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JOHN COWPER POWYS

WOLF SOLENT

A NOVEL

II

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WOLF WAS COMPELLED THAT PARTICULAR AFTERNOON to walk a good deal faster than his wont, to reach the manor-house of King's Barton in time for his daily labour. But his work itself was, when he did settle down to it, a great deal pleasanter than usual, owing to the absence of Mr. Urquhart from the scene.

He found it extremely agreeable to sit at leisure in that escutcheoned window, one of whose smaller panes opened to the outside air upon such easy and such smoothly-worked hinges as made it a pleasure to open it or shut it.

The purple asters and blue lobelia-borders in the flower-beds below, had gathered to themselves a much more autumnal atmosphere than when he last observed them. There were more fallen leaves; and upon them, as well as upon the dark velvety grass, he fancied that he could discern the moisture of last night's dew, giving them that peculiar look for which he had been craving.

The actual work he was engaged on lent itself to the breathless peacefulness of that grey afternoon. He had to take the gnomic commentaries and floating fragments of wicked gossip gathered together by his employer, and translate them into a style that had at least some beauty of its own. This style had been his own contribution to the book; and though it had been evoked under external pressure, and in a sense had been a *tour de force*, it was in its essence the expression of Wolf's own soul—the

only purely æsthetic expression that Destiny had ever permitted to his deeper nature.

The further he advanced with his book the more interested he became in this aspect of it. He spent hours revising the earlier chapters, written before this style of his had established itself; and he came to value these elaborated pages as things that were precious in themselves—precious independently of whether they were ever printed.

The Cerne Giant was now the subject of his efforts; and his first two renderings seemed to him hopelessly below the level of the rest of his writing.

"She had sat on the knees of the Cerne Giant in her youth, and Sir Walter, robbed of the delectation of prolonged seduction, turned, it seems, in infinite weariness, to the more ambiguous tastes that procured him his famous infamy."

He put his pen through this and wrote in its place:

"Those long, hot summer afternoons spent by her in gathering devil's-bit and hawkweed in perilous proximity to that troubling symbol, had seduced her mind long before Sir Walter seduced her body. It was natural enough, therefore, for this corrupt rogue to come soon to prefer——"

Here he laid down his pen and contemplated once more the Squire's notes, which ran as follows:

"Cerne Giant—real virginity unknown in Dorset—'cold maids' a contradiction—Sir Walter's disgust—His erudition—His platonic tastes—How he was misunderstood by a lewd parson——"

"Good Lord!" said Wolf to himself, "I must be careful what I'm doing just here. The old demon has changed his tune. This isn't garrulous history. This is special pleading."

He took up his pen, erased the words "natural enough, therefore, for this corrupt rogue," and wrote in their place, "natural enough, therefore, for this baffled idolater of innocence to become a misogynist and to turn——" He stopped abruptly, pushed back his manuscript, and stared out of the window. He would have found it hard to explain this pause in his work, but a vague consciousness of the personality of young Redfern took possession of his mind.

"I've never seen a line of that fellow's writing," he thought. "I wonder what *he* would have made of this precious Sir Walter?"

The blue lobelias, the dark-green grass-blades leaning sideways against the edge of the brown mould, as if some light faun's-hoof had trodden them down, came to his consciousness then with such a clear revelation of something in nature purer than anything in man's mind, that he felt a sense of nausea with regard to these lewd preciosities. What was he doing, to be employed at such a job?

If the book were ever published, none of his own stylistic inventions, such as they were, could offset the general drift of it. And what effect would that drift have? To which side of the gulf between beauty and the opposite of beauty would it draw readers?

Like a drop of ice-cold rain, frozen, accursed, timeless, this abominable doubt fell upon his heart and sank into its depths. The whole subterranean stream of Wolf's life-illusion had been obsessed, as long as he could remember, by the notion of himself as some kind of a protagonist in a cosmic struggle. He hated the traditional

terminology for this primordial dualism; and it was out of his hatred of this, and out of his furtive pride, that he always opposed, in his dialogues with himself, his own secret "mythology" to some equally secret "evil" in the world around him. But because the pressure of circumstances had made him so dependent on Mr. Urquhart's money, it happened that until this actual moment he had evaded bringing his conscience to bear upon the man's book, though he had brought it to bear freely enough upon the man himself.

But now—cold, frozen, eternal, malignant—this abominable doubt fell upon him like an accursed rain . . . drip-drop, drip-drop, drip-drop . . . each drop sinking out of sight into the dim, unreasoning levels of his being, where it began poisoning the waters.

"How can I struggle with this man when I am exhausting all my ingenuity in trying to make his book an immortal work?" Wolf placed the sheets of his manuscript carefully in order and put a heavy paper-weight on the top of them. Then he set himself to curse the obscurity of his universe as he had never done before.

"Good—evil? Evil—good?" he thought. "Why should these old dilemmas rise up now and spoil my life, just as it is rounding itself off into a solid integrity?"

He surveyed the great shelves of Mr. Urquhart's library much in the same mood as he had recently surveyed the circumvallation-lines of Poll's Camp. "Come out of your grave, you wretched Redfern!" he cried under his breath. "And let's hear what *you* made of it! Was it the drip-drop of this infernal indecision that sent you scampering off to Lenty Pond of an autumn evening? Did you feel a

knot in *your* head, tightening, tightening, tightening?"

The thought came to him then, "Suppose I gave up this whole job?" And the image of his mother seeking refuge with Lord Carfax, of Gerda back again in Torp's yard, of himself wandering over the world, far removed from Christie, rose sickening, ghastly, before him.

He lifted the paper-weight from the pile of manuscript. It had its own interest, this paper-weight—a slab of alabaster with a silver eagle upon it. He tilted it up and balanced it sideways, till the eagle looked to him like a fly on a piece of soap.

"Soap?" he thought; and the word put him in mind of what Mr. Urquhart had said about the transfiguration of little things by the decision to commit suicide.

At that moment there was a sharp knock at the door, and Wolf started violently, leaving the paper-weight upside-down upon his manuscript.

"Come in!" he cried, in a loud, irritable tone.

The tall figure of Roger Monk entered and walked gravely up to him. It had always been a speculation to Wolf how this great ostler-gardener managed to move so discreetly across these polished floors. The man moved up to him now as if he had been a supernatural messenger walking upon air.

"I came just to tell you, Mr. Solent, Sir," said Roger Monk, "that there's a bowling-match goin' on at Farmer's Rest. It entered my mind, since Squire's out to Lovelace's tonight, 'twould be a sight you might be sorry to miss, Mr. Solent, Sir."

"Where's Farmer's Rest?" enquired Wolf.

"Why, that's the village pub, Sir! Haven't you ever

been into it, Sir? But I expect it's out of your way. It's out of all decent folks' way, I reckon. 'Tis down Lenty Lane, Pond Lane, and Dead Badger Lane. 'Tis no great way; and I'm thinking of going round there myself. So if it's no offense, Mr. Solent, Sir, I thought as maybe ye'd like to have my company."

He stopped, and in the manner of the discreet servant of a wilful master stared impassively at the wall till his gentleman made his decision.

"I'd like to come with you very much, Roger," Wolf replied. "But what about tea? I was thinking of dropping in at Pond Cottage."

"Don't do that, Sir. Come, as I'm telling 'ee, to Farmer's Rest and I'll see to it myself that Miss Bess'll give you as good a cup o' tea, and a better, too, than ye'd ever get from that old Dimity's kitchen. Not but what things be much more decent-like down there, since Miss Smith be living with 'em."

"How does Dimity put up with Miss Smith, Roger?" enquired Wolf slily.

"Past all expectancy, Mr. Solent," replied the other. "But she's a real lady, that young woman, whoever her Dad were."

"Why, wasn't Mr. Smith her father, then?"

Roger Monk winked slily.

"There *be* as says he weren't, Sir. But if you don't mind, Mr. Solent, we'd best be getting along, down-village."

He moved towards the door as he spoke, and Wolf got up and followed him.

Lenty Lane and Pond Lane were familiar enough,

though under that grey windless sky they assumed the kind of expression that Wolf always imagined such places to assume when some disturbing human event was impending; but Dead Badger Lane led him to completely new ground. It was narrower than either of the others and very much overgrown with grass. This grass grew long and rank on both sides of deep cart-tracks, and amid its greenness there were patches of scabious and knapweed.

"Who's playing in this bowling-match?" Wolf asked, wondering vaguely what there was about these patches of country weeds that made him think of a certain dusty road beyond the railway-station at Weymouth. "Beyond the backwater it was, too," he said to himself.

"Mr. Malakite from Blacksod, Sir, be playing against our Mr. Valley. . . . And I be playing myself, Sir," the man added, after a pause, in a deprecatory tone.

Wolf prodded the cart-track with his stick, and, unseen by his companion, pulled down the corners of his mouth and worked the muscles of his under-jaw.

"Whom are you playing against?" enquired Wolf in a politely negligent tone.

The man gave him a quick glance.

"Hope 'tis no offense to name the party, Sir, but I be playing against your Missus's Dad."

"Against Mr. Torp?" cried Wolf, feeling that the situation in front of him was growing thicker with discomfort every moment.

"None other, Sir. The old gentleman be the best hand at bowls, when 'ee be sober, if I may say so, that they have anywhere down these ways. I learned the game my-

self"—these last words were spoken with extraordinary impressiveness—"in the Shires."

Farmer's Rest turned out to be a small, whitewashed, thatched cottage, not very well kept up, and displaying no sign, as far as Wolf could see, of its professional use. The place was open and they stepped inside.

They were confronted by a narrow passageway leading into a garden at the back; and there, framed by an open door, he could see the bowling-green, with groups of grave men moving solemnly across it in their shirt-sleeves.

The public bar was on his right, the private parlour on his left; and into this latter room he was ushered by the tall gardener.

"One minute, Sir, and I'll fetch Miss Bess. I expect some of the other gentlemen will be glad to have a cup of tea. Her name is Round, Sir, if you don't mind. Miss Elizabeth Round."

Wolf sat down and waited. Sure enough, in about five minutes a pretty young woman, plump and rosy-cheeked, but in some odd way vacant-looking, brought in a tea-tray and placed it on the table.

Wolf was completely nonplussed by the personality of Miss Round. Superficially she looked clean, fresh, amiable, and a little stupid; but all her movements possessed a queer, automatic quality that made him slightly uncomfortable. He couldn't define it at once; but after watching her carefully for a short space, he came to the conclusion that she was like a pretty doll, or a human mannikin, wound up to perform a given task, but lacking all interior consciousness of what she was doing.

"Mr. Malakite sends his compliments, Sir," she said, "and he hopes to have the honour of a cup of tea with you in a minute. He's just finishing his game."

"Don't hurry him. I'll be all right," murmured Wolf. "Is your father the landlord here?" This he added rather lamely, as she proceeded with rapid movements of her plump hands to arrange the tea-things on the table.

Miss Bess nodded. "He's not Dad," she replied calmly. "He's uncle. Dad's been gone for years."

Whether she meant that Mr. Round, for reasons of his own, had bolted, or whether she meant that he was dead, Wolf could not tell. His interest in Miss Bess was faint; in her father, dead or alive, fainter still. His heart was beating at that moment for quite another cause. His glance, fixed upon the door into the passage, kept visualizing the bookseller's grizzled head. His ears strained themselves to catch the sound of the old man's voice.

But for several seconds all he could hear was the knocking of the bowls against one another on the grass outside.

Then he became aware of quite a different sound, a sound that apparently proceeded from above the ceiling of the private parlour. He glanced at Miss Bess, and, to his surprise, she promptly raised a plump finger and pressed it against her lips.

"It's uncle," she whispered. "He's heard a strange voice and it's set him off."

Wolf and Miss Bess both concentrated their attention upon this new sound. It was a thick human voice, repeating over and over again the same two syllables.

"Jesus . . . Jesus . . . Jesus . . . Jesus."

"Is he ill? Is he suffering? Don't let me keep you if you ought to go up to him."

Miss Bess removed her fingers from her mouth and smiled a little.

"Oh, it's all right *now*," she declared calmly. "It's your voice that started him. He knows every noise for yards and yards round this house. Dogs, cats, pigs, poultry, pigeons, horses, cattle. There isn't a sound he doesn't know. He'll know who's won this match o' bowls afore I tells him a thing."

The voice above the ceiling continued its refrain.

"Jesus . . . Jesus . . . Jesus . . . Jesus."

"That's how he goes on—sometimes for hours. But us who knows him takes no stock in *that*. Now, if I'd heard him starting off on God, same as he does sometimes, you'd have seen me running upstairs like greased lightning! It's all as how he gets started. Whichever way he starts he keeps it up till he's tired. Funny, isn't it? But no one knows what human nature can come to, till ye've seen it and heard it."

"Does he say 'God' over and over again in this same way?"

Miss Bess nodded. "It's *then* I've got to run! It's always the same. I used to let him do it; but one day they found him in a ditch, eating frog-spawn. The ditch were over Lenty-way. I expect you've often seen it. It's where them mare's-tails grows. He had to be pulled out. *That* were one of his 'God' days."

Once more Wolf strained his ears; and, mingled with the clicking of the bowls outside, came that repeated

"Jesus . . . Jesus . . . Jesus . . . Jesus" from above the ceiling.

"He'll go to sleep, present; and by supper-time he'll be gay as a lark. It's our Mr. Valley taught him what to do. 'When you feel God coming,' Mr. Valley said to him, 'don't get flustered or anything. Just say "Jesus" and you'll go to sleep like a new-born babe!' "

"What's the matter with him?" enquired Wolf. The girl fetched a blue tea-cosy from the recesses of a cupboard and pulled it down carefully over the teapot. Then she raised her eyes and looked straight at her guest; and for the flicker of a second her brisk, automatic personality displayed the troubled awareness of a conscious soul.

"Worried," she said simply. And then, in the old automatic way: "Excuse me, Sir. There's someone in the bar." And with all the fresh, stupid innocence of her first entrance upon the scene, she hurried across the passage.

Wolf surveyed the admirable preparations for tea that lay spread before him. There were two teacups, two knives, two plates, and two chairs.

"Jesus . . . Jesus . . . Jesus . . . Jesus."

"What on earth shall I talk about with the old man?" he thought. "I wish he'd hurry up. This tea will have stood much too long."

He had not long to wait. There were shuffling steps in the passage, and the bookseller came in. Wolf rose and shook him by the hand.

"Just in time, Mr. Malakite," he said. "I was afraid our tea would get too strong."

The two men sat down opposite each other, and Wolf, removing the blue cosy, filled both their cups and handed the bookseller the bread-and-butter.

"I hope you're ahead in your game," he said emphatically. "It must be an absorbing game, bowls. It must be one of the most absorbing of all."

Mr. Malakite put down his cup and moved a long, slender forefinger round its rim.

"Your father and I had many a game on this green," he said, without raising his eyes.

And Wolf looked at Mr. Malakite with as many confused feelings as he had ever experienced in the presence of one human head. He thought to himself, "Was the man ever ashamed of that white beard when he saw himself in the looking-glass, as he went up to wash his hands between dusting his books and sneaking into his girl's room?"

"You and my father, Mr. Malakite," he said in a low tone, "must have seen quite a lot of each other in those old days."

"One more cup, if you please, Sir. A lot of each other? Well—no. He was a gentleman, you see; and I've never been anything but a tradesman. But still . . . in a manner of speaking, we *were* friends, I suppose."

He lifted his eyes now, and Wolf was surprised by the devouring intensity of their gaze. It was a fixed, monomaniacal intensity, and it seemed addressed to no particular object. It was impossible to imagine it softening into tenderness, or abandoned to humour, or melting in grief. It did not seem adapted to looking into human eyes. It seemed directed towards some aspect of universal

matter that absorbed and fascinated it. It seemed, so to speak, to *eat the air.* Mr. Malakite himself appeared apprehensive of the effect of his gaze upon his interlocutor; for he lowered his eyelids directly his words were out of his mouth, and once more began following the rim of his teacup with the tip of his finger.

"I know that look," thought Wolf. "I've seen it on the streets in London and I've seen it on the esplanade at Weymouth. It's like the passion of a miser. It's horrible, but it's not contemptible."

"Had you many friends in common?" enquired Wolf; and as he spoke, he leant across the table, and, without waiting this time for any request, filled up the old man's cup to the very brim and placed the milk-jug at his side.

"I can't stand that finger-game of his!" he said to himself. "He'll have to stop doing that if he's going to drink his tea."

But not at all! Mr. Malakite bent his furrowed head, but keeping his gaze discreetly lowered, once more commenced circling the vessel's rim with the extreme tip of his long finger.

"Friends in common?" the old man repeated. "You mean, I suppose, Mr. Solent, to ask whether your father and I had any peculiarities in common? That's a natural question, and if I knew you better I think I could interest you a good deal in answering it. But we don't know each other well enough, Sir . . . not nearly well enough. Besides"—and once more Wolf got the benefit of that fixed, monomaniacal gaze—"I don't approve of exposing a father to his son. It's an impiety, an impiety!"

Wolf finished his tea in silence after this, and handed

Mr. Malakite a cigarette. When they were both smoking, and Wolf, at any rate, was enjoying that faint rarification of human thought, like the distilling of an essence, which tea-drinking can induce, he asked Mr. Malakite with grave directness what was the matter with the landlord of Farmer's Rest.

The bookseller's forehead knit in an unpleasant scowl.

"Been hearing him, I suppose? Nobody bothers about *him*, Mr. Solent. Miss Elizabeth is the boss here, and she don't like people who talk too much about family-matters. Why should she? Round's *her* uncle, not yours or mine."

The brutality of this remark destroyed in a moment all the fragrant clarity of Wolf's after-tea sensations. He received the sort of shock from it that always made him seem to himself a priggish fool, devoid of the degree of humorous toughness which this world requires. At the same time it stirred up all his ill-balanced impulses with regard to persecuted people—impulses that led him to a morbid exaggeration of this particular aspect of life.

He began to indulge in the wildest imaginings about the "worried" Mr. Round; and he obstinately returned to the subject.

"Has this fellow up there," he said uneasily, jerking his thumb towards the ceiling, "lived in King's Barton long?"

But Mr. Malakite rose from his chair.

"Come out and see the game, Sir, won't you? There are people everywhere about us whose existence is no affair

of ours. To fuss over them like this clergyman here does is only to share their disease."

"What disease are you talking about, Mr. Malakite?" asked Wolf, as he followed him into the garden.

The sight of the group of men gathered there so disturbed his attention that he could not be quite sure whether he caught correctly the malignant mumbling that issued from his companion's lips. "The disease of Life!" was what it sounded like.

A little later, as he watched the bookseller calculating with exquisite nicety the "bias" of his particular bowl, he was conscious of a desire not to encounter again for some while the expression of those deep-sunken eyes.

"What *does* that look of his make me think of?" he wondered, as he nodded to the other players and their absorbed spectators. And it seemed to him that he recalled a sombre light-ship that he had seen once in Portland harbour, which every now and then emitted a long, thin stream of ghastly, livid illumination from the midst of waters desolate and disturbed.

There had apparently been time, while Wolf was having his tea, for Roger Monk to defeat Mr. Torp; for that champion, still in his shirt-sleeves, and extremely hot, was arguing in a plaintive voice with Mr. Valley as to what he might have done and didn't do.

Wolf shook hands with Mr. Valley and commiserated his father-in-law on his defeat. "It's a wonder I didn't lose a lot of money over you," he said facetiously. "I backed you to the limit to beat our friend Roger, for the honour of the family; and now you've let us all down,

and the West Country too! Mr. Monk, so he tells me, comes from the Shires."

"Shires be damned, Mr. Solent!" said the monument-maker. "'Tweren't no shires! 'Twere me wone bloody cussedness. If I'd 'a known then what I do know now, 'twould be he and me"—he nodded in the direction of Mr. Malakite—"and not he and *him*, for this here final."

"How is it that *you* got knocked out so soon, Valley?" enquired Wolf.

But the little clergyman made a sign with his hand, and advanced a step or two, intent with all his mind and soul on Roger Monk's massive wrist and the bowl which he was poising.

Wolf had to content himself, therefore, with drawing back his father-in-law to a bench under the hedge, where the game could be watched and Mr. Torp's lamentations listened to in comparative ease and comfort.

"What's wrong with this Mr. Round?" He hadn't intended to say anything like this when he searched about in his mind for a suitable topic; but the words rose to his lips as if from some inquisitive demon pricking up its ears in the pit of his stomach.

"Can't forgive 'isself, I reckon, for they things he said about young Redfern. 'Twere summat o' that, so folks do tell I, what stole the heart out o' that young gentleman and made 'un turn to the wall. Leastways there were some folks as told 'un 'twere what he did say, down here, at Farmer's Rest bar, that turned that young man's poor heart to stone. 'Twould have jostled me wone innards, I tell 'ee, if any well-thought-of landlord spoke such words of I."

"What did he say about Redfern?" enquired Wolf, suppressing the absurd image that rose in his mind of a Mr. Torp lacerated by moral disquietude.

His father-in-law, however, at that moment saw fit to display a revived interest in the game of bowls.

"Look-see!" he cried, tapping Wolf on the knee, and leaning forward. "By jiggers, if that girt flunkey from up at House aren't making Mr. Malakite look like nothing!"

Wolf had indeed for some while been admiring the steady play of the big gardener. The old man opposed to him seemed on the contrary to be growing less and less careful of his aim.

"Something's fretting that wold gent, looks so," went on Mr. Torp. "Miss Bess been showing her laces to he, in parlour, like enough! 'Tis a wonderful disposing of Providence, Mr. Solent, when old men can flutter young ladies and make their hands fidget. 'Tis not been allowed to I, such privileges and portions. And yet I be a man, I reckon, what knows the road royal as well as another!"

But Wolf's mind was still hovering about Mr. Round and his remarkable "worries."

"What did this man actually say about Redfern?" he repeated.

Mr. Torp turned his head slowly towards him. "It may be a good world," he remarked sententiously, "and it may be a bad world, but *it's the world;* and us has got to handle 'un with eyes in our heads for landslides. My job mayn't be the job *you'd* choose. It mayn't be the job *I'd* choose, if others offered. But it's my job. And anyone, Mr. Solent, with a job like mine can't afford to stir up

trouble among they dead. I were the man who made the headstone for'n. I ask 'ee, should I go spreading trouble about thik quiet lad? They said, when his funeral-day came, that he'd got no relation to mourn for'n. Who, then, I ask 'ee, Mr. Solent, is to hold their tongue, i' the peace of God, about the poor young man, if it bain't me wone self, who chipped the stone what covers him?"

"Is it true, when his conscience troubles him, that Mr. Round wanders about that field where Lenty Pond is?"

"Never ye mind where 'a wanders, Mr. Solent! Nebuchadnezzar were more than he; for kings be more than publicans; and *he* went on all fours in's day."

His father-in-law's poetic prevarications had begun to irritate Wolf.

"I wish you'd tell your wife, Mr. Torp," he burst out, "not to let Lobbie bathe in that damned pond!"

The monument-maker gave a start and opened his eyes wide. Wolf's intonation evidently surprised him.

He smiled as he answered.

"*She* not let him bathe? She don't let him do nothing —not even breathe, I fancy! 'Twould be somebody very different from our Gerda's Mummy, Mr. Solent, what would make Lob Torp bide at whoam. But what ails 'ee, Sir, to speak with such disturbance of a good Darset duck-pond, such as I do mind sliding on, winter come winter, since I were slim as a lath? What's Lenty Pond done to thee, Sir? 'Tis no girt place for perch or pike; and to my belief no wild-geese ever settled on it; but 'tis a good pond. 'Tis a pond that would drown the likes of you and me, maybe. But they boys! Why, they'd bathe

in Satan's spittle and come out sweet. Lenty Pond's nothing to Lob Torp, Sir! You can rest peaceful on that."

As Wolf listened to all this, with one eye on the final defeat of Mr. Malakite, and the other on the doll-like briskness of Bess Round, who was now bringing out into the garden more chairs and more tables, he began to be aware of a very odd fancy, which he found it impossible to take seriously, and yet impossible to get rid of.

The fancy had to do with Lenty Pond; and the more he thought of it, the more ridiculously it pressed upon him. It was as if every single person in these three Dorset towns were hiding from him something they knew about Lenty Pond, something that was absurdly simple, that fitted together with mathematical precision, but to which he was himself completely blind.

He got up from the bench and went across the grass, with the intention of congratulating Roger Monk on his victory. On his way, however, and before his approach was detected by the gardener, round whose tall figure all the villagers who had been watching the match were now gathered, he caught sight of Miss Bess ushering into the garden the two Otter brothers.

Towards these two men he directed his steps, leaving Mr. Torp to join the loquacious group in the centre of the bowling-green. As he shook hands with the brothers, he detected Mr. Malakite secretively shuffling off by the elbow of Miss Bess, who, with a tray of empty bottles, was returning into the house.

That disconcerting feeling, as though the whole of his life at the present moment were unreal, weighed upon him

still. It hung upon him like a wavering dizziness, as full of meaningless blotches and sparkles as the glass coffin-lid of King Æthelwolf in the Abbey.

Even as he was describing to the two Otters the portion of the bowling-match that he had seen, his eyes remained fixed on a particularly smooth and delicately polished bowl, of a dark-chestnut colour, that lay on the grass close to Darnley's feet.

It seemed to him as if he were reading his fate on the polished surface of this object, a fate laborious, complicated, burdened, but at the same time rolled and tossed about at random by many alien hands! Was there *any* portion of his identity, compact, self-contained, weighted with inward intention, like the "bias" of this bowl?

As he went on talking to the two brothers, he became aware that a small flower-seed had balanced itself, in its aimless flight, on the bowl at Darnley's feet, and he began to feel as if this flower-seed were tickling the skin of his mind, and that he couldn't brush it away. Something was fretting him; something was teasing him. What was it?

Then quite suddenly he knew what it was. It was the memory of old Malakite's obsessed expression—that expression of concentrated erotic insanity, directed toward universal matter, as he had caught it from under the man's wrinkled forehead across the blue tea-cosy. This, then, was why he was answering Jason's remarks in so perfunctory a manner! Then he gave a quick sigh of irrepressible relief; for he became aware that the doll-like young lady was back again at their side, suggesting that they should all sit down before a ricketty garden-

table upon which she had placed a fresh tray of mugs.

This they proceeded to do; and while she was supplying them with foaming pints of Dorchester ale, he heard her say to Darnley: "Mr. Malakite's just traipsed off. He made his little joke, like he always does, the funny old man; but anyone could see he weren't best pleased! 'Tis hard for him, I expect, to be beat like this by a fellow who, as you might say, is a foreigner in these parts. He's been playing on this green, that old gentleman, as long as I can mind anything, and there be few enough who've got the best of him!"

She moved away to persuade the winner of the match and his rustic admirers to gather about another wooden table, leaving the "gentry" to their own devices.

Then it was that Wolf's mind completely recovered from its sense of unreality and from its hallucinations about Lenty Pond. From where he lay in a creaky straw-plaited chair between Darnley and Jason, he could take in at his leisure the whole characteristic West Country scene. There was a relaxed jocularity about the men's voices, as they rose in that shadowy garden, between the tall privet-hedge and the sloping thatched roof, that seemed to contain within it all the rich apple-juices that were ripening in the orchards around them, all the cool sap of the mangelwurzel plants in the neighbouring fields, the good white heart of billions of ears of plump wheat-sheaves, awaiting their threshing-day in all the granaries between Parret and Stour!

The sky, as he watched it above that privet-hedge, was still of the same filmy greyness as when he had sat, some five or six hours ago, under the sycamore at Poll's Camp;

but the gathered volume of masculine personalities, as it surrounded him now—for Miss Bess was the only woman on the scene, and *her* femininity seemed to have no more weight in it than petticoats on a clothes-line—seemed fast building up about him a sort of battlemented watch-tower, from the isolation and protection of which his days began to fall into a measured, reasonable order, such as he had not known for many a long week.

That chestnut-coloured polished bowl was still within his vision on the smooth turf; but at this moment, in place of giving him a sense of random helplessness, it gave him a sense of reassured control. In this pleasant retreat, with the fumes of the Dorchester ale mounting into his head, he began to feel his hand firm and unbewildered once more upon his life's rudder.

These worthy men, with their work behind them, seemed to have eluded by some secret pressure of their united force the splash and beat of nature's chaotic waves. They seemed to have dragged their "hollow ship" out of the tide that summer afternoon—up, up, up some hidden shelving beach, where all agitations were over.

Everything disturbing and confusing sank away out of sight for Wolf just then. Indeed, his whole life gathered itself together with lovely inevitableness, as if it were a well-composed story that he himself, long ago and time out of mind, had actually composed.

And by degrees while he lazily drank his ale and chatted with Darnley—for Jason had for some unknown reason become suddenly silent—the old fighting-spirit of his inborn life-illusion rose strong and upwelling within him.

And there came to him the vision of one particular rock-pool near Weymouth, to which he had once found his way. He saw the rose-tinged seaweeds sway backwards and forwards . . . he heard the crying of the gulls. . . .

Oh, that it were possible to gather together a great handful of such memories and pour them forth out of his cupped hands into the brain above that face on the Waterloo steps! But—but what if there should arrive a day, when, by the turning of the terrible engines, he himself should *look like that face*, while some other Wolf, drinking ale on a bowling-green, indulged in benevolent emotions in a creaky wicker-chair?

"Are you sure you couldn't come back to dinner with us, Solent?" said Darnley at last, in a pause in the midst of their rambling conversation.

"Impossible!" he said, looking at his watch. "It's seven o'clock now. As it is, I shall be late for Gerda's supper."

And then he suddenly remembered that Gerda's last words to him had been: "Don't hurry back, Wolf, I like waiting for you. I like sitting at the window and doing nothing. That's what I like best of all!"

"Those girls of yours will be very annoyed if you don't come," said Jason.

"Why, they don't expect me, do they? Your mother doesn't expect me, does she?"

"All women," said Jason, with a chuckle, his spirits reviving when he saw Wolf's discomfort and indecision, "expect all men!"

"Well, I must come another time," said Wolf. "I can't

leave Gerda like that without telling her. But I hope 'my girls,' as you call them, are all right? I hope you don't find Olwen too much of a handful?"

"Darnley is the one to give advice. Do you think he'd better go home, Darnley; or do you think he'd better come to dinner with us?"

"He must suit himself," said Darnley smiling. "I wouldn't care about leaving Gerda alone if I were in his shoes. But then, I've never had a Gerda . . . and am never likely to have!"

Mr. Valley at this point drifted up to their table.

"I've got to be getting back now," he said. "Are any of you people coming, or are you going to stay longer?"

The three men all rose. "We were just talking of getting off," said Darnley. "I suppose we all go the same way? At the start, anyhow?"

He beckoned to Bess Round to come to their table, and, drawing a small leather purse out of his pocket, paid for all the drinks they had had except Mr. Valley's. Him Roger Monk had already treated and treated well.

Wolf went across the grass and said good-bye to Mr. Torp and to Roger Monk, congratulating the latter warmly on his victory.

"I've never known the old man to play so badly," said Monk, with a deprecatory shrug of his shoulders. "That cup of tea he had with you in the parlour, Sir, must have gone to his head."

"Give me little darter me love, Mr. Solent," said the monument-maker. "And you may kiss she, too, if ye be so minded, from her old Dad. Not that they turns aught but cold maids' cheeks to their Dad's kisses. But that be

all the better for thee, Sir; and ye are more like to mind me message than if 't had been any o' the young gents here assembled."

Roger Monk's victory at bowls had been celebrated by such copious libations that the gardener had no hesitation now about indulging in a piece of ribaldry from which in more sober mood he would certainly have refrained.

"Young and old is the same to that gender—eh, Mr. Solent, Sir? That's what we servants know, maybe, better than you gentlemen. There's not a poor one among that gender, nor a rich one among 'em—eh, Mr. Torp?—that hasn't wished themselves in the bed of somebody that isn't their law-established."

Wolf went off down Dead Badger Lane side by side with Jason, while Darnley walked in front of them with Mr. Valley.

That remark of Roger Monk teased Wolf's mind. The man had worded it in a coarser, drier, cruder manner than such a thing would have been worded by a man of the West Country. The use of the word "gender," for instance, "That's a touch of Sheffield or Birmingham," thought Wolf. And perhaps just because of its coarse wording, the thing hit Wolf with a most unpleasant emphasis. What *would* he feel if there were any serious cause for his being jealous? What he did feel at that moment was an actual sense of physical nausea caused by Roger's words. It wasn't only Gerda. That use of the word "gender" seemed to have stripped the world of a certain decency that belonged to its inherent skin quite as much as to its external conventions.

He experienced at that moment a wave of positive hatred for Roger Monk. "He looked as if he might put his hand on my shoulder or even slap me on the back. There's something horrible about a male servant . . . especially a big male servant . . . when he drops his professional discretion. . . . I could find it in me to pity even Mr. Urquhart if this chap *does* ever turn on him!"

His thoughts were jerked back into focus and into the cart-ruts of Dead Badger Lane by a remark from Jason Otter.

"Look at those two, in front there! Your friend Darnley has no more idea of what Valley's after, than that stick of yours has! I suppose *you* think that Darnley's very clever and very gentlemanly. That's what most people think. It's all his politeness. Look at their two heads now, bobbing up and down under their hats! I think cows and sheep are better than human beings. Nicer, I mean. Cleaner, too. Cleaner and nicer. What's wrong with human beings is their minds. Their minds are filthy. The minds of worms are much nicer. Have you ever thought about what really goes on in people's heads? I suppose not. I never thought you really knew very much. You're good at writing histories of a lot of bawdy idiots; and you're good at keeping old Urquhart in a good temper. But I've been thinking about you all this afternoon, Solent, and though you'll probably abuse me for telling you the truth, I think you're a crazy fool."

By this time it began to dawn upon Wolf that Jason had no more power of drinking Dorchester ale with impunity than had his *bête noire* Roger Monk. He tried to distract the poet's attention from personalities by remark-

ing on the insubstantiality and ghostliness of the elm-trees in the hedges. But Jason refused to show any interest in the beauty of that August night.

"Your friend Darnley," he now began again, "believes in politeness. He thinks he can smooth everything down by that. He doesn't know what he's got against him."

"What has he got against him?" enquired Wolf, wondering at the back of his mind what effect upon this "politeness" the presence of Mattie in Pond Cottage had been having of late.

The reply of Jason was so violent and so abrupt that it had an uncanny effect upon the placidity of those vaporous elm-trees.

"He's got God against him!" cried the poet. "What he tries to smooth down are the porcupine-quills of God!"

"We'd better walk a little faster," said Wolf. "They'll be turning soon, and I've got to go the other way."

"You're always on the walk, Solent. Walking here, walking there! You'll walk into a pit one day, with that stick of yours."

But Wolf lifted his voice.

"Darnley!" he shouted. "Valley! Wait a minute, you two!"

He could see the figures in front of him turn and stand still.

"Your friends over there will say good-night to you, Solent. Were you afraid they wouldn't? They'll say good-night. All the world over people say good-night. They think it does something, I suppose. *I* don't know what it does!"

Wolf could not repress a heavy sigh. For some reason

or other the peculiar nature of this man's pessimism began to affect him as if he had been forced, till his hands were weary, to push away great stalks of deadly nightshade.

Jason caught this sigh upon the air, and it seemed to change his mood.

"I expect, Solent, you poor old devil, that that young lady of yours doesn't cook a good meal for you very often."

"Oh, yes, she does, Otter!" replied Wolf, as jocosely as he could. "There's hardly a day we don't have meat. But to tell you the truth, I've been thinking of giving up eating that sort of thing ever since Miss Gault talked to me the other night."

"Do you attend to anything that an ugly old woman like that says to you? She only wants to stir things up, because she's never slept with a man."

The unkindness of those blunt words roused sheer anger in Wolf.

"Sleeping with people isn't everything in this world, Otter! It isn't even especially wonderful. I should have thought that being a poet you'd know that, and wouldn't go putting such importance on these material accidents!"

His anger, as he recognized clearly enough, was due to the fact that his own erotic feelings were so divided just then. But the tone of his voice was so vibrant with irritation, that its electric current conveyed itself to Jason in a second.

They were now quite close upon the others, however; and there was no time for anything but a swift, bitter,

malicious blow, aimed where the opponent was most vulnerable.

"You'll walk into a material accident that'll stir *your* quills, master," the poet growled, "though you *do* think yourself a sort of superior being going about among ordinary people. *You'll* walk into the wood where they pick up horns . . . clever though you may be!"

The altercation subsided as swiftly as it had risen.

"I didn't want to lose sight of you," said Wolf, "because our ways divide in a minute. I wish you'd won that match, Valley, instead of Monk. I can't tell why, but there was something about Monk that annoyed me this afternoon. Perhaps servants are always annoying when they're neither one thing nor the other."

"I hope you didn't bring *me* into your quarrel," said Jason Otter.

"I'm not as good as any of them," replied Mr. Valley. "Even Torp is better than I am. I never allow enough room for the swing of the bias."

The four men walked on together and soon reached the spot where Dead Badger Lane joined Pond Lane.

"Well, good-night," said Wolf. "You and I will be seeing each other on Monday, eh, Darnley? Won't you come back to lunch with me then? I'll tell Gerda if you will; and we'll celebrate the beginning of term with some sort of feast."

"Don't get anything out of the way for me, Wolf," the other replied. "You know what I'm like—the most irritating kind of guest. But I'd love to come. It'll make Monday less of a burden to look forward to." He

stopped short and then suddenly added. "If it wouldn't be a bother to Gerda, I wish you'd really make it a bit of an occasion and ask little Christie? I've had an idea for the last few weeks . . . in fact since Olwen came to us . . . that she wanted cheering up. But don't say anything if it would be too much for Gerda."

"But, Darnley . . . you and I know . . . everyone knows . . . that Christie never goes out anywhere."

"Ask her, my dear man, that's all! I daresay she won't come, but ask her!" He paused for a second. "Everyone likes to be asked," he added gravely.

"Hee! Hee! Hee!"

Wolf swung round. It was Jason chuckling like a goblin in the darkness.

But Mr. Valley threw in his word before the electric current of irritation that still connected the two men's minds had time to explode.

"Let's see," said Mr. Valley. "It's Friday today, isn't it? Don't forget, all of you, that next Wednesday is our School-Treat. It begins at two and goes on till seven. The Squire always comes after tea to watch the sports; so I shall expect *you* with him, Solent. But tell Gerda I want her to come too. Lobbie will be there, and our friend Weevil's sure to come."

A muffled chuckle became audible.

"What's the matter with you, Jason?" expostulated Darnley. "We all enjoy Valley's school-treats. Are you going to have the Kingsbury band over here again?" he added, turning to the clergyman. "What a time we had last year! They wouldn't stop, Solent, until it was pitch-dark. When we did get 'em off, they played the Kings-

bury jig out there in Lenty Lane, till Roger Monk hit the drummer into the ditch."

"It was honest of him to do that," said Jason. "We all know why these lecherous young men want the Kingsbury jig. It would be a good thing if your friend Solent used his stick for these young dogs, instead of boasting how many miles he can walk."

"Well, I'm going to walk now, anyway," broke in Wolf, making a violent effort to keep his temper. "Good-night, Valley! Good-night Darnley! . . ."

He found it impossible to think of anything, either good or bad, except imaginary retorts to Jason, as he made his way westward through that hushed night. The mere fact that Jason had the power to annoy him so much increased his aggravation; and his inability to lay his finger on the exact nature of this power added the last sharp prod to his irritated spirit.

"I wonder if I *am* the conceited fool he thinks me? Well! I don't care if I am. I have my 'mythology,' anyway. He's got the terrible instincts of a child in these things," his thoughts ran on. "He's so appallingly direct."

He meditated for about a quarter of an hour upon Jason's personality; while the man's taunt about his fondness for walking and his fondness for his stick took the heart out of every stride he made.

"What really rouses me," he thought presently, "is his *desire* to annoy. People can get angry with anyone and say outrageous things. But this is different. He *wants* to make me feel a fool. He *wants* to take the life out of my life."

Then Wolf set himself to wonder as to why it was that his mysterious psychic struggle with the Squire left him so free from personal hostility; while in the case of Jason he actually felt a longing to be wrestling with him in that very ditch into which he had said it was "honest" of Monk to hit the Kingsbury drummer!

"It's because he knows by some childish instinct just where my life-illusion is weakest. It's because he sees this weak spot, like a raw scratch in the hide of a bear tied to a pole, and it somehow gets on his nerves, so that he wants to poke at it."

With this hypothesis in his mind he advanced yet another quarter of a mile between the high hedges, where great bunches of old-man's-beard made large whitish blurs against the darkness. The trunks of the elms looked now, as he passed them by, as if they were composed of a vaporous stuff that was absolutely liquid. But he hated to see this particular effect, because it made him think of his recent attempts to distract Jason from poking at the spot in his life's conceit where the skin was so tender.

"*That* is what it is," he thought. Jason has deliberately stripped himself of every consolatory self-protective skin. He must see life continually as we others only see it when our life-illusions are broken through. The point is, *is* life what Jason sees, or is it what *we* see?"

Trailing his oak-stick now, instead of prodding the ground with it, Wolf lurched forward in that fluid grey-coloured darkness, as if he'd been some forlorn Homeric ghost whose body had been left unburied.

"It *can't* be as he sees it," he thought, "except to him . . . except to him!"

He now stood stock-still, his stick just held, but no more than just held, from falling to the ground.

"I refuse to believe," he said to himself, "and I never will believe, until the day Nature kills me, that there's such a thing as 'reality,' apart from the mind that looks at it! Jason's stripping himself bare is *his* way . . . that's all . . . what he sees when he's like that is no less of an illusion than what I see when I'm plastered with armour. The 'thing in itself' is as fluid and malleable as these trees . . . I'm a sharded beetle and he's one of those naked little green things that live in the centre of cuckoo-spit!"

This comparison cheered Wolf's mind a good deal; and his fingers tightened once more upon the handle of his stick. "These trees, this old-man's-beard, these dark ditch-plants . . . they all see what they've the nature to see. . . . No living thing has ever seen reality as it is in itself. By God! there's probably nothing to see, when you come to that!"

He heard at that moment a slight, dry rustling in the grass by the side of the road. Inquisitive to know what it was, he went over, and, stooping down, fumbled with his hand among the entangled weeds. A scent of camomile hit his nostrils; but then—with an exclamation of distress—he drew his hand away.

"Damn!" he exclaimed. "Thorns!" And he thought vaguely, "How odd that there should be a bramble-bush so low down!"

Once more he heard the rustling; and once more, though with more caution, he stretched out his hand. This time he knew what it was; and repressing an instinct to hook the hedgehog with the handle of his stick and drag it out into the road, he straightened his own back and walked on.

"Another version of reality!" he said to himself. "And a bit more armoured even than mine!" And then he remembered what Jason had said with regard to the prickly quills of God. "I must tell him about this hedgehog," he thought. "It's just the sort of thing that'll please him, especially as it's made my finger bleed."

The notion of communicating this occurrence with self-depreciatory humour to the "Slow-Worm of Lenty" completed his restoration to good spirits. By the little device of seeing himself in a humorous and yet not in a ridiculous light, he crossed the moat that separated him from his accustomed stronghold, and pulled up the drawbridge after him.

"I'll tell him about the hedgehog on Wednesday," he thought, "when I meet him at the school-treat." And thinking of Jason's goblinish laughter when he should be telling him the tale, Wolf entirely forgot the sensations he had recently received from that same sound.

With a mind once more adjusted and fortified to deal with existence, he advanced rapidly towards the outskirts of Blacksod. He knew every mark, every sign of the way as he came along. In a darkness far deeper than this darkness he would have known them, those grotesque and insignificant little things that arrest a person's at-

tention for so many unknown reasons, as he follows a familiar road.

But all at once Wolf thought vividly, sharply, disturbingly of Mr. Malakite.

"I hope I'm not going to overtake him!" he said to himself; and then, before this hope was fully registered in his conscious brain, there in the dimness, standing as if she were waiting for him, was Christie herself!

"I knew your step. I knew the tap of your stick," she said hurriedly. "I haven't been here very long. Father came back and told me he'd had tea with you and then went off to get supper in the town; for he knew I hadn't anything for him in the house."

She spoke hurriedly, but quite calmly; and all the while she was speaking, she held one of Wolf's hands tightly with one of her own, and kept rubbing his knuckles with her other hand, as if she were rubbing out some stain left by Time itself, some imprint which the days that had passed since they had last seen each other had left there.

"Do you realize," he said, "that two seconds before I saw you I thought suddenly of your father? That shows something, doesn't it?"

"I've been thinking of him, and of you too, Wolf, all the afternoon. When he told me you were watching that game of bowls, I said to myself in a flash, 'I'll go out and meet Wolf coming back!'—and you see I did meet you."

She spoke with a wavering happiness that seemed to be lifting the syllables of her voice up and down on the darkness as the undulations of a full-brimmed tide might lift a drifting boat.

"Let's find a place to sit down for a minute," said Wolf. "I can't realize I've got you, when we're just standing up like this."

He tightened his clasp upon her hand and led her to the hedge. A mass of vague, dark umbrageousness confronted them.

"Stop!" he whispered, "while I see if there's a ditch."

He advanced slowly, feeling with his stick among the hemlocks and dock-leaves.

"There's no water, anyway," he said, stepping down among the obscure rank-scented growths. "Wait a second," he cried, "I believe we can get up over this."

He felt about with his free hand. He could just detect the faint outlines of the branches of some small tree or shrub. It turned out—well did he know that acrid mind-cleansing pungency in his nostrils!—to be an elder-bush; and he pulled himself up by its brittle stalks till he attained the summit of the hedge.

"Come on! Catch hold!" he cried triumphantly, securing a firm position for himself and stretching out the handle of his stick towards her.

It took her a second or two of struggling amid the mass of weeds and of fumbling with upraised arm, before she reached the extended support. But when once she felt it between her fingers she clung tight with both hands, and he soon pulled her up beside him.

They found themselves, by a lucky chance, in a wheat-field that had been cut but not yet carried; and after a step or two across the stubble, they sank down with a mutual cry of satisfaction against the side of a shock of corn.

The weight of the immense vaporous summer darkness covered them there like a waveless ocean. They floated there upon a cool, yielding darkness that had neither substance nor shape, a darkness full of a faint fragrance that was the sweetness neither of clover nor of poppies nor of corn nor of grass, but was rather the breath of the great terrestrial orb itself, a dark, interior, outflowing sweetness between vast-rocking waves of air, where firmament bent down to firmament, and space rose up to meet space.

He kept fast hold of her hand; and her fingers seemed still cold and stiff and impassive, just as they had done when he first took them in the road. She did not bend her head towards him as they sat side by side, nor did he make the least movement to put his arm round her.

Wolf had sunk a little lower in the corn-shock than she, so that their heads were exactly level; and to any inquisitive owl or nightjar hovering across that stubble-field they must have appeared like two well-constructed scarecrows, good enough to frighten the silly daylight rooks, but quite negligible and harmless to all more sagacious nocturnal eyes.

"When I'm with you like this," said Wolf, "I feel as if I'd stripped my mind clean off my spirit; pulled it off as I might pull off my vest when I go to bed! I feel as if I could actually see my mind now, like that terrible flayed skin in the 'Last Judgement,' lying there on the ground. I can see the rents in it and the stains on it and all the insane zigzag creases!"

"I knew I should meet you tonight," said Christie,

"just as I really knew, though I wouldn't admit I knew, that you'd come to me that day of the fair. I felt it would be like this the moment my father left the shop. Do you think it's being the daughter of my mother that gives me these feelings, or do you think every girl who's in love has them sometimes?"

The question fell like a ripple of the very sweetness of the night over Wolf's soul, but he went on thinking aloud without replying.

"The odd thing is that when I'm away from you I can hardly call up your face. Mother's face and Gerda's face I know like two books; but it's as if I carried your identity so close to me that I couldn't see a single expression of it."

"I feel unreal," said Christie. "That's how I feel—unreal. I've told myself stories about a lover since I was little. But after Olwen was born—oh, and before that, too—my life was so crushed and inert that I seemed to look at everything from some point outside of myself—as if my mind had been a cold, hard, inert mirror, reflecting what was there, but not feeling anything. But now I've known you it's been all different. My mind has got in touch again. I was a mere husk or shell all those miserable years—without a heart at all. But now the husk has come to life, and my heart with it. But sometimes I think my heart's still partly dead."

"I'm perfectly satisfied with how your heart is," Wolf threw in. "Alive or dead, I've got it now, and I'm never going to let it go! What's so strange is that I don't idealize you one bit; and I don't think you idealize me

either. I think it's wonderful how we accept each other just as we are."

"Whether it's being my mother's daughter or not," said Christie, "it's a great comfort to me to have the feelings I have about what you're doing or where you are. . . . I think if anything happened to you I should know."

"I wonder what it really is in us," said Wolf, "that makes us so happy as we are? All other lovers in our position I know very well would be desperate to make love, to live together, to have a child; but here we are, in this field, perfectly content just to be side by side. *You* don't want anything more than this, Christie, do you?"

"I don't know, Wolf, that I'll always feel as I do now. How can I know? But certainly tonight I don't want anything else."

She stopped; and then, after a little pause, her voice began again in the darkness.

"But you don't think, Wolf"—her tone had in it now a certain half-humorous dismay—"that what we feel for each other could ever be called 'Platonic,' do you? I don't know . . . perhaps it's because the word's been so misused . . . but I've always had such an aversion to that idea. The mere possibility of its being applied to the mysterious feeling between us, just because we don't want what people usually do who are in love, reduces everything for me in some way . . . do you know what I mean?"

"Ay, Christie! Christie!" he cried. "How my father

would chuckle if he heard those words of yours! You know how *he* would regard us and the way we behave? As nothing less than stark, staring mad! I'm damned if *I* know what 'Platonic' does mean . . . but I'm rather inclined . . . to think . . . to think . . . that our way of dealing . . . with things . . . with our feeling for each other . . . is much more mediæval than Platonic."

"Mediæval, Wolf?" protested Christie.

"Don't be cross with me. I know I'm absurd. I suppose I'm more of a slave to philosophical *phrases* than anyone in the whole of England! I love the sound of them. They have something . . . a sort of magic . . . I don't know what . . . that makes life rich and exciting to me."

"Oh, I know what you mean, Wolf!" cried Christie. "That's why I've loved reading those books in our shop . . . especially Leibnitz and Hegel. I've never been able to follow their real meaning, I suppose; but all the same it's been a great satisfaction to me to read them."

"I don't think it's pedantry or priggishness in either of us," Wolf continued. "I think we're thrilled by the weight of history that lies behind each one of these phrases. It isn't just the word itself, or just its immediate meaning. It's a long, trailing margin of human sensations, life by life, century by century, that gives us this peculiar thrill. Don't you think so, Christie?"

"What I was going to say," the girl murmured, "was that since I've known you I haven't cared so much for these philosophical books."

"Nonsense!" he muttered. But once more there floated over him an undulating tide of happiness that made the mere tone of her voice seem to him like those fluctuating

wine-dark shadows on the deep sea, that suggest the presence of cool-swaying fields of submerged seaweeds lying beneath the water.

"I know they're absurd . . . these phrases . . ." he went on. "Words like 'pluralism' and 'dualism' and 'monism.' But what they make me think of is just a particular class of vague, delicious, physical sensations! And it's the idea of there having been feelings like these, in far-off, long-buried human nerves, that pleases us both so much. It makes life seem so thick and rich and complicated, if you know what I mean?"

They were both silent, and presently she struggled stiffly to her feet.

"And now, Wolf dear," she said, "I'm sure it's time we went on! I don't like being the one to say it . . . or being the one to interrupt our thoughts . . . but Father will be back, and Gerda will be expecting you."

He rose to his feet, too, and they stood awkwardly there, side by side in that windless darkness. Wolf had the feeling for one second as if the world had completely passed them by . . . gone on its way and forgotten them . . . so that not a soul knew they existed except themselves. As the shadow of a solitary bird on lonely sands answers the form of the bird's flying, so did he feel at that moment that his spirit answered her spirit.

But the moment passed quickly. A vague, troubling remembrance of that "yellow bracken" down by the Lunt rose up suddenly without cause. "Gerda must be thinking of me," he said to himself. And as this thought came into his head he couldn't resist a savage, secret jibing at

his own treachery. "I wonder," he thought, "what Jason would say if he knew everything!"

The girl's figure, close to him as it was, seemed like a pillar of mist. "It's love-making," he thought, "just the relief of love-making, that saves a person's touchy mind from these morbid thoughts. But Christie doesn't depend on that, any more than I do. What *would* Jason say if he saw us now?" And then there came upon him a curious sense of shame that his mind had the power of wandering so far. "Is *her* mind wandering too?" he thought. "What is going on in *her* mind?"

He spoke to her then . . . to that blur that was her face in the darkness.

"As long as we see each other like this, it'll go on being all right, won't it, Christie?"

Her voice replied to his voice with a sound that might have been a whisper out of his own heart or might have been a cry from the other side of the world.

"But it's hard now. It's hard when it ends," she murmured.

"We might never have met at all," he said resolutely. "We've had all we wanted tonight. It's been as if all the noises of the world had blent into one, and then quite died away. Listen, Christie, there's not a stir or movement. It's silence like this that you and I have always wanted . . . all our lives."

"But it's hard when it ends," she repeated.

"We mustn't think of that," he said. "Our thoughts will always be able to find this silence. We shall always be able to reach each other with our thoughts, wherever we are. Don't you feel like that, Christie?"

"I try to," she said.

"You *do*. No one else except you could answer a person's thoughts before they've been spoken! You *must* know, Christie, how I go muttering on and on to you, in my heart, day and night, telling you every single feeling I have?"

"I tell you things too, Wolf. I talk to you, too, sometimes . . . but still, but still . . ."

Her voice broke in a light sigh that floated away into the stubble, fainter than the falling of a feather.

"I know," he repeated obstinately. "But don't let's be ungrateful to the gods, Christie. Think, how easy for us never to have met at all! Think, how I might have gone on with my life in London, you with your life in Blacksod! But now it's all different. And there really *is* a sense . . . don't you see, Christie? . . . in which by just knowing each other and being as we are we've got outside Time and outside Space! We've got into a region where all this——"

"Stop, Wolf, stop!" the girl cried. "I can't bear it now. I tell you I can't——"

He moved towards her, seeking to touch her; but she drew away from him.

"Forgive me!" she said, in a low, quiet voice. "It isn't that I don't understand you. I feel all those things. It's only that . . . at the end . . . when I've got to leave you . . . that all this seems . . . I mean doesn't seem . . ."

The gentleness of her tone softened the reproach, if reproach there was; and Wolf was conscious of nothing but an obscure rebellion within him against this mys-

terious pride in them both which made it so hard for him to risk the relief of the least caress. It was his turn to sigh now—a heavier sigh than hers—and in a second she caught his change of mood.

"I love you so much, Wolf," she said. "I wouldn't hurt you for anything. It's what I feel for you that makes it so hard when you've got to go and I've got to go. And I know what you mean . . . I *do* know what you mean . . . about . . . about our thoughts!"

As she spoke she moved towards him a little in the darkness. It was an almost imperceptible movement; but it was enough to send a perilous stab of tenderness through his nerves.

"Christie, oh, Christie . . ." he murmured, involuntarily starting towards her.

But she had already gathered her cloak about her and held it tightly with one hand under her chin.

"It's all right, Wolf! It's all right!" she said quickly, turning as if with a swift impulse for flight towards the hedge.

"It would be mad now, I suppose," he thought, as he followed her through the entangled branches.

Half-an-hour later, and he was walking with a rapid, preoccupied step along the lighted pavement of the Blacksod High Street. His head was so full of Christie, as he strode along, that the people he passed were as much phantoms to him as had been the elm-trees on the road from King's Barton.

Christie had agreed to come on Monday. That was what he was thinking about now; and it was an imaginary dialogue with Gerda, dealing with this project, that

he was now occupied in rehearsing, sentence by sentence, as he hurried along.

"If she refuses, she refuses!" he thought. "I shan't press her. I'll just have to tell them the thing's off."

He had just reached the point, close to the market-place, where Preston Lane debouched from the High Street, when he encountered, without any warning of his approach, for the pavement was crowded, the lean Panurge-like figure of Bob Weevil, hurrying along in a new straw-hat and new flannel trousers.

"Hullo!" said the young grocer, with a shrinking, startled movement; and then he gave a furtive glance around him, as if to ensure public protection from a possible outburst of physical violence.

"Oh, it's you, is it, Bob?" said Wolf. "Where are *you* going so fast?"

Mr. Weevil stopped and gazed at him with screwed-up eyelids, as he shook him by the hand.

"Home," he announced, in a loud, unpleasant voice. "Home to Dad. 'Little Bobbie's Best at Home,'" he went on. "Where've *you* been? Pursuing the Necessary over at Barton?"

The forced grin that animated the lad's features as he indulged in these pleasantries was so obviously embarrassed and uneasy, that Wolf became instantaneously suspicious. Every word of Jason's innuendoes returned to his mind. There also returned to him that still more sinister hint whispered by the poet on the day of the snatching away of Mukalog.

"Where have *you* been?" he asked abruptly.

He did his best to give his voice a casual tone; but the effect of his question upon Mr. Weevil showed that this effort was unsuccessful.

"You're not a detective, are you?" jeered the young man, in a boisterously insolent manner. " 'Little Bobbie's Best at Home,' " he repeated. "Do you know that song? I'll give you the rest of it some day."

"Well, good-night to you!" rapped out Wolf, brusquely and almost rudely. "I've had a long day. Good-night to you; and don't stay in the water so long the next time you bathe in Lenty Pond!"

He moved off at that, grimly entertained, in spite of his agitation, by the manner in which the young man's eyes and mouth opened at the tone of this remark.

"He's been with Gerda," he thought, as he hurried on.

As soon as he reached Preston Lane, Wolf looked at his watch under the first of the three lamp-posts which were all the illumination that Blacksod had bestowed on that humble district. It was a quarter past nine. He must have been more than an hour in the cornfield; for he had left the bowling-green at seven.

"He's been with Gerda." This single thought had brought him from the centre of the town to where he now stood, without consciousness of anything in the world except one solitary fish's eye—glazed and staring—that he had caught a glimpse of on a gas-lit counter.

He was too staggered even to experience surprise at his unexpected feelings. No alert self-watchful demon in him cried out, "What is this?" or "What does *this* mean?" He just suffered; and his suffering was such a completely new thing to him that he had no mental apparatus ready with which to deal with it. He was like a man who all his life had stalked leopards, suddenly confronted by a charging rhinoceros! All the blood that was in him seemed to have rushed with blind, irrational violence to a portion of his nervous system which he had supposed atrophied and callous. Vividly he recalled Jason's warning to him in the road by the churchyard. "Those people must have pushed him to this," he thought. "Not very nice," he thought, "to think of the water-rat boasting up there with them and telling tales about her!"

He stood stock-still beneath the lamp-post. He felt as

though a mob of Urquharts and Jasons had burst into the inmost sanctuary of his feelings—of his inarticulate physical feelings—and were jeering at them. He felt as though he had been stripped naked—as though he had become a laughing-stock to the human race. These were just the things—these physical feelings—that in his pride he had hidden from everyone. And now they were held up to derision, and he himself with them! He walked slowly across the road and then stopped and looked about him.

Everything was quiet. Most of the windows of those neat little houses displayed shaded gas-jets between the muslin curtains. From where he stood, the dark outline of the pig-dealer's shed was a small huddled blackness against the tall ash-tree further on. Over the top of the shadowy hedge came a faint smell of cattle-trampled grass, a poor antidote to the manure-drain whose stench soon swallowed it up. His own house was still two or three doors off. He could see a thin stream of light emerging from its upper window. Gerda was in her bedroom, then—in her bedroom at a quarter past nine! Had Bob Weevil cajoled her up there, directly they'd finished their supper? "Where did I once read," he thought, "that whatever liberties they allow, they usually fight shy of their man's bed? Good Lord! but what are beds? Beds are nothing. Beds are birth, death, and the morning and evening. But they're nothing when it comes to this! This can take the heart out of any bed."

He recrossed the road to where the lamp-post was. The particular house just there had no light in the front-windows. Instead of this there was a small notice which

he could plainly read. "Furnished Room to let. Inquire within. Mrs. Herbert." "I suppose I've seen Mrs. Herbert," he thought, "a hundred times without knowing her. And I shall never know her. I shall die without knowing her."

He tapped Mrs. Herbert's railings with his stick. "It's not that I grudge Gerda any pleasure," he thought. "It's that I don't like spectators at *my* pleasure. She'll be just the same whatever Bob Weevil did. But he'll always be there . . . hiding behind her thoughts like a rat behind a screen . . . and watching me when I touch her. He'll be in her thoughts when I'm holding her. He'll be always there. I shall be eating with him, sleeping with him. There'll always be a slit in her thoughts through which his eye will be on me."

He remembered how his mother had once come home in high spirits to their London flat, after a conversation with her cousin, Lord Carfax, and told him how this nobleman had explained to her his philosophy of free-love, and how barbarous it was to grow jealous and possessive when you were enamoured. "Jealous?" he thought. "Well! He's more sociable than I am, the good Carfax. I like to be alone in my house . . . not to be peeped at by a third person from the back of my girl's head!"

He felt an extreme reluctance to move a step from where he was at the railings of the unknown Mrs. Herbert. "I've talked a lot about reality," he said to himself. "But now I know a little better what *mine* is . . ."

"*This* is reality," he thought. "This is the kind of thing that men returning home at a quarter past nine, in

Colorado, in Singapore, in Moscow, in Cape-Town, in New Zealand, see in the darkness! . . . This is reality," he thought.

He looked down at the tiny gutter at his feet between the asphalted pavement and the road. The lamplight shone upon this gutter, and he observed a torn piece of newspaper lying in it—a headline of the "Western Gazette"—and just tilted against the edge of this headline he saw an empty greenish-coloured tin. He could even read the words upon that torn bit of paper—printed in large, heavy type. "France distr . . . land." "France distrusts England," he repeated to himself; and then "Lyle's Golden Syrup." He could read *that*, without reading it! Much sweetness had he, in his time, watched Gerda imbibing from such a greenish-coloured receptacle!

"Does Mattie make 'em give Olwen *her* 'golden syrup' out at Pond Cottage? This is reality," he thought.

Down under his feet, under this asphalt, under this Somerset clay, down to the centre of the globe, went the mystery of solid matter. Up, up above him, beyond all this thick swine-scented darkness, went space, air, emptiness—the mystery of un-solid matter. "France distr . . . land"—"Lyle's Golden Syrup." Poke them with the end of an oak-stick. . . . "You'll walk into a pit with your precious stick, master!"—was that what Jason had said?

Pluralism, pantheism, monism! . . . Phrases . . . phrases made by men who come home at a quarter past nine. But these sounds too . . . these large, easy, purring sounds . . . part of reality!

Did Bob Weevil pull up her clothes? They like to have

'em unhooked better than that . . . untied . . . slipping down. . . . They never lose that sense . . . They belie 'em when they say they lose that sense. What sense? The beauty of their beauty . . . the sense of being *beautifully* loved . . . "This is reality," he thought. "They belie 'em when they say . . . Up or down, Bob Weevil? That's the question. Up is infinite. Down is infinite. Pantheism, dualism, pluralism! An ounce of civet, good Master Jason!"

He moved on and stood by the little iron gate of his own house. He did not look up, because there suddenly came to him the nervous idea that she was kneeling on the floor in her short "slip," peeping out at him; and he didn't feel in a mood to be peeped at!

What he did was to stare at the latch of the gate, wondering if he could lift it without making any sound. She had so often heard that "click" and come running to welcome him. He felt that to make that particular noise now would be as if he entered her presence with his face blackened all over like a clown. . . .

But now there arose a different question. His mind began tying itself in a knot like a twisting snake. His own voice was in his ears assuring Christie that, all day and all night, he did nothing but live with her in his thoughts, telling her everything! Could he now tell her everything? . . . She who at this very minute was no doubt standing at *her* window? Why couldn't he tell her everything? Why couldn't he tell her that it wasn't that he grudged Gerda pleasure . . . that it was only that he grudged Bob Weevil the *sort* of pleasure he had got from that tombstone-picture! Why couldn't he explain all this

to Christie; why couldn't he explain to her that it was not the thing itself, but only the way . . . the way in which Bob Weevil did . . . whatever it was he did?

He knew perfectly well that Christie understood his attachment to Gerda. He knew perfectly well that she would understand his resentment at the intrusion of Bob Weevil. What he could never, *never* make her understand would be this cold, sickening nausea he felt toward the simple, actual facts of what must have gone on. How *could* Gerda allow it? How could she?

But perhaps she did struggle a little—if only out of pride—when Bob Weevil began fumbling. But soon there could have been no sound at all except their breathing, except their hard breathing . . . Gerda would suffer, if she knew about Christie, the most secret of feminine sufferings . . . deeper than "France distr . . . land" . . . But a man coming home at a quarter past nine suffered too, the most secret of male sufferings . . . "An ounce of civet, good Master Jason!" He bent his head low down over the little iron railings, trying to think—to think and get it all clear.

He leaned against the little gate, while some unperturbed portion of his consciousness set itself to wonder whether it were a marigold or a petunia that emitted a faint whitish lustre in the darkness. There were plants of both of them there; but he couldn't remember their position—whether the marigolds were there or *there!* Then a thought came into his head that made him straighten his back, click the latch, open it, and walk boldly to the door.

If Gerda and Mr. Weevil were really fond of each

other—if the girl had grown weary of him and his heavy lumpish mind—why couldn't they separate . . . he *his* way . . . she *her* way?

To his surprise—in spite of the lighted candle upstairs—Gerda was seated quietly, contentedly, calmly, at a table in their parlour. She was hemming an apron; and before she smilingly rose to greet him, he saw her quickly but carefully fix her needle in her bobbin of white thread. She threw her arms round his neck and kissed him, not passionately or perfunctorily, but affectionately and gaily.

"I had tea late and waited supper. It's all ready in the kitchen," she said, releasing him. And then she stretched herself, with both arms outspread; and her careless air of indolent well-being was accentuated by the childish smile that covered a shameless yawn. Wolf returned to the passage to hang up his hat and place his stick in its accustomed corner. He could not help thinking of Jason as he did this.

When he returned she was folding up her sewing and putting it away in a drawer. She looked at him smilingly over her shoulder. "I've had a visitor for tea, Wolf. Guess who it was."

"It wouldn't be much of a game for me to guess *that*, Gerda," he said with all the lightness he could assume. "Careful! Careful, now!" his fighting-spirit whispered to his excited nerves. "If you make the least false move she'll have you at a disadvantage."

"Why not?" The girl approached him, as she spoke, giving him a long, scrutinizing glance. "What's the matter, Wolf? Is anything wrong?" She laid both her hands

on his coat, clutching its unbuttoned flaps and tightening them round him with a gesture that was at once imperative and cajoling.

"I met Bob Weevil just now," he murmured, trying to give the words a natural tone, and smoothing out every sign of treachery from his face.

But with incredible rapidity, even while she was lifting up her chin and opening her lips, the self-protective demon in him cursed him for a blundering fool. "Why did you blurt *that* out?" said the demon.

"And he told you he'd been here?" Her words were as calm as if she'd said, "And he told you he'd been playing bowls." She released her hold upon his coat and with easy naturalness ran out into the passage and thence into the kitchen.

Wolf heard her collecting the supper-things. He heard the sound of running water and the sound of metal against earthenware. He looked round the room. Ah! *there* was something he hadn't noticed before, a draught-board open, with the black and white disks jumbled in casual confusion over its checkered surface.

So they had been playing draughts!

He walked thoughtfully up to this object and began piling up the round wooden counters, one on the top of another, balancing his shaky tower with his fingers as it began to sway. Then he removed his hand, and his tower fell with a crash, and many of the pieces rolled on the floor.

The house was so still that the sudden noise brought Gerda running into the room—to find him standing by the draught-table.

"What's the matter with you?" she cried peevishly. "Aren't you going to help me get supper? Aren't you even going to wash your hands?"

"So you and Bob were playing draughts? I never knew you even knew the game, Gerda," he said.

"Come and wash your hands," she replied in a calm, scolding tone. "I've got tomato-soup. It'll be ready in a minute. I'll tell you every bit of the gossip about Bob when we've sat down! Of course I know draughts. Bob taught me years ago, when I was little. Today I won every single game. I was 'huffing' him all the time. But *do* come, Wolf. I'm hungry. Never mind picking up those things!"

He followed her into the kitchen and stood there, awkwardly and sulkily, till the meal was ready.

"I'm going to have beer tonight, Gerda," he said. "I don't know if *you* are."

"I certainly am!" she said in her most cheerful tone, seating herself at the table and breaking a piece of bread with one hand, while she dipped her spoon into the soup with the other.

He went to the cupboard and came back with three bottles.

"Wolf . . . *dear!*" she cried, with her mouth full. "Who's the third bottle for? Have *you* got somebody coming in?"

"It's for me," he remarked laconically. "I'm tired tonight. I've had a long day."

"But, Wolf—isn't it rather extravagant drinking so much at one meal?"

He didn't reply to this, but busied himself with open-

ing two of the bottles and with filling her glass and his own.

"It's good . . . this soup . . . isn't it, Wolf?" she remarked presently, passing the tip of her pink tongue over one corner of her perfectly curved lip and lifting her spoon once more to her mouth.

He poured half his glassful of beer, froth and all, down his throat without a word! Then he began swallowing the soup in rapid gulps.

"Good soup . . . very *good* soup," he muttered.

She gave him a quick, penetrating look over her own raised glass, just sipped at the white foam, and then replaced the tumbler on the table. The next spoonful she lifted slowly, meditatively, absent-mindedly, a little puckered frown hovering about her forehead.

Wolf set himself obstinately and resolutely to finish the meal. Eating pieces of crumbled bread, hurriedly, intently, as if the process were something important in itself, leading to some desirable consummation, he kept drinking the beer in long draughts. The moment the first bottle was finished he opened the other, and with the same concentrated, absorbed determination disposed of that also.

"Good soup . . . very *good* soup," he repeated, as if the words were a sop thrown over his shoulder to some insatiable Cerberus of the river of Time.

"I am the weakest, most gullible fool," he thought, as he watched Gerda spreading a large slice of bread and then very deliberately taking little bites out of it, "ever born into the world. I oughtn't to be called Wolf Solent

at all! I ought to be called Mr. Thin Soup or Mr. Weak Beer."

"Aren't you going to give me a cigarette?" asked Gerda.

He got up to obey, and it seemed to him as if the physical effort it required to hand her what she demanded and to hold towards her a lighted match, were the heaviest material task he had ever stretched his muscles to perform.

He lighted one for himself, however, and resumed his seat.

In complete silence now, save for the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece, the greyish-blue spirals of smoke rose from each end of the table and floated hesitatingly, fluctuatingly, towards one another, high up above the two human heads.

"It's the weakness of your nature, Beer-Soup," he said to himself. "The weakness and the gullibility." Then he recalled the sudden bold resolve with which he had clicked the latch of their gate; and he compared that flash of inspiration with his wretched feelings now. Didn't he know himself at all? What he felt now was a complete disintegration of desire and will. He felt as if his consciousness were a tiny fitful flame, no, not a flame even, a scarcely visible vapour, hovering over a chaos of conflicting wishes, purposes, desires, hopes, regrets, that were so disorganized as to utterly cancel one another. They felt remote from him, too, these feelings that ought to have been his—remote and infinitely contemptible! The only desire this weak, floating awareness retained

was a desire to escape from them altogether. For disorganized though they were, a dull nausea, sickening and paralyzing, ascended from them, troubling that feeble, free consciousness of his, as a putrefying body might trouble some frail "animula vagula" only half-escaped from it.

He struggled to use his brain, his free brain. "What *is* the matter with you, you lump of asininity? Speak up, express yourself, Mr. Wolf Beer-Soup!"

Then he suddenly recalled what he had felt as he drank that Dorchester ale in the bowling-green of Farmer's Rest. He had felt completely master of his destiny then. All these disorganized emotions, all these nervous electric currents, were gathered up then and focussed. Was he perhaps . . . innately incapable of dealing with women, whether in the way of lust, or in the way of tenderness? Was he only *a man* when confronted with men? Thrown with women, did his whole nature turn lumpish, sapless, porous? He began suddenly to have that appalling sensation which had come to him on Babylon Hill, as if his head . . . the thing that said "I am I" . . . were twisting and turning, like an uprisen hooded serpent . . . above a body of unspeakable decomposition. . . .

Like a drowning man he stretched out his thoughts for help in every direction. To his mother he stretched them out. To his father he stretched them out. Feebly and automatically he carried his thoughts like a basket of dying fish to the threshold of Christie's room. "Christie! I must tell you . . . I *must*, I *must* tell you!"

But it seemed to him then as if even Christie's mind

were shut to his helplessness. He seemed to hear her cry, "Stop, Wolf, stop! I can't bear to hear it!"

"This can't go on," he thought. "I must end this somehow; or I shall go mad."

He rose to his feet and began pacing up and down the kitchen.

Gerda watched him in silence for a moment or two; and then, extinguishing the remains of her cigarette against the edge of her empty soup-plate, she said to him, quite naturally and quietly:

"Wolf darling, just run upstairs, will you, and see if I left my candle burning? I want to wash up before we go to bed."

He stared at her in bewilderment, blinking his eyes. Then he lifted his hand to his mouth and held it there—held it to hide that trick he had, when he was at the limit of his endurance, of working the muscles of his lower jaw.

Gerda calmly rose from her seat and began gathering together the things on the table. "*Do* run up and put out that candle, Wolf," she repeated. "We don't want a fire in our house."

He obeyed her in silence now, and ascended the creaking steps, dragging his feet. He felt as if some completely different person—some docile, harmless, lumpish idiot—had taken the place of the Wolf he knew.

When he entered the room he found that the candle she had left there was low down in its candlestick, burning and guttering sideways, and dropping grease over the cover of the chest of drawers. He bent down mechanically to blow it out, receiving as he did so the full force

of the carbonic-acid gas in his face. With no conscious purpose in his mind, he approached the bed, and, in the darkness, passed his hand hesitatingly over both the pillows, as if feeling for something.

Then he stood straight up against the edge of the bed, his knees touching the sheeted mattress, his arms hanging limp at his sides.

Quite externally and objectively, as if it had been this idiotic other person and not himself at all who formulated the thought, he wondered whether it was *after* she had let Bob Weevil make love to her up here, or *before*, that the game of draughts had been brought out. A hideous commentary upon this problem seemed to arise then from the mass of his own disorganized nerves. "Why don't you ask Christie what *she* thinks? Christie is a girl. Christie will be able to tell you whether it was before the draughts or after the draughts!"

He left the bed and went to the open window, hearing, as he did so, the sound of Gerda's clattering with the supper-things as she calmly washed up below.

The window was open at the top, so that to get the coolness of the air he was forced to lean his elbows upon the woodwork and rest his chin upon the back of his folded hands.

He remembered to the end of his life what he felt at that moment, while the bone of his lower jaw met the bones of his knuckles pressed so hard against them. He felt absolutely alone—alone in an emptiness that was different from empty space. He did not pity himself. He did not hate himself. He just endured himself and waited

—waited till whatever it was that enclosed him made some sign.

By slow degrees it dawned on him that he had been for the last two or three minutes seeing something without being conscious of what he saw. Now it began to grow slowly plain to him, lineament by lineament, feature by feature, what it was he had been seeing in the darkness of that room, in the darkness of this obscure night.

It was the face of the man on the Waterloo steps! And out of his abominable misery Wolf cried a wordless cry to this face; and the nature of this cry was such that it seemed to break—so desperate it was—some psychic tension in his brain. And it seemed to him that what he was appealing to now was something beyond his mother, beyond his father, beyond Christie herself—something that was the upgathered, incarnated *look*, turned toward life's engines, of every sentient thing, since the beginning of time, that those engines had crushed.

The smell of the pigsty across the way must have been the reason why the *look* he appealed to was only partially human. It was an animal look . . . it was a bird look . . . it was the look of the fish's eye that he had seen on a counter as he came along the street that very night; it was the look of a wounded snake's eye that he had had time to mark long ago, out on some country road near London, before he ended its suffering.

It was, in fact, the Life-Eye, looking out on what hurts it, that he now knew he had caught glimpses of, all the days of his existence, in a thousand shapes and forms.

From air, earth, water, had he intercepted the appeal of that little round living hole . . . that hole that went through the wall . . . straight into something else. Into *what* else? No one knew or would ever know. But into something else. It was upon *this* he was crying out now . . . upon that eye . . . upon that little round hole . . . upon that chink, that cranny, that slit, out of which life protested against its infamous enemy!

"Jesus . . . Jesus . . . Jesus . . . Jesus!"

Was that the heart of Wolf Solent howling a wordless howl in a dark bedroom, or was it the voice of Mr. Round of Farmer's Rest seeking escape from his "worries"?

A sigh of unutterable relief shivered through Wolf's nerves as they relaxed and yielded. He drew back from the window and began with an almost cat-like movement licking his hurt knuckles.

His whole being seemed dissolving into some lovely liquid-floating substance, lighter than human flesh, and he became capable of thinking now with every portion of his identity, easily, freely, spontaneously.

"I've learnt one thing tonight," he thought, as he crossed the room and felt about in the darkness for the handle of the door. "I've learnt that one can't always get help by sinking into one's own soul. It's sometimes necessary to escape from oneself altogether."

He ran down the little staircase with happy agility. He burst into the kitchen, where he found Gerda placidly and abstractedly polishing her knives and forks.

"How long you——" she began; but the words were

stopped upon her mouth by an imprint of impetuous, almost boisterous kisses.

As he held her in his arms, Wolf's thoughts were of the most intense and rapid kind. Why was it that his love for Christie hadn't protected him from all this agitation? Why had he been paralyzed by Gerda's calm? How was it that, in the unbelievable relief he experienced now, he really felt as if it didn't *very much* matter what the water-rat had done or hadn't done?

Releasing Gerda now, he seemed to bewilder her a good deal more by his high spirits than he had done by his moroseness.

"Don't let's go to bed *just* yet," he said. "Let's go for a tiny stroll down the road."

"Why, Wolf, how funny you are tonight! A moment ago you were telling me that you were quite exhausted."

She yielded good-humouredly, however, to his caprice, and they went out together into the narrow road.

Wolf had the strangest feeling as he clicked the latch of the gate to let her through. It was as if he were breaking some law of nature—refuting some inflexible scientific category of cause and effect.

He kept his arm tight about her, and led her up the road, in the direction away from the town, till they came to the place where the immense ash-tree lifted its branches into the dark air high above their heads.

There was a small gap in the hedge at this point, and Wolf pulled her through it, into the meadow on the other side. "For the second time tonight!" whispered his demon. But for some reason the mockery glanced off

from Wolf's present mood of slippery buoyancy, without causing him the slightest discomfort. "Very well, then," he mentally retorted, "for the second time it *shall* be!"

They found themselves now under the very trunk of the vast tree whose branches they had so often watched from their upper room. One branch bent so low down and stretched out so far that they instinctively put their arms about it and dallied with its cool foliage. Wolf even amused himself by gathering up those great multiform leaf-growths, so different from the foliations of all other trees, and twisting them, without breaking their flexible stalks, about the girl's bare neck.

Gerda remained passive and yielding under this dalliance. It seemed to him that her mind was a little aloof; but he could see, without seeing it, the faint, docile smile, like that of a sweet-natured child drawn into a game it was ready to play without understanding, with which she submitted to his humour.

All at once there came a sudden coolness upon his face and a quick rustling above their heads. The wind was rising. Oh, this was what he had been craving for, ever since his return to Preston Lane! It had been—he knew it now—something in the heaviness of this windless air that had caused half his trouble. Had this cool wind been blowing when he crossed the threshold, everything would have been different. It was the wind he wanted, the wind, the wind; to blow away all odious eidolons of Bob Weevil's presence out of his "sober house"!

He permitted the leafy ash-twigs that he had been bending to swing back to their natural position; and

snatching at Gerda's arm above the wrist, he drew the girl, like a captive, right up to the trunk of the great overshadowing tree. She remained still passive, gentle, unresisting, by his side, her head drooping a little, her whole being—so it seemed—lost in a calm untroubled quiescence. Holding her thus, but turning away from her, he rubbed the palm of his free hand up and down over the hard slightly-indented surface of the ash-trunk, whose bark, thin and tightly fitted, raised no barrier between his human touch and the tree's own firm, hard wood-flesh.

"Human brains! Human knots of confusion!" he thought. "Why can't we steal the calm vegetable clairvoyance of these great rooted lives?"

"I simply can't understand myself," he thought. "Why, after being so happy with Christie, should the idea of Bob Weevil, poor, lecherous little rat, have worried me so? And why didn't I make a scene with Gerda—raise denials, anger, tears, reproaches? Why, instead of that, did I just muddy up my own wits?"

Still retaining his clasp of Gerda's wrist, he leaned forward and pressed his bare forehead against the trunk of the ash-tree.

"What's this, Wolf Solent? . . . What's this, you lumpish, mock-Platonic, well-cuckolded ass? Ash-tree! Ash-tree!" Why had he been allowed by the justice of things to deny himself a single embrace with Christie, only to come home at a quarter past nine and find a lit candle in Gerda's bedroom? Platonic cuckold! That was just what he was. . . . Not even Platonic . . . for Christie despised that word. . . . Mock-Platonic cuck-

old! Oh, it was all coming back! The knot in his mind was tying itself up again—tight—tight—tight! He continued to lean against the tree in the position of an animal that is butting with its skull against some immovable obstacle.

And then the Waterloo-steps' eye, the fish's eye, the snake's eye, the slaughtered pig's eye, the eye of a caged lark he had seen once as a child in St. Mary's Street, Weymouth, all seemed to melt strangely together—all seemed to peer out at him from the heart of the tree-trunk against which he was butting with his skull.

And he thought to himself, "There are ways that I haven't tried at all!" And he thought to himself: "Endless little things are beautiful and wonderful beyond words. And I can love Christie and forgive her for hating 'Platonic'; and I can love Gerda and forgive her for letting Bob Weevil pull up her clothes. And if Christie and Gerda knew what *I* know, they'd forgive *me* for loving both of them! Christie would forgive me for not telling her. Gerda would forgive me for not telling her. There are things a person can't tell. But there's a way of floating like a mist out of my pride and conceit. There's a way of accepting myself as Mr. Promise-Breaking-Beer-Soup, and yet not minding it at all . . . just becoming a cloud of mist that enjoys this cool wind . . . a cloud of mist that pities everything and enjoys everything!"

He swung away, back from the tree, at this, and let Gerda go.

"You've hurt me, Wolf!" the girl cried peevishly. "Why did you do that? I haven't done anything to you.

I wouldn't have come out with you if I thought you were going to act so funny. Come! Let's go in. What do you think I am, to stand so much silliness? You're drunk—that's what's the matter with you; you're just drunk and acting silly!"

He was so delighted to receive nothing but this very natural piece of scolding, that he only answered by hugging her tightly to his heart. "Little Gerda! Little Gerda!" he kept repeating. And he thought to himself: "I've exaggerated the whole thing. She *can't* have let Weevil play with her and be like she is now!"

And then an idea came into his mind.

"Don't be cross, sweetheart," he said. "If I *was* drunk, I swear I'm all right now. But listen! Do let me lift you up into this tree, just for a minute! I'd so adore to hear your voice out of the leaves above my head and not see hardly a glimpse of you! *Do* get up into it, Gerda, and let me hear your voice from up there. You needn't climb far. I can't climb trees at all. I get dizzy. Or I'd climb it with you."

The girl was still apparently enough of a child to be stirred by this unexpected appeal.

"But I'm so heavy, Wolf; and this branch is so high up."

"Oh, no, it's not—it's not! There—shove yourself up on the palms of your hands. Jump—and lift yourself—you know? Like boys do on walls!"

He bent down and encircled her body with his arms, just above her knees, and lifted her up.

Gerda pressed her hands upon the bough as he had suggested, and after a few struggles was lying prone

along it, holding it so closely with her arms and legs that he could hardly distinguish the one living thing from the other.

"Well done, sweetheart!" he cried. "That's right. Now work your way towards the trunk. Careful now! Straddle your legs—you'll scratch your knees like that—straddle your legs and hold with your hands!"

Again she obeyed him with good-humoured docility. And as he watched her shadowy figure riding the swaying branch, he could not help recalling the wicked tombstone-picture; and the thought—the very last thought he expected to cross his mind that night—flitted into his senses, that it would be a desirable moment when he blew out the candle in their room—blew out that candle for the second time!

"That's it, Gerda, that's it! Now get hold of the branch above, and pull yourself on to it!"

He came nearer the tree-trunk and gazed up into the darkness.

In a second or two he lost sight of her altogether, for Gerda was an adept at climbing trees. All he could detect was a vague rustling; and even that was very soon swallowed up by the murmur of the whole dark mass of foliage, stirred into movement now by the rising wind.

He waited. He leaned his back against the trunk. He listened to the long-drawn swish—swish—swish of the invisible, rustling leaves.

Then his heart gave a leap within his body and he caught his breath with an indrawn, quivering gasp.

A blackbird was whistling above his head! Faint and low at first, each liquid flute-note went sailing away upon

the wind as if it had been a separate pearl-clear bubble of some immortal dew. Then, growing louder and clearer, the notes began following rapidly one upon another; but each one of them still remained distinct from the rest—a trembling water-transparent globe of thrilling sound, purged, inviolable—a drop of translunar melody, floating, floating, far above the world, carrying his very soul with it.

Then the notes changed, varied, overlapped, grew charged with some secret intention, some burden of immeasurable happiness, of sadness sweeter than happiness.

Rising still, freer, stronger, fuller, they began to gather to themselves the resonant volume of some inincredible challenge, a challenge from the throat of life itself to all that obstructed it. Tossed forth upon the darkness, wild and sweet and free, this whistled bird-song, answering the voice of the rising wind, took to itself something that was at once so jocund and so wistful, that it seemed to him as though all the defiant acceptance of fate that he had ever found in green grass, in cool-rooted plants, in the valiant bodies of beasts and birds and fishes . . . "mountains and all hills . . . fruitful trees and all cedars" . . . had been distilled, by some miracle, in this one human mouth.

The whistling sank into silence at the very moment when its power over Wolf's soul was at the flood. But without one single second of delay, when the last note had died, Gerda came scrambling down, laughing, rustling the leaves, and giving vent to petulant little outcries as her clothes impeded her descent. Wolf, when she

finally fell, all panting and tremulous with wild gaiety, into his arms, felt that it was difficult to believe that this was the same Gerda whom he had watched, that very noon, asleep on the summit of Poll's Camp.

As they returned hand in hand to their house-door, a queer, abashed sense came over him that all the events of this turbulent day had been a sort of feverish delirium. What *was* his mind that it should go through such agitation and remain unaltered—remain the same "I am I" of Wolf Solent?

But once again his self-knowledge received a shock. For no sooner were they inside their small domicile, no sooner had he glanced at the linoleum on the staircase, the wooden clock in the parlour, the familiar kitchen-table, than all these little objects hit his consciousness with a delicious thrilling sense of happy security, as if he had come back to them from some great voyage over desolate and forlorn seas, as if he had come back to them with his clothes drenched with salt-water and his hands wounded by tarred ropes! His mind may have remained unaltered by all this, but it had at any rate been washed very clean!

Upon every tiniest and least-important object he looked, that night, with a purged simplicity, a spontaneous satisfaction. The pine-wood boarding at the edge of the linoleum stair-carpet, the pegs where their coats hung, the handles of the dresser-drawers, the rows of balanced plates, the cups suspended from the little hooks, the metal knobs at the end of their bed, Gerda's comb and brush, the candlestick still covered with grease, and two exposed soap-dishes on the washing-stand, one contain-

ing a small piece of Pears' soap and one containing a square lump of common yellow soap—all these things thrilled him, fascinated him, threw him into an ecstasy of well-being.

What was it that Mr. Urquhart had said, that day, about these little inanimates? Suicide *he* was talking about. But this was different. . . .

It was a very quiescent Gerda, lethargic and languorous, who lay down by his side that Friday night. It was a very indulgent Christie, grave and tender, who listened now in her room above the shop to his story about ash-trees and draught-boards—who listened to every thought he had, as she lay there with closed eyes!

No system at all! Only to dissolve into thin, fluctuating vapour; only to flow like a serpentine mist into the grave of his father, into the mocking heart of his mother, into the ash-tree, into the wind, into the sands on Weymouth Beach, into the voice of the landlord of Farmer's Rest. No system at all!

Jesus . . . Jesus . . . Jesus . . . Jesus. . . .

GERDA HAD REFUSED POINT-BLANK TO INVITE DARNLEY and Christie to supper on Monday night, thus bringing to nothing Christie's premonition in the stubble-field. And now it was the middle of the long, sunlit afternoon—relaxed, autumnal, mellow—of Mr. Valley's great gala-day.

The *fête* was held in the vicarage-glebe, adjoining that portion of the churchyard-wall behind which rose the now four-months-old tombstone of the youthful Mr. Redfern.

The young men and boys of the village, encouraged at their game by Mr. Urquhart and Darnley Otter, were engaged in an interminable cricket-match, a match played between those who lived west of the church and those who lived east.

When Wolf first left his employer's library, which he did some half-hour later than the squire himself, and entered the school-treat field, he felt nervous and irritable. Everyone he knew in the world seemed to be gathered in that enclosure; and as he stealthily shuffled along the edge of the churchyard, he felt as if he would like to hide himself from them all, down in the silent earth along with young Redfern!

He found himself at a spot where the wall was very low, and, turning his back upon the crowded scene, leaned there for a while unnoticed, gazing at the great perpendicular tower. With the shouts and laughter in his

ears, that tower looked incredibly massive and silent. What ebbing and flowing of human lives had it not seen, since unknown hands in the reign of the first Tudor piled it up there, stone upon stone!

Well, at least it was something to face the disquietudes of his own life in the presence of masonry like this, so subdued, so encrusted, rendered so mellow by the passing of the generations! As long as Fate allowed him to eke out his days amid old time-weathered concretions, like this King's Barton Tower, he could never touch certain abysses of misery! Here in these West Country places he was at any rate spared the atrocity of feeling the pinch of life's dilemmas against a background of monstrous modern inventions. The long, cold clutch of scientific discovery, laid, like metallic fingers, upon the human pulse, could not despoil the dignity of existence here; though the invasion by such inhuman forces had already begun!

"Long may this tower stand, so that men like me can touch its stones, its buttresses, its lichen, its moss, and escape from the dragon's-tail of the stinging present!"

He was conscious of a stealthy step behind him, and, turning round, he found Jason Otter at his side.

"You are enjoying yourself looking at his grave," the poet began; "and I don't blame you. I like looking at the graves of people I've known. But you go further than I could go, Solent. You are the clever one, the wise one, the old cunning one! You can enjoy looking at a grave though you never knew the person who's in it."

"You can't expect me not to be interested in Redfern, can you?" retorted Wolf, a little crustily.

"Of course not. That's just it. We all feel an interest—a nice, merry interest—in being alive when someone else is dead. He only came down here for money," he added unexpectedly, "like you!"

"If I came for it, I assure you I don't get it," said Wolf.

Jason chuckled a great deal at this remark. Then he grew grave. "I've got a poem here I'd like to read to you, if it wouldn't spoil your pleasure in looking at this young man's grave. I won't, if it *would*."

"I've looked all I want to look," said Wolf; "so do read me what you've got there. I'm glad of any excuse not to go round the field and hear so much talk."

"Sit down, then, a minute . . . do you mind?"

The two men sat down at the base of the wall and leaned their backs against it, facing the school-treat meadow. Jason produced from his pocket a small note-book, which he opened very deliberately upon his knee.

"It's about white seaweed," said Jason Otter.

"I didn't know it was ever white," said Wolf.

"Everything is white at one time or another," retorted Jason. "*You*'ll be white enough yourself, one fine day!"

"If it only gets white when it's dead," argued Wolf obstinately, "I don't think it's much of a subject. I like the idea of seaweed being white in the way chalk is white or daisies are white; but if it just fades and bleaches . . . I don't think much of that."

"It's no good abusing me before you've heard it," said Jason; "but, of course, we know this business of

reading our writings is what your friend Darnley would call impolite."

"Go on, man, go on!" cried Wolf. "I'm listening."

And the poet began to read.

"White Seaweed" . . .

He repeated these words a second time, gathering his energy.

"White Seaweed."

"For God's sake," cried Wolf, "get on with it! They'll catch sight of us in a moment and then it'll all be spoilt."

Jason accepted this impatience with unruffled equanimity, and began in a low voice; but, gathering confidence as he proceeded, he read the poem from beginning to end without a pause.

White as the foam in the track of a whale
As he spouts and sports for a thousand miles
Where the waters slope round the planet's rim,
Beyond the continents and the isles,
White as the foam that follows him
Where there's never a masthead nor a sail,

Drowned and dead from their sunken ships,
Drift the bodies of boys and girls;
White are they as they float and drift,
Their hair like flostam, their breasts like pearls,
While the grey tides lift them, or cease to lift,
And the green tides gurgle between their lips.

Fishes' eyes in the cold grey deep,
Staring and waiting, waiting and staring,
Seagulls' beaks on the tops of the wave,
The same eternal quest are sharing;
But the dark, wet, purple, slippery grave
Holds safe those bodies in untouched sleep.

And out of the flesh of those bodies light,
In their dark, wet, purple, slippery bed,
A seaweed grows that is soft as silk,
White as the moon on St. Alban's Head,
Moss-like, fern-like, white as milk,—
The fingers of Mary are not more white!

Oh! White as the horn of God's unicorn,
That seaweed lies upon Red-cliff bay,
Lies in the spindrift on Red-cliff sands,
Fling all your wicked thoughts away!
Take off your shoes; anoint your hands!
Than to touch such seaweed with careless scorn
'Twere better never to have been born!

Jason's voice sank; and that peculiar silence ensued which is fuller of electric cross-currents than anything else in the world . . . the silence produced by the falling of the seminal drops of verbal creation . . . upon an alien mind.

"I like it very much," murmured Wolf at last. And he thought to himself, "The beggar *has* his own peculiar imagination."

Then he said aloud: "It's one of your best poems, Jason. I don't think it's quite up to the 'Slow-Worm of Lenty,' but it does you credit and I congratulate you. What did you exactly mean by that last verse? Did you mean that there are people in the world whose wicked thoughts are aroused by white seaweed, or did you just mean the ordinary stupidity of human beings?"

"It's not my business to explain what I mean," said Jason. "It's my business to write. I can see what you think. You think that I just string words together as they come into my head! It isn't as easy to write a poem as you seem to imagine."

"Why do you write so often about water and about drowned people?" asked Wolf. "Your pond-elf in 'The Slow-Worm' gave me a weird feeling; and this seaweed of yours, growing out of drowned bodies——"

"You needn't go on!" interrupted Jason. "Of course, I can't expect anyone to like my poetry who lives by copying out the liquorish thoughts of a doting old fool. We all want to be glorified. My poetry is all I've got and I ought never to have read it to you. I ought to have known I'd only get abuse. It's this wanting to be glorified that's the mistake. A person ought to be satisfied if he can get his meals three times a day, without having to dance attendance on some silly old man or some ugly old woman!"

Wolf swept this aside. "Do you have in your mind any definite people when you make the newts and tadpoles tease the pond-elf, and when you make these fish and gulls want to eat these youthful bodies?"

Jason's face wrinkled with delight at this.

"You're afraid I might bring *you* in!" he chuckled. "I wouldn't mind not being glorified if I could make your friend Urquhart agitate himself as much as you do over my poems."

Wolf had no time to reply to this; for, to his considerable surprise, he perceived his mother and Gerda, arm in arm, advancing towards their retreat.

Both he and Jason struggled simultaneously to their feet and moved towards the two women. Mrs. Solent began speaking with her accustomed high-pitched ironical intonation.

"Don't take it off, Mr. Otter," she said, when the poet

raised his hand to his hat. "I know how you hate the sun; and it *is* hot today; though the hotter it is the more I enjoy it, though I think our pretty Gerda here agrees with *you*."

Jason, who had succeeded with a certain embarrassment in lifting his straw-hat a few inches from his head in a stiff, perpendicular direction, pulled it down once more over his forehead with grateful relief.

"What's this?" said Wolf, trying to conceal his discomfort under an airy jauntiness. "What's this between you two?"

"Your mother and I have had several walks together," said Jason, "and she knows my ways."

"So well as to take a great liberty!" exclaimed the handsome lady, whose brown eyes were shining with radiant exultation. And as she spoke she stepped to Jason's side and poked something, with her light-gloved fingers, into its place under his hat.

While this was proceeding, the expression upon the poet's face made Wolf astonished. It was the queerest mixture of physical repulsion with pleasurable, masochistic submission. He was amazed at his mother's audacity.

"What is it that you wear under your hat, Mr. Otter?" asked Gerda innocently.

The strange man looked at her with a very peculiar expression—an expression that baffled Wolf altogether. Then a most beautiful look came into his grey eyes, a look infinitely wistful and sorrowful, the sort of look that a disguised and persecuted god, lost among some savage race that knew him not nor could have compre-

hended him if it had known him, might have worn; and he replied gently: "I feel the sun, young lady. I find cabbage-leaves a great help. But today"—and here he smiled a disarming smile—"today it's a rhubarb-leaf."

Having said this, and with a courtly bend of his body that would have done credit to a royal personage, Jason Otter moved off, making his way, with careful manœuvring to avoid any encounter with the crowd, towards that part of the field where the old men of the village, seated on wooden benches, were partaking of cakes and cider.

"I hope you haven't offended him, Mother," muttered Wolf.

"I don't think so," cried Gerda. "What a nice man he is, Wolf! I like him ever so much better than Darnley."

"That's because Darnley's my best friend," said Wolf. "It's a law of nature, sweetheart, isn't it, Mother?"

But Mrs. Solent completely disregarded this little passage between them.

"What Gerda and I came for," she said, "was to ask you to show us Mr. Redfern's grave. Gerda's never seen it, though her father made the headstone, and I've never seen it, though I've asked Mr. Urquhart a hundred times to show it to me."

"It's not hard to find," said Wolf drily. "You could have gone any day by yourself."

"What's the sport in *that?*" laughed the lady, still displaying the same undercurrent of secret excitement. "The fun of looking at graves is all in the person you look at them *with* . . . isn't it, Gerda? I'm sure *you* must have enjoyed yourself watching all the fuss people make!"

"I can't help my father being a monument-maker," said Gerda gravely. "It's a trade, like any other trade."

"I'm not quarrelling with your father's profession, child," Mrs. Solent rapped out. "I'm only saying that there's no sport in looking at graves by oneself; and I *do* want to see this one."

"There it is, then, Mother!" cried Wolf, almost peevishly. "Can't you see? . . . the tall stone one there . . . no! over there . . . nearer the Tower," and he pointed with his stick.

"I want to go up to it," said Mrs. Solent obstinately, "and so does Gerda. She told me so just now. We're both sick to death of swinging long-legged girls. I don't want to see any more frills or garters for the rest of my life."

"Well, come on, then," said Wolf petulantly. "You can climb over this, can't you, Mother? I suppose Bob Weevil's making himself useful at the swings, eh?"

Whatever demon it was that made him indulge in this jocularity, its result was immediate.

Gerda turned on him fiercely. "Don't be so vulgar, Wolf. Bob's playing cricket, and so's Lobbie. You ought to know better than to make remarks like that!"

"Don't push me, Wolf." It was his mother speaking, as she began scrambling over the low moss-grown wall. "Give me your hand; . . . no! give me your hand."

Soon they were all three standing by Redfern's grave.

"Poor boy!" sighed Mrs. Solent. "Do you know, Wolf, I heard Roger Monk talking in a queer way last week. I was asking him about this boy's death, and he spoke in such a funny tone about it. He almost implied that it was

a case of suicide. Have you heard anything of that sort?"

"Oh, just rumours, Mother," replied Wolf casually; "just rumours and village-gossip. I've never heard of an inquest, or anything like that. I believe he died in his bed."

"Father talks queer about it too," said Gerda. "But do look at that! Is that a mole or a rabbit?"

"*I* don't know," said Wolf vaguely. It did not interest him in any particular way that this newly-grown-over mound should have been burrowed into or scraped at. After his many years of London life, the ways of moles, rabbits, dogs, foxes, were all equally arbitrary, equally unpredictable. It was, however, brought home to him now that there *was* something exceptional in this phenomenon; for Gerda, oblivious of the risk of grass-stains upon her summer frock, went down hurriedly on her knees and began fumbling with her bare fingers in the disordered clay, scooping up little handsfuls of dry brown earth with one hand and filtering them thoughtfully into the hollow palm of the other hand.

"Are you looking for Mr. Redfern's bones?" enquired Mrs. Solent in her most airy manner. "You look like that pretty girl in the poem, leaning over her Pot of Basil; doesn't she, Wolf?" And touching the mound with the tip of her green parasol she put her head a little to one side and began quoting from the poem in question in a mock-sentimental intonation . . .

> "And she forgot the stars, the moon, the sun;
> And she forgot the blue above the trees;
> And she forgot the dells where waters run;
> And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze.
> She had no knowledge . . ."

"Don't, Mother," interrupted Wolf crossly, "Gerda knows what she's doing."

The unequalled lines roused their response in him, as independently of the mocking tone in which they were spoken as beautiful limbs under a ridiculous disguise; but this response only annoyed him the more.

"What is it, sweetheart?" he cried. "Is it a rabbit? I didn't know rabbits ever burrowed in churchyards."

"It's a mole," said Mrs. Solent.

It was Wolf's turn to mutter something now . . .

> "Well said, old mole! canst work i' the earth so fast?
> A worthy pioner! Once more remove, good friends."

"What's that? You know perfectly well it's a mole, Gerda," said Mrs. Solent. Gerda remained silent. She lifted some of the loose earth to her face and smelt it. Then she leapt to her feet, shook out her skirt, and rubbed the palms of her hands together. "I give it up," she said. "It isn't a rabbit. There's no smell of a fox either. It *may* have been a dog."

"A mole . . . a mole!" repeated the older woman.

"A *mole!*" muttered Gerda, with the profound sarcasm of the country-bred; and Wolf caught a little red flush on her cheeks like a crimson shadow on a mother-of-pearl shell. "Well! *we* can't do anything, anyway," she said. "It's silly to fuss ourselves. Bother! I've got some grit in my shoe!"

"It spoils the look of the grave completely, this great mole-hole," said Mrs. Solent. Then her face lit up, and she opened her parasol with an eager click. "This is a bit of sport," she cried. "Let's fill the thing up! Never

mind about the school-treat. Where does Valley keep his spade? We only want a spade and a roll of turf. I saw some loose turf lying about in our garden. Come on, Wolf! Let's go over and get it, and ask Valley where he keeps his shovel."

Her face was full of animation now, and her eyes shone. Her grey hair and black Gainsborough hat framed the vivid cheeks of youth. The way she tilted her parasol as she spoke had something adventurous, almost hoydenish.

"Come, Wolf, let's get that turf," said Mrs. Solent. "We must ask Valley where he keeps his spade."

As Wolf turned to follow his mother on this impetuous quest, he caught sight of Gerda, struggling with the strap of her shoe, as she propped herself with one hand upon Redfern's headstone. There was such a look of defiant anger on her face that he halted irresolutely.

"Oh, go, if you want to, Wolf!" she cried. "I'm sure I don't want to keep you. It isn't often, though, that I get a chance of enjoying myself, working like I do in that dark kitchen all the time!"

Mrs. Solent gave her a steady, surprised stare.

"I won't keep him long, if you want him for your game," she said. "I can fill this hole up by myself, if you just get me the spade and the turf, Wolf."

The flush in Gerda's cheeks grew deeper. "I think it's a shame! Why did you bring me here at all, Wolf, if we weren't going to do something nice? I don't want to spend this afternoon doing what I do every day in the week."

Mrs. Solent gave Wolf a quick, surprised look, full

of airy pity—a look that said, "You poor boy, how awful for you to be at the beck and call of such a child!" But aloud she remarked:

"It's all right, Gerda. We won't spoil your sport. Run along to your friends. I won't keep him long."

But Gerda's suppressed anger had mounted so high by this time that there could be no such easy *dénouement.*

She held up her rounded chin and tossed back her head. Then, clasping her hands behind her, with her heels close together at the edge of the grave, she regarded Mrs. Solent with flashing eyes.

"Of course Wolf's on your side. Of course he'll love to fool about with your spades and turf, when it's my one real treat of the whole summer! You two are both the same. You only think of yourselves and what *you* want. If it's the silliest thing, like this nonsense about a mole, and every sensible person knows what a mole-hill is, it must come first, before everything, just because you've thought of it! Oh, yes, I saw you smiling at him just now, when my shoe came off. You couldn't have looked much different if my stockings had been full of holes! Everyone can't buy high-class London things; but I tell you our Blacksod shops be as good as they be any day in the week!"

"Well, Wolf," said Mrs. Solent calmly, holding her parasol at a correct garden-party angle and letting her high spirits drop away, "the best thing you can do is to take your pretty young wife back to her friend's games."

"My friends' games!" retorted the indignant girl. "I'm as old as anyone, considering all I put up with!"

"My dear child," said the elder lady gently. "There's really no reason for this excitement. Do try and calm yourself, and let's all go back quietly. I'm sure I'm quite ready to give up my idea if it spoils your pleasure. Don't, for mercy's sake, make such a mountain out of this mole-hill. I only thought of filling up this hole as a bit of sport, and because school-treats are so boring."

Her words were soothing; but there was something in the tilt of her eyebrows, as she glanced at Wolf, which made him realize that she was less unruffled than she appeared. He knew of old that the one thing in the world she hated was any display of temper or anything resembling a "scene." His own mind at this moment was unable to resist its furtive commentary upon the way Chance had managed to stage this encounter between the two. He had noticed these tricks before. It was as if there were some special æsthetic laws which Chance delighted to obey; and it always gave him a peculiar satisfaction to contemplate this bizarre rhythm. At such moments he found himself sacrificing action, emotion, sympathy, every human attribute, in a sort of ecstatic pondering over what this artistry of Chance was accomplishing. He felt as if he were in the presence of the unrolling of a psychic map. The figures on this map—his mother with her green parasol, Gerda with her grass-stained dress—were a sort of eddying vortex of significance upon a stream that was always rippling itself into mystic diagrams! Chance, in fact, was for ever at work fulfilling its own secret æsthetic laws; but every now and then, as at this fatal moment, its creation became especially vivid, and the whole "psychic map" upon that flowing

stream grew violently and intensely agitated. The circle of ripples he was now contemplating with this inhuman detachment had two circumferences, namely, the angry consciousness of Gerda and the supercilious consciousness of his mother; but below them both—down there on the quiet river-floor—was the discolored, decomposed, unrecognizable face of the young Redfern.

"You've never liked my marrying him!" It was Gerda's voice he heard now, as he awoke from his metaphysical trance to realize that part of his mother's last remarks had fallen upon nothing but the surface of his mind.

"I've always been an outsider to both of you," the angry girl went on. "You've always despised me and my family, and done your best to make him despise us."

"I have the greatest respect for your family, my good child. No one who knows your father can possibly help it. Come now! It really won't do for us to make Wolf embarrassed like this. I've the utmost respect for your people, Gerda, and I'm sure my son couldn't have married a lovelier creature than you are, even at this moment! But do come, now, both of you, and let's get back to the field. Mr. Urquhart will be quite lost among those boys without Wolf's help."

She laid her hand with a soothing gesture upon the girl's wrist; but the glance she gave Wolf was full of a mocking resignation that threw a screen round them and railed off this ill-advised proletarian. Gerda's behaviour on the other side of this barrier became so irrational that it could only excite well-bred surprise! But the girl tossed her hand away.

"Mr. Urquhart, indeed!" she cried. "A nice sort you are out here, you King's Barton gentry! Why, I've never cared even to *tell* Wolf all I've heard Dad say about what some folks do in this dirty village." Her voice grew louder, as her long-suppressed feelings burst forth. Wolf had fancied in his simplicity that his mother's airy propitiations had disarmed the girl; but he under-rated both Gerda's perspicacity and her pride.

There was something else on Gerda's mind, too, beyond her personal indignation. What actually, he wondered, *were* these Blacksod gossips saying? He looked at the girl with a kind of paralyzed helplessness, and again the thought struck him how neat a stroke of chance it was that Redfern's grave should be the background of her outburst.

"Some of you gentry," she went on fiercely, "don't lie abed with decent consciences like my folks! Why, they do say down at Farmer's Rest that landlord Round do keep his bed, and that Squire Urquhart can get no peace by night or by day, because of what do taunt their minds over this poor young man."

In spite of his discomfort, Wolf couldn't help feeling faintly amused at Gerda's struggle to keep the insidious Dorset dialect out of her speech, a struggle that grew less and less availing as her agitation rose.

"And these be the high-class people that you think so superior to respectable plain folk like my dear Dad!" Her voice had a quiver in it at this point that made Wolf cry out, "Gerda! Gerda darling!" But she did not break down. On the contrary, her tone grew stronger and more defiant. "Like my dear Dad," she went on, "who never

in his whole life said an evil word to anyone. But you get your spade and your turf and cover up this hole. Maybe you'll catch the fox that made it and be surprised!"

"Come on, come on, Gerda," said Wolf peevishly, stretching out his hand, in his turn, and trying to seize her fingers. "We mustn't stay here like this. We shall be attracting attention soon. Come on; let's go back to the field."

His glance wandered from one to the other of these two figures who held his peace of mind so completely in their power. He could not shake off the profound inertia that had fallen upon him.

"But we *must* go back," he murmured helplessly. "Come along, Gerda. Please do stop saying these things."

His voice sounded in his own ears puerile, feeble, futile. It sounded like the petulance of a child, outraged and astonished by the tenacious obstinacy of grown-up people.

He had noticed on other occasions this peculiar psychic phenomenon—that when he was with Gerda and his mother together, his personality shrank and dwindled until he felt his actual body grow limp and lumpish. The supercilious calmness of his mother's face under her green parasol, the angry defiance of Gerda's face under her simple school-treat hat, with its pale watchet-blue ribbons, seemed to paralyze him; so that all he could do was to bow before the storm, like a horse with its rump turned to the wind and its forehead turned to the fence! The male animal in him felt quelled and

cowed by these two opposed currents of feminine emotion. Both of them seemed to him completely irrational at that moment. His mother's patronizing irony seemed absurd, in conflict with the direct outburst of the other; and Gerda's violence seemed pitifully uncalled-for. If he could have felt any sort of complacent superiority, he could have endured it more easily. But he felt no such superiority! Irrational though they both seemed to him, their personalities had never struck him as more attractive or more mysterious. Their very irrationality seemed drawn from some reservoir of life-energy that was richer, more real, more strange and vibrant than the lumpish bewilderment with which he confronted it.

As he looked from one to the other, and listened, without listening, to the rising torrent of Gerda's wild words, he felt that it was absolutely impossible for him to take whole-heartedly one side or the other. He felt not only inert and helpless; but he felt as if he were himself torn into two halves by their struggle. He felt as if he incarnated at the same time his mother's ironic detachment and his girl's passionate grievance. All the long nights he had lain by Gerda's side, all their sweet, secret caresses, clung, like a portion of life itself, to what he felt then for that young, troubled face under the watchet-blue ribbons. But in his mangled bifurcated identity it was impossible to feel hostile to the other figure. Longer nights with him had been hers, and closer caresses! How could he, for all the sweetness of his companion's body, turn away from the flesh that was his own flesh?

Reason? Justice? The forces that victimized and para-

lyzed him now were those that had created the world. Who was he to contend against them?

Gerda came to a pause at last, and without a word to either of them walked off towards the school-treat field.

Then it was that Mrs. Solent turned upon her son with wide-open eyes and gave him a prolonged stare.

"Well!" she exclaimed at last, while her tilted parasol sank down, "there it is! . . . I think," she resumed, slowly and casually, "I'll go back to the cottage and do a little gardening before tea. If I mustn't tidy up your graveyard, at least I can tidy up my landlord's garden! Digging in the earth for an hour or two will give me an inspiration perhaps about all our affairs. I'm tired of this treat and I've done my share."

"All right, Mother," he said, casting a quick glance after Gerda, whose muslin frock and blue hat were now disappearing over the wall; "I'll take you a little way and then go back."

They walked round the church and out of the main entrance into the road. When they had passed the gate into the field, and were almost at the point where Pond Lane debouched from the village-street, they overtook the furtive figure of Jason Otter, hurrying surreptitiously homewards.

He gave a start of dismay when they came up with him.

"You won't tell Urquhart you saw me," he said hurriedly. "The truth is I can't stand it any longer seeing that great lumbering gardener of his swaggering about at the wicket. No one can get the great fool out. He hits

boundaries all the time. They oughtn't to have let him play! He thinks because he won that bowling-match he can do everything. And, of course, with a lot of little boys like that, who consider he's a great batsman——" A look of dismay covered Jason's face like a frayed shroud, as he spoke these words.

"They think he's a kind of County Player," he added gloomily.

"Were you playing yourself?" enquired Mrs. Solent.

"Any one of the Ramsgard second-eleven could send his bails flying!" continued Jason. "Wilson Minor would have got him out for a duck's-egg."

A faint wrinkling in the lines of the poet's profile indicated that some mental image was exciting his proclivity to roguery.

"I've never heard of Wilson Minor," murmured Wolf.

Jason cast a sidewise glance at him and then looked at Mrs. Solent. He seemed to imply that these intimate affairs of the Second Eleven of Ramsgard School were, where women were concerned, rather to be concealed than revealed.

"Do you know him?" enquired Wolf boldly, taking the bull by the horns.

There was a moment's hesitation.

"He bowls left-handed," Jason threw out. "They twist, too. This stall-fed head-gardener couldn't stand up to them for a moment."

"Is he a nice boy?" persisted Wolf.

"*I* like him," said the other nervously. "I have only seen him three or four times. I took him to tea once at the Lovelace. But that was only because I *wanted tea;*

and when I'm alone, that waiter always stares at me so. When I first spoke to him he thought I was a new master."

"What does he think you are now?" said Wolf.

Jason chuckled. "An undertaker perhaps; or a private secretary, like you! But he sees I'm honest; and he knows I know a good bowler." He paused for a second. "We all like to be praised!" he added grimly.

"Jason," said Wolf, feeling a sudden qualm about Gerda, "why don't you take my mother home? She'll give you a splendid cup of tea . . . better than you could make for yourself at Pond Cottage . . . and I know there'll be nobody in your house now. Mother, you'd like that, wouldn't you? I know how well you two always get on." He felt so impatient to be off, that he cared nothing for the effect of this suggestion upon either the poet or the lady. But Mrs. Solent looked not altogether displeased at this turn of events.

He hurried away now, avoiding any glance at Jason to discover how this prospect appealed to him. He had no difficulty in finding Gerda when he reached the field. She had not yet joined in any game, and it was quite easy to take her aside. She was in a mood of reserved apathy, neither apologetic nor defiant, just remote from the whole stream of events, and a little sad.

"Did you really hear all that about old Urquhart?" he asked her, anxious to distract her mind.

She smiled faintly; and he was so delighted to welcome that sign of a return to her normal self that he gave scant consideration to the substance of her reply.

"Well—not in those very words, Wolf! But Dad do al-

ways tell that there was something queer about this young gentleman's end; and if it weren't the Squire, 'twere at least Landlord Round who folks have seen, mooning and mowling round that grave."

"Come on, Gerda!"—he spoke as energetically and gaily as he could—"let's hear what you really think! You don't *yourself* think that it wasn't an animal that made that hole, eh?"

"Let's not talk about it any more," the girl replied. "I was angry, and you know why; and you know that any girl who wasn't made of rags and straw would have been angry! If I said more than I meant, you must forget it, Wolf, and forgive me."

Together they advanced now, boldly and unhesitatingly, into the midst of the crowded field. They soon came upon Mattie and Olwen, hand in hand, watching a three-legged race, in which the most buxom and spirited of the maids of King's Barton, tied together in couples, were contending for a bag of sugar-candy.

Olwen greeted Wolf with her usual passionate intensity. "Mattie won't race," she cried. "Do make her do it!"

"But *you* can race if you like," Mattie retorted. "That big girl who looks like winning was ready to run with you." Mattie turned to Gerda, as she said this, with something like an appeal.

"I don't like racing," she added. "Besides, I'm not dressed for it, am I?" and she glanced down at her new black frock.

"Oh, that's nothing," mumbled Wolf; and then, observing that Gerda had bent over the child and was di-

verting her attention, he took his sister's arm and led her aside. "Everyone I've met today seems upset by something or other," he began, as soon as they were well in the rear of the onlookers at the race. "I don't know whether it's because I'm nervous myself; but there's a bad wind blowing from some quarter."

"Do you think there's something the matter with *me?*" she asked. "You're too sympathetic, Wolf dear. To tell you the truth, I do feel rather grim this afternoon. I *ought* to have let them tie Olwen and me together; but I couldn't bring myself to it. I hadn't the heart for it."

Wolf glanced back over the heads of the spectators. He could see that Gerda had possessed herself of the child's hand and that they were both watching the proceedings with absorbed attention.

"They're all right," he whispered. "Let's go for a bit of a stroll."

They moved off together towards a vacant portion of the meadow, midway between the cricket-match and a noisy group of smaller boys.

"Now, what is it, Mattie?" he said, pressing her unmercifully. "I've seen you so little lately that I can't follow your moods. But I've never seen such a depressed look. It's far sadder, your face today, than when Mr. Smith died. It's a different kind of sadness. It makes me wonder."

"Dear Wolf! I assure you, you needn't fret about me. I'm all right. You worry too much about people. You can't take *everyone's* sorrows on yourself. People have to go through things sometimes where no one can help them."

Wolf stood stock-still and laid his hand on her wrist.

"Don't begin those platitudes, Mattie, or you'll make me angry. I don't take anyone's sorrows on myself. But you know . . . I feel as if . . ." He stopped short and stood hesitating, wondering how he would dare to broach the various troubled intimations that had been crossing his mind concerning her and Darnley. They moved on again, and his words still hung uncompleted in the air.

To help him out she tentatively repeated, "You feel as if?"

"Well . . . don't be angry with me if I'm plunging into something too"—he hesitated for a word—"too frail to bear the weight of my clumsiness. But I'm not blind. I've seen that you and Darnley have something between you, some subtle understanding. I was glad to see it. You don't know on what a long road it started my fancy! So now, when I see you looking 'grim,' as you call it, I can't help thinking it must be because of . . . you know? . . . something gone wrong between you."

Mattie gazed at him dumbfounded.

"But . . . Wolf . . . but . . ." she gasped. She looked so hopelessly confused and so wretchedly miserable, as she stood there before him, her heavy eyebrows twitching, as she frowned, and her mouth a little open, that Wolf was afraid he had made some gross blunder that might be terribly hurting to her reserved nature.

"But there's nothing in it at all!" she cried pitifully. "Darnley and I are just friends. I've always felt he understood me better than anyone I've known. But that's not much, Wolf. You know how many people *I've*

known! There's nothing more that's between us, Wolf. What made you think there was?"

"Oh, all right, Mattie," he muttered, rather sulkily. "I see you have to keep your affairs to yourself, and I'm not the one to force anything on you."

He broke off; for he saw her face assume an expression that was completely new to him and to which he had no clue.

Swinging round, and following the direction of her eyes, he saw Darnley and Mrs. Otter coming straight across the grass towards them.

"I came to find Olwen," the old lady began. "I'm going home now, and I thought it would leave you freer if I took her with me."

"I'd much rather come back with you," said Mattie. "But I expect I ought not to desert Mr. Valley quite as early as this. What is the time, Darnley?" Darnley looked vaguely round. "Oh, of course you haven't your watch with you," the girl went on. "Have you the time, Wolf?" Wolf looked at his watch, one of the few objects in his possession that was of monetary value. His Weymouth grandmother had given it to him as a child; and there were moments when merely to take it out of his pocket brought him a kind of reassurance, as of things quiet, stable, continuous, in the midst of turmoil.

"It's ten minutes past seven," he announced; and as they separated, he caught a look between Mattie and Darnley that made him wonder if, after all, his instinct had not been on the right track.

"Has the Squire gone home yet?" enquired Wolf, as he and Darnley walked slowly towards the cricket-pitch.

"I don't know. I expect so," the other answered absent-mindedly; and then, as they came nearer: "No, he's there still."

When they reached the outskirts of the game they stood for a while in silence, a little behind the player who was fielding at "point." Mr. Valley was umpiring on one side and Mr. Urquhart on the other; and it interested Wolf to note that it was his own hand that was instinctively lifted to salute the clergyman, and Darnley's to salute the squire. One of the batsmen proved to be none other than Bob Weevil; and Wolf was sardonically amused at his own expense when he found that this fact gave him a thrill of unexpected relief. There was little chance, for some while, anyway, for Mr. Weevil and Gerda to pair off, unless the sausage-seller was prepared to sacrifice his reputation as a batsman to his amorous propensities; and, as Wolf watched him now, playing with skill and caution, this seemed the very last thing he was prepared for.

"What would you do, Solent," began Darnley suddenly; and Wolf, glancing quickly at him, observed that his head was turned away and his gaze fixed intently upon the bowler at the further end of the pitch. "What would you do if you were in love with a girl and had at the same time some peculiarity that made all women repulsive to you?"

Wolf deliberately attuned his voice, as he replied to this, to a flat, dull intonation, as if Darnley had said, "What would you do if you were bowling at Bob Weevil and he had 'got his eye in'?"

"It would entirely depend on who the girl was," he

said, keeping his gaze on the bare arms of the young grocer, as he balanced his bat in the block and bent his slim body forward.

"That's all very well," rejoined the other, "but you can't go against nature beyond a certain point."

Wolf raised his voice a little at this, as Bob Weevil, swinging his bat round, slogged the ball vigorously to leg and began to run.

"Nothing is against nature!" he retorted. "That's the mistake people make; and it causes endless unhappiness."

Darnley replied in three muttered, disjointed words, stressing each of them with a deliberation that had something ghastly in it. "Patience . . . pretend . . . perhaps. . . ."

Wolf paused to join in the loud general clapping that indicated that the batsmen had scored six runs. Then he pointed with his stick. "Come on," he said, "there's Miss Gault over there, watching the tug-of-war. Let's go and speak to her. I particularly want to avoid getting caught in a long conversation; but, at the same time, I *must* speak to her. It would be outrageous not to. But if you come with me, Otter, I shall be safe."

Darnley smiled and took his friend's arm.

It was then, as they moved across the field together, that Wolf discovered that the touch of Darnley's hand on his arm agitated his nerves to a pitch of exasperation. Inexplicable to himself, this mounting anger with the man he loved so well gradually grew so intense that he could hardly endure it. He exerted a superhuman effort to restrain his nervousness; but his friend's very con-

sciousness of his mood was rapidly making it impossible for him to control himself.

The sunshine made Darnley's beard glitter, as if it were composed of shining gold; and this effect, though he noticed it calmly enough with one part of his mind, increased Wolf's irritation. It was all he could do to prevent himself from seizing upon this beard and pulling it viciously. Darnley was now holding Wolf's arm so tightly that he felt a blind impulse of animal resentment rising up within him—an impulse upon which his nervous irritation rocked like a cork upon a wave.

"Avoid! Avoid!" he suddenly flung out; and with the same spasmodic impulse, as he uttered this strange cry, he tore his arm free. "It's a trick! It's a trick! It's a trick!" He let his voice quiver without restraint, as he hissed out these words, though he knew perfectly well that the ugly contraction of the muscles of his mouth, as much as the word itself, must have been very agitating to his companion. But for this, just then, he cared nothing. If he could have made clear to that anxious face that now gazed at him so concernedly, what he really felt at that moment, it would have resolved itself into something like this: His mother and Gerda had lost their separate identities. They had become the point of a prodding shaft of yellow light that was at the same time the point of Darnley's trim beard! This shaft was now pushing him towards another misery, which took the form of a taste in his mouth, a taste that he especially loathed, though he could only have defined it, even to himself, as the taste of salad and vinegar! But, whatever it was, *this taste was Miss Gault.* The shaft of yellow light that

prodded him on had the power of thinning out and bleaching out his whole world, taking the moist sap quite away from it, leaving it like a piece of blown paper on an asphalt pavement. Between these two things —the blighting light and the corrosive taste—he felt an actual indrawn knot of impotence tying itself together within him, a knot that was composed of threads in his stomach, of threads in the pulses of his wrists, and of threads behind his eye-sockets! Everything in the world that was lovely and precious to him was being licked up by a mustard-coloured tongue, while a taste of constricting, devastating sourness began to parch his mouth.

They were now close behind the back-row of spectators. "She was here just now," said Darnley. "She must have gone round to the other side." Wolf knew perfectly well that his friend referred to Miss Gault, but he only murmured, in a weary, drawling voice, "Who's that you say's gone over to the other side?"

There was *that* in him that was ashamed of what he was doing . . . *that* in him that knew well enough that he was only behaving in this childish way because of his profound reliance upon Darnley's affection and concern; but his nerves were so completely jangled by this time that he was just tinder-wood for any casual spark.

The spark soon came; for, emerging from the crowd, and coming straight to meet them, appeared the familiar figure of Mrs. Torp. Of all people in the world, Mrs. Torp was the very last with whom he felt himself capable of dealing just then. This did not prevent her from approaching them with extended hand, her face rigid and yet festive, bearing an expression like a waxen mur-

derer's in Madame Tussaud's, while from the top of her bonnet a big purple feather nodded with a diabolic gaiety all its own.

If it had not been for this lively and obtrusive feather, Wolf might have retained his self-control; but this, combined with that rigid, festive smile, proved the last straw.

"Mrs. Torp! Mrs. Torp! Mrs. Torp!" he yelled, at the very top of his lungs.

"Stop that, now! Stop that, Wolf!" said Darnley sternly, seizing him by the elbow, just as he had done before.

"Quarrelling young gents, be 'ee?" said Mrs. Torp; while, in the hurried rush of his shame, Wolf, hardly knowing what he did, shook her vigorously by the hand. "You be too fine a figure of a man, Mr. Otter, to come to school-treat with brawlings and babblings brewed in pub-bar. Mercy! and what a face upon's shoulders have our Mr. Solent got! Don't let my Gerdie see 'ee with thik face. What be come to, young gents, what be come to?"

At this point Mrs. Torp was side-tracked in her volubility by the appearance of her son Lobbie at her side. "You get back, you limb of Edom, where you belong!" she cried, giving the boy a vigorous push. "What dost want here, dirty-face, ferreting round like the weasel thee be? Get back where 'ee belong, and don't plague the gentry!"

But Wolf's thundering outcry had made other heads turn about; and soon quite a little group began to gather round them. The voice of Mrs. Torp was naturally penetrating; and the nature of her discourse—intermittently

caught by inquisitive ears—did not lessen this effect. Wolf and Darnley soon found themselves, in fact, in the unenviable position of a sort of side-show to the main interest of the tug-of-war. It was clear enough, however, that none of these staring rustics had caught the real significance of Wolf's unpardonable outburst. They must have simply supposed that in some fit of whimsical impatience he had peremptorily summoned his wife's mother to that particular spot.

Such at least was the impression gathered up for future reference by that unclouded portion of Wolf's own mind, which, like a calculating demon perched on the top of his head, calmly contemplated the whole scene. Mrs. Torp herself, as far as he could make out, never deviated one second from her preconceived notion of the incident; which was, to put it bluntly and grossly, that the two young gentlemen had had a drunken quarrel!

It was with a very distinct feeling of relief that Wolf, as he moved forward hurriedly now to meet the approach of no less a personage than Selena Gault, recognized that his father's old friend had no conception of anything unusual in that cry, "Mrs. Torp! Mrs. Torp!" which, resounding across that small arena, had informed her of his presence there.

"Is poor Mrs. Torp to be dragged into this game, then?" said Selena, as she shook his hand.

Wolf muttered some lame jest about tug-of-wars and lean people, and then found it inevitable that he and Miss Gault should wander off together, leaving Darnley to deal with the Torp family.

His nerves were not yet altogether steady; for he

found it necessary to reply in nothing but patient monosyllables to what Miss Gault was saying. By degrees, however, her discourse became so personal that these replies began to gather a dangerous intensity, although they still remained abrupt and brief.

"I'm glad to find you, boy. I've been hoping and hoping I should get a word with you."

"Dear Miss Gault!"

"You're not angry with me any more for opposing your plan about Mattie and Olwen? I confess it seems to have worked out better than I ever supposed it would."

"No . . . no."

"As long as she doesn't meet that terrible old man or that crazy girl——"

"What's that?"

"Oh, I forgot. They tell me you yourself visit those people, Wolf."

"Who tells you?"

"Of course, you have to go there for books. I understand that. But there are reasons which are hard to explain, boy, why I'd sooner see you enter . . . enter a workhouse . . . than go into that house."

"Mr. Malakite was my father's friend."

She raised one of her gloved hands to her mouth at this, as if to restrain the quiverings of her upper-lip. "You don't know what you're saying, Wolf! His friend? That man corrupted his soul; and he did it with his accursed books."

He was saved from making any answer to this by the sound of a familiar but by no means pleasant voice calling him by name.

"Mr. Solent! Mr. Solent!"

He turned on his heel and beheld Bob Weevil, still in his shirt-sleeves, smiling and perspiring after a violent run.

"What's up, Weevil?" he asked.

The young man bowed respectfully to Miss Gault and gasped for breath.

"Mr. Urquhart sent me to find you, sir," he panted. "He says you must umpire now instead of him. He has to go now."

"Mr. Solent is taking care of *me*, Weevil," said Miss Gault indignantly. "What does the man mean by 'must' umpire? I don't see where the 'must' comes in."

Wolf looked the excited lad up and down. Miss Gault's words had not abashed him in the least. There was even an air of spiteful arrogance in his manner, an air which seemed to say, "As the Squire's emissary to his secretary, I am the most important person here."

"I'm afraid there *is* a 'must' in this, Miss Gault," Wolf said quietly. "It was agreed between us before we came on the scene that I was to umpire when Mr. Urquhart had to leave. It isn't Mr. Weevil's fault that he happens to be the messenger of ill-fortune!"

The lady drew herself up in high dudgeon. "Well! Run off, both of you, as fast as you can," she said.

The annoyance of Miss Gault, thus expended upon both men, had the natural effect, as they went off together, of closing up in a measure the rift between them.

They passed the swings on their way, and a common masculine weakness for the sight of ruffled skirts held

them for a moment behind a group of hobbledehoys who were enjoying this spectacle.

"They love swinging," remarked Wolf carelessly, as Weevil and he moved away at last; "but those boys being there makes it delicious for them."

Bob Weevil sighed deeply; and this pitiful sigh, rising up from the young man's aggravated senses went wavering skyward. Past a high trail of flapping rooks, heading for Nevilton, it went; past the flocks of the white clouds. At last, far beyond all human knowledge, it lost itself in the incredible desirableness of lovely blue space, and mingled, for all we know, with the vast non-human sighing of the planet itself, teased by some monstrous cosmogonic lust!

Hearing this sound, Wolf glanced sideways at his young rival, and an unexpected flicker of sympathy for that water-rat profile ran through him.

They crossed the field in silence; and the thought that he was going to meet Mr. Urquhart recalled to Wolf's mind that mysterious aperture in the side of Redfern's grave. Could it be possible that there were in the village people so crazed by remorse for this boy's death that they actually had been making mad attempts to disinter his bones? Such, at any rate, from what Gerda hinted, would not have struck these Dorsetshire gossips as impossible. But impossible, of course, it was! It was one of those morbidly monstrous fancies that, as he knew well from the Squire's own collection of weird documents, did sometimes run the round of these West Country villages, passing from tavern to tavern, and growing more and more sinister as it went. Something in this

quarter of the land, as soaked with legends as it was with cider-juice, seemed to lend itself to such tales!

"Well, sir!" he said, as he approached the wickets where Mr. Urquhart stood at attention like a sober sentinel on the ramparts of Elsinore, "I'm ready to relieve you."

The cheerful complacence with which his employer accepted his docile obedience caused his nerves to assert themselves again in a surprising manner.

"If you're going to say good-night to Valley before you leave, sir," he said brusquely, "you might tell him that something or somebody has been scratching a hole in that grave in the churchyard!"

A queer cowardice, or discretion perhaps, prevented him from looking at Mr. Urquhart's face as he tossed out this remark. He followed it up, without a second's pause, by crying out "Right you are!" to the batsman opposite him, and by moving hurriedly aside into his place, a yard or two from the wicket, so that the new "over" might commence.

All that he could take in of the effect of his words was the look of his employer's back, as the man moved away, not at all in the direction of the clergyman's black-coated figure, but straight towards the little group of spectators who surrounded the seated form of Roger Monk, occupied just then in keeping the score.

Mr. Urquhart's back, as Wolf followed it with his eyes at that moment, seemed to him to resemble the back of Judas Iscariot in that popular picture entitled "Pieces of Silver," of which there used to hang a cheaply col-

oured reprint in his grandmother's house at Weymouth. It did more than stoop with its usual aristocratic bend, this back. It sagged, it lurched, it wilted. It drifted towards that bench of heedless spectators as if it had been the hind-quarters of the Biblical scapegoat, driven forth into a wilderness whose desolation was not material, but psychic. The neat clothes that hung upon it only accentuated the ghastliness of this back's retreat.

It may be believed that Wolf's umpiring was not of the most alert or efficient kind that evening. But it sufficed; it served its purpose. For the game itself was dragging a little tediously now, and most of the lads were weary of it and longing in their hearts for the grand consummation of the eventful day.

This was the hour of the twilight dancing, a celebration that, taking place in a roped-off portion of the meadow furthest removed from the churchyard, was the supreme source of responsibility and concern to the authorities—the thrilling climax and crowning episode to the boys and girls of King's Barton!

Long before the cricket-match was over, all the other sports had drawn to a close. Tired groups of children, disputing about their prizes and gorging themselves with butter-scotch and barley-sugar torn from sticky paper bags, drifted across the hill towards the gate, followed by voluble mothers with overflowing parcels and sleeping babies clutched tightly in their arms. The older men had found themselves seats here and there, and were smoking their pipes with an air of cautious relaxation, an air that stopped short of the complete abandonment of Farmer's Rest and yet had unstiffened beyond the super-

ceremonious atmosphere of the earlier hours of the afternoon.

The youths and the maidens, from all parts of the field, along with a drifting concourse of outsiders attracted by the occasion, gathered now, impatiently and nervously, round the weary cricketers.

The Kingsbury Band, duly stimulated by its full quota of traditional refreshment, was now tuning up for the great moment of that gala-day. At length, to Wolf's infinite relief, the last bails fell; the captains of the two sides pulled up the wickets; the score was proclaimed in indifferent tones and amid lethargic cheers; and the whole company hurried towards the dancing-plot.

Wolf, as he looked about for Gerda, crossed inadvertently the path of the perturbed Mr. Valley.

"It'll be dark in an hour," said the anxious Vicar, glancing up at the sky; "but they will hardly have begun then."

"There's a nice scent of trodden grass in the air," remarked Wolf.

"What a time! What a time!" wailed the little priest, disregarding the interruption.

"What's wrong, my dear man?" sighed Wolf indifferently, searching with his eyes the groups who passed by for a glimpse of Gerda's white gown. "What's troubling you? Dancing's all right. There's no harm in dancing."

The little priest laid his hand upon the front of Wolf's coat. "Dancing!" he muttered peevishly. "Oh, you Londoner, you Londoner! It's not the dancing I'm thinking about. Do you suppose it's only for the dancing that all

these men are collecting? I tell you I've never known one single visit of the Kingsbury Band to this place when there hasn't been some girl—and they're always the wrong ones—got into trouble! If I could keep 'em penned up in these ropes, they might dance till dawn!"

Wolf made a grimace and moved away. There seemed to him, at that moment, as he thought of Gerda and his mother, such far worse things in the world than the episodes dreaded by Mr. Valley, that he found it impossible to give him the remotest sympathy. Mr. Valley, without knowing it, however, had his full revenge for this callousness in less than a minute from when they parted. For there was Gerda's white gown! And there, side by side with it, were Mr. Bob Weevil's white shirt-sleeves! . . . As he walked up to them trying to assume his most invulnerable philosophic calm, Wolf thought to himself, "I'll let her dance one dance with him and then off we'll go . . . back to Blacksod!"

They did not observe his approach till he was quite close.

"Hullo, Gerda! Hullo, Bob! Look here, you two." He paused awkwardly, staring at Gerda's sash. "I don't want," he went on, "I don't want——" He seemed to catch a defiant look on the girl's face. "I don't want to break this up till you've danced once tonight. So go ahead, for heaven's sake, as soon as they start. . . . Only, listen, Weevil——" He paused again, and found it necessary to take several long breaths. He had said exactly what he meant to say. He had said it in the tone he meant to adopt. Why, then, were those two staring at him like that, as if he were a ghost? Did his face look

funny to them? Was "the form of his visage changed" upon them? "I mean," he went on; but his voice sounded unsure to his own ears now—unsure and queerly mechanical, as if it issued out of a wooden box. "I mean that you'd better have one good dance, or perhaps two . . . two certainly! Two would be far better than one . . . one dance is nothing . . . What's one dance? Nothing at all! And then . . . and then . . . what was I going to say? That band's making such a noise! . . . Oh, then we'll walk home, Gerda; and perhaps Bob will come with us. But I expect not, with Mr. Valley so jumpy."

"What are you talking about, Wolf?" said Gerda abruptly. "What's the matter with you? Is there anything wrong? I thought we'd agreed that I was to stay for the dancing. You've no objection to my dancing with Bob, have you?"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Solent," broke in the voice of the young grocer, "but what was that you said about Mr. Valley being 'jumpy'? I couldn't hear what you said; and I don't see, anyway, what it's got to do with me."

"Did we decide that I had to wait till midnight for you, Gerda?" said Wolf sternly, disregarding Mr. Weevil.

"Oh, let me be! Let me be, Wolf!" cried the girl angrily. "I don't know what's come over you tonight . . . you and your mother! I suppose you've been over there again and she's been talking to you again. I don't know what you take me for! I've danced at King's Barton School-Treat since I was no bigger than Lobbie. I don't know what you've got against it, or against me and

Bob. You've been over to Lenty Cottage! That's where you've been; and she's sent you back to punish me for what I said to her. I haven't said I was going to dance with Bob at all. Bob isn't my only friend here. Mother's going to stop to the end. She always does. And I shall go back with her. I don't want either you or Bob, I tell you! You've never treated me like this before and I won't stand it! *You* can walk back with him if you like, Bob. I'll be glad enough to see the last of both of you! I want to enjoy myself tonight." She moved away as she spoke, and Wolf caught a look of miserable consternation upon the water-rat physiognomy at his side. "I don't want any men to dance with!" she flung back at them. "I'll dance with no one but girls. But I *will* enjoy myself in spite of you all! I won't depend on any of you for my pleasure . . . and I'll go home with Father and Mother!"

She walked off haughtily, her blue-ribboned hat held high, and was speedily lost to sight in the gathering crowd.

Wolf and Mr. Weevil stood staring at each other stonily and awkwardly while the long-awaited music burst triumphantly into the familiar strains of the Kingsbury Jig.

After a few seconds, with an abrupt lifting of his hand, Wolf moved away. He pushed through the crowd with the air of a complete stranger who finds his path impeded by some popular transaction that means nothing to him.

On the outskirts of the field he was arrested by the sight of a figure that seemed familiar to him. Yes! It was

the automatic young lady from Farmer's Rest. But there was another girl there—a younger girl—and he recognized her too. She was the maid in the white muslin frock whose shameless manner of swinging had arrested Weevil and him an hour ago. This younger girl's head was turned away; but as he approached them, he caught a full glimpse of the automatic young lady's face. She was too absorbed, however, in what she was doing—fastening a safety-pin or something in the other's waistband—to give the least attention to him. But what was this? The look he captured upon her face was a look of unmistakable emotion, rapt, intense emotion, such as a boy would have displayed when he was caressing the object of his desire. Like a flash it came over Wolf, as he wavered there for a second, that he was in the presence of a passionate perversity, kindred to that he had discovered elsewhere in this Dorsetshire village; and he was a little startled to find how the presence of it set his heart beating and his pulses throbbing. Something in him pleaded desperately to be allowed to remain a second longer on this unhallowed ground; but he resisted the temptation, and hurried forward. But what did this mean? How could he explain this in himself? That kindred obliquity, which he had so recently tracked down among the "higher circles" of King's Barton, had not affected him to anything resembling this degree of vicious sympathy! The vision of those two girls remained like a deadly-sweet drop of delicious fermentation in some vein within him—some vein or nerve that seemed in contact with the very core of his consciousness. Like some virulent berry-juice, insidiously sweet and yet mad-

deningly bitter, like a drop of that old classic poison distilled from the blood of the enamoured centaur—that look, that gesture of the Farmer's Rest girl teased and troubled him. The averted head of her muslin-frocked companion, the contour of that soft, conscious, youthful profile, stirred his senses even more.

"Damn!" he thought. "Don't I *yet* know the worst of my vicious, secretive nature?"

He felt startled rather than ashamed by what arose within him; but what *did* trouble him, to a kind of inward fury, as he left those preoccupied girls, was the ricochet of this discovery upon his jealousy over Gerda and Bob! Who was he to indulge in sulky jealous heroics, when he himself was capable of a feeling like this? To be angry with those two, to be bitterly hurt, and yet not to be able to indulge in the undertone of his own grievance without knowing himself to be an unphilosophic fool—*that* was the point of the spiritual wedge that now was driven into his disordered life-illusion!

Was Lord Carfax, that whimsical "man of the world," of whom his mother loved to relate the shameless opinions, right after all? Had he always over-rated the connection between sex and that mysterious struggle in the abysses, with which his "mythology" was concerned?

In regard to the perversity of Mr. Urquhart, he had taken for granted that the man's sex-aberration was merely the medium through which unspeakable emanations of evil—beyond sex altogether!—flowed up into the world.

"But what *is* this evil?" he asked himself now letting his mind hover like a hungry cormorant over the heaving

waters of his troubled senses. Vague intimations concerning some sort of *inert malice,* that was beyond all viciousness, rose up within him as his mind's deepest response. Hunting irritably for some gap in the hedge by which to escape, he tried to define this inert malice. Was it an atavistic reversion to the primordial "matter," or "world-stuff"—sluggish, reluctant, opaque—out of which, at the beginning of things, life had had to force its way? Was this, and not his attitude to any youthful Redfern, the real secret of Urquhart's harmfulness?

All the while he struggled with these thoughts, he kept feverishly skirting the hedge, striking it every now and then with his stick. If he could only find a gap by which to escape! This hunt of his for a gap into the next field began to assume almost symbolic proportions. Something within him was tugging at him all the while to make him turn his head and cast another furtive glance at those two girls. Were they still together there, just where he had left them? He began to indulge his imagination, letting it tantalize and provoke him with the tremulous intensity of the feeling that sight might have aroused. He knew he could cool his excitement, blunt it, undermine it, stave it off, by analyzing its nature; but the feeling itself was so deadly-sweet to him that it pleaded in "a still, small voice" for a postponement of this invasion of his reason!

Was it his jealousy over Gerda that had made him so porous to this quivering, breath-taking obsession? Indignantly his soul shook itself to and fro in its endeavour to escape. Like a slippery-scaled fish it shook itself, turning sideways, turning belly-up, as it strove to

force its way through the strands of the net that encircled it. Why was it that this glimpse of the amorous feeling of one girl for another girl should send this trembling, dissolving, shuddering provocation through him? Was it that the mere importunity of the feeling, so intense, so sterile, emphasized the mysterious quality of desirableness? Did it imply a diffusion of the magic of beauty through the whole identy of the desired one, such as can rarely take place where great creative Nature, contemptuous towards both lover and beloved, shamelessly occupied with her own enormous purposes, is baiting the trap?

What a queer thing it was that the attraction of this muslin-frocked little hoyden should have been barely emphasized for him by Weevil's desire for her, but increased to a point of shivering, electric sweetness, under the emotion of the "automatic young lady"! Oh! it had *that* within it that might lead him upon such a quest that nothing else would matter to him any more! He could feel even now, as he went along this stubborn hedge, the sort of scoriac desolation—all delicate intimations become cinders and ashes in the mouth—that would possess him, as this quest grew more and more concentrated! He felt within him the actual *expression* his face would come to wear, as in his maniacal pursuit he went to and fro over the earth, oblivious of all else.

He had just reached this point in his mental struggle, when he suddenly did find a gap in the obstinate hedge. Forcing his way hurriedly through, careless as to how he pricked his face and hands, he descended from the high hedge-bank into a field of mangelwurzels. Over this field he now strode, while the gathering twilight deep-

ened about him, oblivious of all purpose save to escape —to escape into the peace of his own soul.

The mangelwurzel-field behind him at last, he blindly pushed his way through a second hedge, this time caring not even to find a gap. What next awaited him was a succession of stubble-fields, some of which had patches of purple clover growing amid their corn-stalks, the dark foliage of which, soaked with heavy dew, quickly penetrated his boots. This physical sensation, the sensation of walking barefoot through an endless dew-drenched twilight, gradually soothed and calmed him.

He went obstinately forward, crossing field after field in the falling darkness, forcing his way recklessly through every sort of rank vegetation, through every sort of arable fallowness. He had left the school-treat field for more than an hour now. He had crossed, almost without consciousness of doing so, the main road between Ramsgard and Blacksod. He had threaded his way through the maze of small, grassy lanes that lay between that highway and the village of Gwent. And now, emerging in the scented autumn night into a rondure of sloping hills, he could see, beyond the scattered lights of Gwent, a vast unbounded region, shadow within shadow, vapour within vapour, a region that he knew to be—though all he could actually see was darkness of a thicker, richer quality than the darkness about him—the umbrageous threshold of Somerset, the first leafy estuary of that ocean of greenness out of which rose, like the phallus of an unknown god, the mystical hill of Glastonbury!

He stretched himself out on the grassy slope of this shadowy amphitheatre and gazed long and long into the

vaporous obscurity before him. The quarrel between Gerda and his mother became nothing. Nothing and less than nothing became his jealousy over Weevil . . . his vision of those two girls!

It was as though he had suddenly emerged, by some hidden doorway, into a world entirely composed of vast, cool, silently-growing vegetation, a world where no men, no beasts, no birds, broke the mossy stillness; a world of sap and moisture and drooping ferns; a world of leaves that fell and fell for ever, leaf upon leaf; a world where that which slowly mounted upwards endured eternally the eternal lapse of that which slowly settled downwards; a world that itself was slowly settling down, leaf upon leaf, grass-blade upon grass-blade, towards some cool, wet, dark, unutterable dimension in the secret heart of silence!

Lying upon that rank, drenched grass, he drew a deep sigh of obliterating release. It was not that his troubles were merely assuaged. They were swallowed up. They were lost in the primal dew of the earth's first twilights. They were absorbed in the chemistry, faint, flowing, and dim, of that strange *vegetable flesh* which is so far older than the flesh of man or beast!

He stretched out one of his hands and touched the cool-scaled stalks of a bed of "mare's tails." Ah! how his human consciousness sank down *into that* with which all terrestrial consciousness began! . . .

He was a leaf among leaves . . . among large, cool, untroubled leaves. . . . He had fallen back into the womb of his real mother. . . . He was drenched through and through with darkness and with peace.

THE THREE AUTUMN MONTHS THAT FOLLOWED THE School-Treat became for Wolf, as the days shortened and darkened, like a slowly rising tide, that, drawing its mass of waters from distances and gulfs beyond his reach, threatened to leave scant space un-submerged of the rugged rock-front which hitherto he had turned upon the world. Something in the very fall of the leaf, in the slow dissolution of vegetation all about him, made this menace to the integrity of his soul more deadly. He had never realized what the word "autumn" meant until this Wessex autumn gathered its "cloudy trophies" about his ways, and stole, with its sweet rank odours, into the very recesses of his being. Each calamitous event that occurred during those deciduous months seemed to be brewed in the oozy vat of vegetation, as if the muddy lanes and the wet hazel-copses—yes! the very earth-mould of Dorset itself—were conspiring with human circumstances.

It was during many a lonely walk among the red-berried hedges and old orchards, where the rotting cider-apples lay wasp-eaten in the tangled swathes of grass, that these events worked their wills upon him. Sunday after Sunday, as September gave place to October and October gave place to November, he would lean upon some lichen-covered gate and struggle to give intelligible form to these "worries" of his. Threaded in and out of such ponderings were a thousand vivid impressions of those out-of-the-way spots. The peculiar "personality" of

certain century-old orchards, of which the grey twisted trunks and the rain-bent grass seemed only the *outward* aspects, grew upon his mind beyond everything else. How heavily the hart's-tongue ferns drooped earthward under the scooped hollows of the wet clay-banks! How heavily the cold raindrops fell—silence falling upon silence—when the frightened yellow-hammers fled from his approach! He felt at such times as though they must be composed of very *old* rain, those shaken showers; each tremulous globe among them having reflected through many a slow dawn nothing but yellow leaves, through many a long night nothing but faint white stars!

He certainly had anxieties enough this Autumn to bring down his happiness to a very muted key. The head and front of these "whips and scorns of time" had been a complete break with Urquhart. The Squire's obsessions had got upon his nerves to such an extent that he had just recklessly revolted—flung up his work on this detestable history of Dorsetshire scandals—and, cutting his coat to suit his cloth, fallen back upon a rigid monotony and economy between Preston Lane and the School.

The results of this quarrel might have been much more serious than they were, if he had not, by Darnley's diplomatic help, obtained both more work and more income at the Grammar School. But this piece of good luck had been followed by a second calamity; for his mother, in her reckless, irresponsible fashion, had also annoyed Urquhart, and had consequently been compelled to give up Lenty Cottage and join him in Blacksod. Twenty-five pounds, therefore, of his increased salary had to go now to pay for a room she had taken a few doors from them

in Preston Lane. Here she lodged in the house of that very Mrs. Herbert, whose name was already familiar to him. She had managed to obtain, however, a job for herself in the town, and was highly amused and extremely pleased by her unexpected success in the conduct of it. But this also was attended by an unpleasant consequence, her business being nothing less than the managing of a tea-shop belonging to Mr. Manley of Willum's Mill! Wolf would have been quite resigned to this development, if his mother had not, in her gay, ironic manner, cast a magnetic spell over the bull-necked farmer and entered into some sort of humorous flirtation with him.

As far as those two perturbing figures in the background of their days were concerned—Bob Weevil and Christie—matters relapsed during these long autumn months into a curious state of suspension. He would go to tea with Christie; and once or twice Gerda spoke of a visit from Bob. But as winter set in, and the nights lengthened to the December solstice, it seemed as if the burden of his monotonous work in the classroom, and the rigid economies practised by Gerda in the house, had undermined the spirit of adventure in both their natures.

He was surprise at his own obstinate patience in the tedious routine of teaching history to the Blacksod tradesmen's sons. What supported him were the moments of ecstasy he derived from his long week-end walks. He had the whole of Saturday free, as well as Sunday, and sometimes with Gerda, and sometimes alone, he would follow the wraith-like vapours of autumn as they drifted over the lanes and hills, and give himself up, with a

large forgetfulness of everything else, to his sensuous-mystical mythology.

If it had not been for this secret refuge and for the sensations accumulated in these walks, Wolf's first winter in Dorset would have culminated in a miserable inertia, resembling that of the luckless Redfern. For one thing, Gerda seemed completely to have lost her miraculous power of bird-whistling. He caught her making the attempt; but recently, as far as he could tell, she had given the thing up. He suspected, too, that Darnley and Mattie were unhappy; but, ever since that day at the School-Treat, both those reserved beings had remained completely uncommunicative as to their relations with each other, though on all other topics he found them as affectionate and spontaneous as ever.

There had been little frost and no snow before Christmas. Gloomy, damp days had succeeded one another all through the month; and now, on the last Sunday of the old year, it seemed to Wolf, when he awoke in the darkness, that the air smelt of deep pools of rain. He awoke that morning long before his companion; and once awake he lay thinking intensely and excitedly for several hours. It was of his mother he thought. She had dropped a hint, while he was at Mrs. Herbert's on the previous night, that she would like to start a tea-shop of her own, and that she thought of borrowing the money for this project from her present employer. Wolf was startled at the depth of the hurt to his pride that this information dealt him. In the early hours of that rain-smelling morning he made a drastic resolution. *He would go back to Urquhart!* What did it matter how he outraged his conscience

over that accursed book, so long as his mother got this help from *him* rather than from the owner of Willum's Mill? Oh! And what pleasure to be able to hand over a little solid money to Gerda after her long, miserable economies! He knew so well the list of desirable purchases in the girl's mind—from the silver sugar-tongs to a grandfather's clock! It always touched him, the way Gerda put things for the house above things for her own person. Yes! That is what he would do: run round to his mother's after breakfast, find out how the land lay with regard to the tea-shop project, and then set off for King's Barton. Urquhart would most certainly be at home on Sunday morning; and he knew exactly how he would deal with the man. He would ask him point-blank for a cheque for two hundred pounds. He would ask for this on the understanding that he should finish the book for him in three months—finish it, in fact, by the anniversary of his first arrival in Dorsetshire!

He was so excited by the idea of this daring move that it was with difficulty he refrained from jumping out of bed; but Gerda being sound asleep, and to wake her a couple of hours before her usual time being likely to make her cross for the whole morning, he restrained his impulse and continued to lie still. . . .

It was early enough, however, when finally he rang the bell of Mrs. Herbert's house; for the landlady, evidently just returning from eight-o'clock Mass, came up to her door at the same moment.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Herbert," he said, as pleasantly as he could. But when the woman had let him in and was proceeding to announce him, a faded picture of

"The Bombardment of Alexandria," hanging in her hall, brought to his mind all the lodging-houses he had ever entered! It was as if from each of these places some polished bannister-knob, some vase of dead bulrushes, some dusty ornamental chair, some vague odour of Indian spice or of dried-up seaweed, added its quota to the accumulated memory.

"Oh, it's you, Wolf!" exclaimed his mother, without rising from her antimacassared chair, where, with a volume of "The Trumpet-Major" open on her tea-tray, she was sipping her tea. "How grave you look, my son!"

She gave him a glowing smile as he sat down opposite her. But he plunged at once into the dangerous waters.

"Are you really thinking of borrowing money from that brute, Mother? You know it's been worrying me a lot."

She regarded him with eyes that gleamed with mischief.

"Why not?" she said. "I think the good man has grown quite attached to me. I think he *likes* elderly ladies!"

Wolf was too agitated to keep his seat. He began walking up and down the room. Suddenly he stopped in front of her. "Are you as happy down here, Mother, as you were in London?" he said, looking down on that mocking, invulnerable face.

She settled herself in her chair, stretching out her arms with an almost feline gesture of physical well-being.

"I live in hope of greater happiness yet," she murmured, with a contented yawn. "Your mother's an un-

regenerate woman," she went on, her words rising on the breath of her yawn like fins on a smooth wave. "She doesn't take life as seriously as her ugly duckling of a son!"

He sighed and sat down again.

"But it's a disgrace I can't support you properly, Mother."

"As well as your wife, Wolf? Sons who have to support wives can't tackle mothers too. You ought to have thought of that six months ago." The shamelessness of her words was relieved by the ironic glint in her eyes. "But you must have come to your mother's defense at any rate over that young lady of yours; for, when I met her on the street three weeks ago, she stopped and talked quite pleasantly to me! She told me you were still friends with that bookseller girl; and I told *her* she was far too pretty to be jealous of that melancholy little shadow."

Wolf frowned, picked up "The Trumpet-Major," put it down again, and began nervously scratching its cover with his finger-nails. He thought to himself: "It's absolutely impossible to talk of any woman to another woman without betraying the absent one. They must have blood! Every word you speak is a betrayal. They're not satisfied otherwise."

To turn the conversation from Gerda he launched out at random.

"I wish Darnley would try and support a wife as well as *his* mother! I hate to see anyone as decent as he is, getting so little pleasure."

"Mattie, eh? What a boy you are! Legitimate . . . illegitimate . . . you're ready to look after them all! I

daresay you're only waiting till my new flame, Mr. Manley, starts me in my own shop, to give my twenty-five pounds to this deserving couple!"

"What's your idea, Mother, of how things are at Pond Cottage? I don't believe I've ever asked you that."

"What do you mean . . . how they are? A good but very plain young woman and a good but very handsome young man . . . isn't that the whole situation? She's in love with him, of course; and he enjoys it. He'd do more than enjoy it if her nose wasn't so awfully like yours!"

"Will they marry in the end, do you suppose?"

"Why not? Didn't we agree he's a *good* man? What's the use of a man being good if he can't make a plain face happy? Besides"—and the brown eyes laughed with the gayest wickedness—"your sister's got very pretty legs!"

Wolf made a faint grimace and plunged into a different topic.

"Did you really tell Urquhart, Mother, that Monk had threatened to kill him?"

Mrs. Solent laughed aloud. "Don't start me on those two, Wolf, or I'll talk all the morning. Why, they set on me as if they'd been a pair of savage goats that I'd tried to separate. Monk was rude. Mr. Urquhart wasn't rude; but he'll never forgive me." She laughed again, the gay, mischievous, rippling laughter of a young girl. "I had the best hit all the same; and I'm glad I did!"

"What did you say, Mother?"

"I told him he ought to set a trap for that fox in the churchyard!"

"Why was that a hit, Mother?"

"Oh, you know! Anything about Redfern. . . . It bothered him that he couldn't tell what I'd heard or what I hadn't heard. As a matter of fact, Roger Monk told me there wasn't a night he didn't go rambling about. *I* don't think anything of that. I like night-walking myself. But I knew it would be a hit!"

Wolf looked at his mother with frowning brows.

"But, Mother, Mother; don't you ever take anything seriously?"

"I take my tea-shop seriously," she said, with a mock-tragic air.

Wolf sighed. "Sometimes I've fancied, Mother, that you'd got some secret philosophy of your own that made you wiser than anyone . . . wise as some great sorceress."

"Your father thought me a hard, selfish, conventional woman, without an idea in her head. And that's what I probably am at bottom, Wolf!" She paused, and her face grew flinty. "I can never forgive him for destroying our life. What's the use of that sort of folly? What's the use of tilting against conventions? It's more amusing, it's more interesting, to play with those things. They're as real as anything else."

"What do you actually want out of life, then, Mother?" His tone was naïve and pedantic. And he *felt* naïve and pedantic, as he looked at this woman, the contours of whose countenance were as defiant to ordinary emotions as dark, slippery rocks to the wash of the sea.

She startled him then by suddenly rising to her feet with a movement that seemed to shake off twenty years

as if they were nothing. "I want happiness!" she cried. "I want a lovely, thrilling, beautiful life. I want adventures, travel, noble society. Oh, I don't want to be shut up all day long in Preston Lane, Blacksod!"

She turned her back upon him and surveyed her own face in the little plush-framed mirror over the mantelpiece.

"Our friend Selena used to tell me I was a woman of the world . . . and I am! I am! What else should anyone be, I should like to know?"

She put her fingers to her cheeks and began tracing their lines as if she were an angry sculptor, feeling for the mistakes of her work.

"I want to drive down the streets of Vienna! I want to float down the canals of Venice! I want to see Paris, Amsterdam, Constantinople!"

Wolf stared at the strong back in its neat tailor-made jacket. He stared at the loose coils of wavy grey hair; and an odd sensation went through him, as if this extraordinary person were a complete stranger to him. He began to feel that the moment was tense and even dangerous. What a fool he'd been to disturb such ocean-deep waters!

Presently she swung round upon him. "I suppose you never thought," she cried in a high-pitched voice, "that I wanted anything more than to be the mother of a well-meaning ninny!"

"Mother dear . . . my dear mother . . ." he faltered, dominated so completely by the woman's formidable paroxysm as to feel as if she were towering above him in that funny little room, and above the whole of Blacksod.

But she controlled herself now with a suddenness as unexpected as her outburst had been.

"It's all right, Wolf. I only wanted to be petted up a little," she murmured gently, moving to the table and beginning with agile fingers to pile the breakfast-things on her tray. "I expect I've worked myself into a fuss by reading Thomas Hardy! One day you shall take me down to Weymouth and we'll walk over to the White Horse and the Trumpet-Major's village. Yes, and we'll go in and see who's living in Penn House now, where your grandmother was. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Wolf nodded; but he did not smile. "If I give her every penny of what I get from Urquhart, will it be enough?" he thought.

"Listen, Mother," he said aloud. "I'm going to walk over to King's Barton presently to call on the Squire. You'll smile, but I have practically decided to finish that book for him. I can work at it at home with the notes he's made. I could get it done in about three months. It's absurd to be too——" He stopped abruptly, irritated, in spite of his anticipation of that very thing, by the gleam of sardonic mischief upon his mother's face.

"The truth is, Mother," he went on, "I'd much sooner get this money for you from Urquhart than that you should fall under this brute's thumb!" It was the teasing indulgence in her smile that made him use this crude expression. The sight of the malicious glint still radiating from her eyes drove him to add, "Will two hundred be enough, Mother?"

Her expression became so extremely mock-sentimental at this, that he was completely nonplussed. She even

tilted her head a little to one side, just as she had done when she quoted the "Pot of Basil" by Redfern's grave. Then she laid down her tray and rested one of her hands upon the chimneypiece.

"Perhaps . . . it would . . . be . . . enough," she said slowly, giving him a long, hard, penetrating look, out of which all sentiment had fled. Then she added, while a dusky red spot appeared in each of her cheeks, "Don't you see that I've got it in me to make a success of this thing and stand on my own feet?"

She paused and stared into the fire, biting her underlip in concentrated thought, and drawing two of her finger-tips along the edge of the mantelpiece. Then she suddenly burst out:

"Don't you see it's a life of my own I want, now you've deserted me? I've lived in the thought of something exciting that you'd do for both of us, but"—and she made a dramatic gesture with her strong shoulders—"you won't do anything . . . any more than *he* did."

"Well, Mother," said Wolf slowly, when her final outburst had spent itself and a tender whimsical smile had settled down upon her face, "I'm off now, anyway, to see Urquhart. That's *something* to have decided upon, at any rate, isn't it? Oh, I shall get more competent and more unscrupulous, if you give me time. Well, I'm off, so good-bye, Mother."

It was at this juncture, after a hurried tap at the door, that Mrs. Herbert appeared upon the scene, to carry off her lodger's tray.

"Can you manage it?" Wolf said politely, balancing a forgotten sugar-bowl among the rest of the things. But

his mother came towards him, and, standing with her back to the landlady, made a whimsical grimace. As he bent forward to embrace her, there was a furtive exchange between them of that rapid blood-understanding which human beings share with the animals; but even as she kissed him she whispered in his ear: "Don't you think any more about the money, Wolf, for I won't have it! And look me up tomorrow, if you have time, either here or at the shop. Good-bye! Don't you bother, Mrs. Herbert! I'll open the door."

As he made his way through the quiet Sunday morning streets, Wolf found that he had already decided, in the secret places of his mind, to look in at Christie's before he started for King's Barton. This decision quickened his steps, but it did not prevent him from being stared at with the usual vapid curiosity by the few lethargic idlers he encountered.

He tried to analyze, as he went along, the cause that intensified this curiosity, in certain particular eye-encounters, to a malignant hostility. He came to the conclusion that this occurred only when his own mind was especially harassed. It must be, he decided, the same psychic instinct that makes a flock of fowls attack the one that happens to be hurt or sick, Mentally, at such times, he *was* hurt—he was actually bleeding invisible blood—and it might easily be that this wounded "aura" excited some mysterious irritation in those who caught it.

When he reached the Malakite shop he determined to ring the side doorbell; and he entered the little alleyway with this purpose. A certain shrinking from the critical moment that would decide whether Christie were

in the house or not led him to gain time by strolling forward into the small garden at the alley's end.

The little enclosure was entirely surrounded by walls; and at that time of year the only greenery visible was a few patches of parsley at the further end. Wolf walked towards those patches, though the soaked earth-mould clung heavily to his boots. Under the wall he did find a couple of dilapidated chrysanthemums, little, drooping, daisy-like blooms, that seemed to have had their very souls washed out of them. Glancing upward above these, he observed a projecting stone in the wall, which was covered by a species of vividly green moss, small and velvety, that seemed enjoying a vernal prime of its own, in the midst of the universal dissolution. In a moment, like a rush of warm summer air, there came sweeping over his mind the memory of certain old pier-posts at Weymouth, covered with small green seaweed . . . and simultaneously with this he heard a sound that made him turn hurriedly towards the house.

It was the opening of the side-door. And there was Christie, emerging in her out-of-doors attire!

He called her name loudly before he knew what he was doing, and she turned and looked at him.

With the poignance of that vision of pier-post and green seaweed still in his brain, the sight of her figure there, so quaint and pitiful, in her old-fashioned cloak and tightly-pulled-on gloves, stirred in him a sudden sense of something so beautiful in life, that it melted the bones within him. She herself seemed startled and overjoyed at seeing him; and tossing aside her accustomed reserve, she hurried towards him, heedless of the

rain-soaked soil under her feet, heedless of any windows that might be overlooking them, her arms impetuously stretched out and her mobile little face working under her tremulous emotion like a ruffled leaf in a gusty wind.

Once in possession of her hand he defiantly retained it; and together they moved close up to the wall at the end of the enclosure, where, on their rain-battered stalks, drooped those miserable chrysanthemums.

"I've come to the conclusion, Wolf," she said, as they stood there side by side, looking down at those forlorn survivals, "that I must be more frank, as well as more philosophical, about what I feel for you."

His heart began to beat wildly. The fantastic idea flashed through his mind that she was going to suggest —she herself—that he should come to her one of these nights when the old man was asleep!

"What exactly do you mean, Chris?" he asked, as she dropped his arm and faced him with her steady stare.

"I'm going to keep my feminine nature in control after this," she said. "We know what we are to each other . . . and what apparently we have to be . . . so I've decided not to allow any insurrection of my feelings. I've even thought of a *coup d'état* to keep them in their place!"

Quite unconsciously she had lifted her free hand to his coat and was twisting round and round in her gloved fingers one of its buttons.

An electric vibration of understanding quivered between them like a shivering cord stretched between two boats balanced each on its own wave-crest. And then,

with incredible swiftness, a deliciously mocking smile came into her face. "Shall I tell you something, Wolf?" she said. "I've started writing a story! I began it at one o'clock last night, when I decided to conquer all feminine equivocations. It's about someone quite different from me, but . . . very philosophical. It was the philosophical part I began last night. I wrote page after page . . . quick as that!" And releasing his coat, she made a characteristically girlish gesture with her fingers.

"I believe you could write a wonderful book," said Wolf earnestly; and then, almost before he was aware of it, as they stood together, the indescribable entrancement of that green seaweed he had visualized a moment ago, and the salty taste of spray, and the touch of sun-warmed sand that had come with it, associated themselves with the delicious peace into which her presence threw him, and he began to abandon himself to the ecstasy of his "mythology."

He was stupid enough to dream that he could give himself up unobserved to this egoistic satisfaction. It was therefore with something of a shock that he caught the faint sound of a sigh upon the air.

"I've got to go now," she said. "I've got to get something for Father's dinner that I forgot yesterday, and there's only one little shop round here that's open on Sunday morning. But don't let me drive you away if you're happy in my garden. Stay as long as you like!"

She was holding out her hand now and upon her face was a candidly-humorous smile. He knew perfectly well that she had discovered, without the passage of a sign between them, that his mind had plunged their paradisic

moment into some undersea of its own, where she could not follow. But he saw that she accepted this with complete indulgence; just took it for granted as a masculine peculiarity . . . a different way from hers of being happy!

"When am I to see you again?" he asked. "Our school-holiday will soon be over . . . and then . . . well, we know how it goes!"

Christie turned her head away from him, and, with puckered forehead and drooping under-lip, fell into a fit of deep pondering.

"Now's the time for you to practise your new philosophy, Chris, of being frank with your lover!"

Wolf uttered this lightly, but his heart was beginning to beat again. Something had made him give to her confessed "decision" a meaning directly the reverse of what her words implied. Wicked, satyrish thoughts flashed through his mind like darting fish through disturbed water. Her frown deepened at his speech and her lip drooped still more. Then, with heightened colour, she turned quickly and faced him.

"Will . . . you . . . be——" she began slowly. "I mean, will Gerda be——" She hesitated; and then, speaking rapidly, and with wide-open eyes fixed steadily upon his: "Will you be free tomorrow night, Wolf? Father is going down to Weymouth tomorrow, on some affair of his own, and is going to stay the night there. So, if you like, I could get you supper, and we'd have everything to ourselves."

It was Wolf's turn now to look away; but he answered

her easily and lightly, as if it were quite a small matter. "Why, Chris, that would be wonderful! I'll snatch at such a chance as that, whatever's in the way. Besides, there's no earthly reason why I shouldn't come to supper tomorrow. So let's consider it settled. No, I mustn't stay longer now; and I mustn't try and help you with your Sunday shopping! I'm off to Barton to see if I can't catch Urquhart at home." He paused for a second. "I'm thinking of finishing that book for him, you know . . . after all . . . if he'll pay me in advance."

Perhaps never in his life had Wolf's mind moved as rapidly as it moved now. His consciousness at this moment became like a wild horse stung by a gadfly or like an ox driven crazy by the eating of some "insane root." Those words of hers, "Father is going to stay the night there," took to themselves a sweet-shivering identity of their own. But his cheeks were flushed with a queer sense of discord within himself. "What I feel now," he thought, "is not happiness at all. *What is it?*" And then, as the two of them moved away over the wet sods of earth to the alley's entrance: "That green moss . . . that green seaweed . . . *was* happiness; but this is something else. This is something that will kill my 'mythology' if I let it."

He was taking her hand now to say good-bye. "What does she care," he thought, "about my doing Urquhart's book?" And there came over him, as he looked into her brown eyes, a cold shudder of deadly loneliness. "She would never understand," he thought, "what I am risking by going back to Urquhart."

"Well, good-bye, Chris, till tomorrow night!" And then, as they released each other's hands, "You're not to look round now!" he added querulously.

"I've never looked round in my life!" retorted Christie Malakite, as she gave him her parting nod.

It was still about half-an-hour before church-time when he reached the gate of King's Barton Vicarage. And there was T. E. Valley himself, in his ragged brown ulster, scraping with a hoe at one side of the drive!

For a moment Wolf found himself enjoying the lot of this little clergyman. *He* had no worries about girls. *He* had no worries about money. *He* had no mother but the Mother of God.

Wolf advanced slowly up the drive. The click of the hoe on the gravel made so much noise that his approach was unobserved.

Mr. Valley's green-tinted trousers—he thinks nothing of Sunday, thought Wolf—covered such lean flanks, as he stooped, that it was as if the trousers were doing the weeding rather than the man.

"Good-morning, Valley! Not started ringing your bell yet, then?"

A twinge of physical discomfort, as he resumed his upright position, crossed the priest's face. He rubbed his spine with the back of his left hand, as he offered his right to his visitor.

"Stiff. I feel rather stiff, Solent. You must excuse my being stiff."

Wolf sighed wearily. "I've been envying you, you irresponsible monk." He turned his head and surveyed the result of Mr. Valley's labour. A small path had been

made free of weeds along the edge of the great overgrown drive.

"People won't follow your path, Valley, even if you carry it to the gate. They'll just walk straight up the middle."

Disregarding this remark, the clergyman screwed up his eyes as if thinking of some important matter. Then he leaned forward and said gravely:

"By the way, Solent, do you know any literary people in London?"

Wolf surveyed him in astonishment.

"Yes, a few," he said.

A smile like a tiny crack in grey pond-ice crossed Mr. Valley's pallid features.

"Why don't you get them to publish Jason's poems, then? They're good, aren't they? He won't show them to me. You know what he is! He thinks I'd steal the ideas for my sermons. But if your London friends were to see them——"

Wolf felt sheer amazement at the perspicacity of the little man. What a fool he'd been not to have ever thought of this! Of course, it must be exceedingly difficult to get anything published. Carfax might—he had an interest once in a publishing-house. And they *are*——

"I'll talk to Jason about it," he said gravely. "Well, I must be off now. I'm going to see Urquhart. By the way, Valley, I *am* going to finish that book of his."

Mr. Valley's face crumpled into woeful disorder, as if he had received a blow. He turned up his shirt-sleeves and resumed his weeding, without a word.

Wolf experienced extreme discomfort.

"You think I'm making a mistake, Valley?" he said.

There was no answer.

"You think the less I see of Urquhart the better, Valley?"

Still there was no answer.

"Don't work at that job too long, Valley, and forget about the service!"

The man gave him an extraordinary sideways glance without lifting his head or ceasing his work. But not a word did he utter.

"Well, good-bye . . . and I *will* do something about Jason's poems!"

"I wonder if I *am* making the greatest mistake I ever made in my life!" he said to himself, as he emerged into the road. He began to feel almost startled by the blind desire he had to erect this money as an impassable barrier between his mother and Mr. Manley. "It's only his money. *Of course* it's only his money. She couldn't *like* a brute like that!"

In spite of the lowering clouds hanging like toppling bastions above High Stoy—as if the Cerne Giant himself were heaping up earthworks there—not one single drop fell till Wolf reached the shelter of the Manor. He began to feel there was something uncanny about the way the rain threatened to descend and yet did not descend.

"What's the time, Roger?" he asked, nervously, as he followed Monk up the old Jacobean staircase to the familiar library.

"Must be near church-time, I believe, Sir; though I haven't heard the bells yet. Squire'll be main glad to see

'ee, Sir," the man went on, as he opened the library-door; "glad as a hernshaw Squire'll be!"

"He wants to get his book done, Monk, I suppose?"

" 'Tis all he thinks of, Sir. Night and day, 'tis all he thinks of."

"Why doesn't he advertise for another secretary?"

Roger Monk made a deprecatory grimace and then hurriedly placed his large first-finger upon his lips.

"Squire's had enough of secretaries," he whispered, "and so, by Grimey, have I!"

His voice resumed its normal tone when they were well inside the room.

"You'll find your old seat just as comfortable as it used to be, Sir. Them big logs warms the whole place."

On the servant's departure Wolf went over at once to the table by the window. How well he recalled the thrill he used to get from the asters and lobelias, down there in that round flower-bed, so dark and bare today!

There was a book, lying with others upon the table, that caught his attention at once. He picked it up. The particular pencil-marking in the corner of the fly-leaf indicated to him that it had come into Urquhart's possession through the agency of Mr. Malakite. The volume had no connection at all with the rambling chronicles and scandalous County-Trials out of which Urquhart's History was being framed. It was the kind of book the debased purpose of which is simply and solely to play upon the morbid erotic nerves of unbalanced sensuality. The Malakite shop had, it appeared, inexhaustible resources of this nature, distinct altogether from any merely bawdy local folk-lore.

He turned over the pages. At once that old wicked shiver, drunken, indescribable, ran through his veins. It was an abominable book! A peculiar tremulousness took possession of the pit of his stomach, and a mist swam before his eyes. The atrocious attraction of a single page that he had encountered drew him towards a region of unspeakable images. Through an iridescent vapour, with the blood rushing to his head, he followed those images. He sank down into the chair, with the book clutched between his trembling fingers. He read voraciously. All those drops of deadly nightshade which, four months ago, had distilled themselves into his nerves as he fled from the school-treat field, began to seethe and ferment again in his secretest veins. Every now and then he was compelled to wipe away the salt sweat that clouded his eyesight. His knees knocked together beneath the table in his absorbed emotion.

It was while he was thus engaged that the library-door opened upon him and Mr. Urquhart presented himself in the doorway. The Squire advanced towards him across the polished oak floor, limping and muttering, his cane striking the echoing boards resoundingly at each step.

Wolf rose and met the man with extended hand; but his flushed cheeks, hot forehead, and excited eyes must have betrayed his preoccupation.

"Glancing at our last purchase, eh? What? Can't keep these pretty little books out of you young people's hands! You'll be snatching, by hook or by crook. . . . You'll be snatching, you rogues, eh?" And he dropped

Wolf's fingers, only to nudge him familiarly in the ribs.

Mr. Urquhart looked that morning as if something had inordinately refreshed and cheered him. "Well?" he muttered interrogatively. "Well?"

Wolf retreated a step or two, and mechanically placed the book he had been reading on the top of another volume, adjusting it evenly and neatly. Then, with his clenched hand resting on the table, and leaning a little forward, "I've been thinking, Sir," he began gravely, "a good deal lately about that book of yours; and I've thought I'd like to see you again to find out if we could come . . . if we could come . . ."

"To business, me boy!" threw in the other. "Quite right. I'm your man. I'm ready to bargain with 'ee."

Wolf's eyes fixed themselves upon the ebony stick upon which his late employer propped himself. "As it happens, Sir," he began resolutely, "my mother is just now in need of a sum of money . . . two hundred pounds in fact . . . to start a new tea-shop in Blacksod. She wants this at once. She's been thinking of borrowing it from . . . from a friend. What I had in my mind, Sir, was . . ." He relaxed the tension of his muscles a little at this point, and, in place of leaning heavily on the table, he found himself scratching with his thumbnail a zigzag pattern upon it in the shape of an architectural ornament. "What I thought was," he went on, "that if you could see your way to give me a cheque for this sum . . . now at once . . . I would pledge myself, in any form you suggest, to get the book finished

within the next three months . . . by March, in fact, when I first began it. What you'll be doing, Mr. Urquhart, is to pay me in advance for this three months' work on condition that I finish the job in that time . . . but I must be free"—his voice became quite steady now, and he found himself looking at last into the Squire's face—"I must be free to do this work at home and in my own way, using your notes, of course, as my material. I mean, that with my school-teaching I can't come over here regularly. But if I haven't finished it by the end of March you'll have the right to demand the repayment of this two hundred."

He paused, a little breathlessly; and, as was his wont in any crisis, he put his hand into his side-pocket, produced his cigarettes, and lit one with punctilious deliberation.

"Come over to the fire, Solent," said Mr. Urquhart. Wolf followed him, as he limped across the room; and they sat down in the two leather chairs against the open hearth, the smouldering logs of which the Squire proceeded to stir up with the end of his stick.

Wolf's heart was now beating fast. "I shall have the two hundred," he thought. "I shall have the two hundred!" He became aware that the vision of himself handing over this cheque to his mother was melting now into a vague, delicious sweetness that had nothing to do with either Mrs. Solent or with Mr. Urquhart. It hung quivering—this drop of maddening sweetness—on the edge of those words of Christie's, "He will stay the night at Weymouth!"

"I'm not a rich man, Solent. You know *that*, I suppose?"

Wolf nodded sympathetically; but he caught no more than the general drift of his companion's words, as the Squire rambled on.

"She's a plucky woman, your mother, and a darned good-looking one still, me boy, if you'll let an old man say so. Shame you had to desert her. But you nympholepts are all crazy. It's beyond me what you can find—— But there! It's a matter of taste. But I don't see why you need have bought the filly as well as ridden her. Torp's a reasonable man; though he *is* such a fool. But there! We all have to pay for our little vices. Well! About the two hundred, me boy—I suppose you must have it. Yes, by Jove, Solent, and you *shall* have it! And what's more, we'll drink a glass of my old Malmsey to wash the business down!"

While these words were reaching him across the smoke of the stirred-up logs, Wolf's own consciousness was sounding the depths of an unexpected mental crisis. Intensely did he realize the relief with which he would fling this cheque into his mother's lap. It was against his conscience; but the moment had come when he must sacrifice his conscience! In an irresistible salt-tide, overcoming all barriers, the idea of sacrificing his conscience rushed in full force now over the portion of his mind where the words, "Mr. Malakite at Weymouth," lay like a drowned sea-reef! And then, as he stared at Mr. Urquhart, it became clear to him in a flash of cruel illumination that these two things—today's bargain with

the Squire and tomorrow's visit to Christie—would be the end of his peace of mind. To these two things had he been brought at last. This was the issue; this was the climax of the mounting wave of his life in Dorset. He had to outrage now—and it was too late to retreat—the very core of his nature! That hidden struggle between some mysterious Good and some mysterious Evil, into which all his ecstasies had merged, how could it go on after this?

"Do 'ee hear, me boy?" The Squire's voice came clear and straight now into his agitated consciousness. "Will you do me the favour of ringing the bell? There! Just in front of 'ee!"

Wolf rose and rang the bell, and sank down once more into the depths of the leather chair. As he did so he was aware of a rattling at both the mullioned casements. The wind was rising, then? Let it rise! Let the rain pour down. It would please Mukalog, in his kitchen-drawer over there, to hear this sound.

The tall gardener had his black coat on when he entered the room, and his air was the air of a privileged major-domo in a noble house.

"Get my paper and pens, Roger, and my cheque-book, out of my study, please. Oh, and one thing more! Here, you'll want my keys for that"—and he began fumbling in his pockets.

"A bottle of port, Sir?" suggested the servant.

"Where the devil *are* my keys?" murmured the Squire petulantly.

"In your dressing-gown, I expect, Sir. I'll look for them, Sir. Is it the 1880 port that I'm to get?"

"Listen, Monk," said Mr. Urquhart gravely. "How many bottles of my father's Malmsey have I got left?"

The man straightened his back with a jerk, and Wolf noticed that his eyebrows went up as if some extravagant and very foolish transaction were in the air.

"Some half-a-dozen, Sir. Them what's in the walnut chest are the last. We locked them up, sir, after Candlemas night, when you and young Mr. Redfern looked at they portfolios of antiquities."

Mr. Urquhart gave Wolf a rapid but very complicated glance as he answered the man.

"Never mind about the antiquities, Monk. Mr. Solent doesn't care for antiquities. Get a bottle of the Malmsey, and bring my cheque-book."

Half-an-hour later, over the same fireplace, Wolf found himself drinking the most nectareous wine he had ever tasted in his life. A cheque for two hundred pounds on Stuckey's Bank lay securely in his waistcoat-pocket; and on the silver tray between Mr. Urquhart and himself, a corner of it beneath the decanter to keep it in its place, was his own acknowledgement of the money and of the obligation which it entailed.

"Fifteen chapters would be a good round number, Mr. Urquhart."

"Fifteen . . . thirty . . . fifty!" cried the other. "I don't care how many! Order it as you please. My *facts*, my little *facts*, are the main thing—that future generations should have all the biting, pricking, itching, salty little facts about our 'wold Dorset' that can be put together!"

"I won't have any of your 'facts,' Sir, that I can't turn

into decent English. This book may carry your name, but it will have my soul between its——"

He broke off abruptly. "What's amusing you, Mr. Urquhart? By God, I *will* hear what's amusing you! Have I said anything ridiculous?"

"Not . . . at . . . all . . . me boy!" gasped the Squire, suppressing his chuckling-fit. "Did you say your 'soul' between its pages? 'Soul' is good. 'Soul' is a good word. So you've got a soul, have you, Menelaus? Or you *had* before it strayed into my book? By Jove, that's a pretty fancy, eh? Like a rose-leaf or a bit of white heather, such as the wenches put in their prayer-books!"

Wolf laid his hand on the stem of his wine-glass and stared sombrely at the rich purplish umber of its contents. Never had he tasted such wine! He felt irritated with Urquhart for not letting him enjoy it in silence —savour every drop of it—draw it into his heart, his nerves, his spirit. . . .

"Not one fact left out . . . Menelaus . . . that's in the bond, you know!" And Wolf, through that Malmsey-tinctured mist, saw his host tap significantly with his forefinger the sheet of paper that lay under the decanter.

A second gust of rising wind rattled the two window-casements; and this time there came with it the sound of a distant bell ringing.

"It's Tilly-Valley," said the Squire brusquely. "Hand me your glass, Solent."

"Does he have it done when he's saying Mass?" asked Wolf, watching the tilting of the decanter. Then he cried, "I like to hear it!" with a sudden, fierce emphasis. "I think I'll open the window." He rose with meticu-

lous care and moved across the room, lifting his legs with cautious exactitude, as if they were heavy objects totally distinct from his personality.

He pushed open that familiar latched pane of the mullioned window.

"I say, Sir!" he cried excitedly. "It's going to pour with rain. There's an enormous black cloud out there!"

He strode gravely back to his place by the fire; and the wind followed him, making that paper he had signed rise up like a leaf and tap against the side of the decanter.

"It's going to pour in a minute," he repeated, emptying his glass.

But he now became aware that his companion's wits had completely succumbed to the influence of the wine. Mr. Urquhart was engaged in a fatuous attempt to measure out the last few drops of the Malmsey equally between their two glasses. "Empty . . . quite empty . . ." he murmured, with a deep sigh; and then he began muttering something that sounded like "Who'll toll the bell? 'I' said the bull, 'because I can pull.' "

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Urquhart?"

His recognition that the man had sunk instantaneously through all the intervening stages and was now hopelessly drunk was a sobering shock to his own fuddled mind.

"It's ringing still," he remarked gravely.

"I'm the only magistrate round here," cried the Squire. "What does Torp know of the law?"

Wolf contemplated with some concern the heavy lips in front of him, which were now gibbering incoherently.

Valley's Mass-bell had ceased. The wind was rattling all the windows. A wild gust, blowing down the chimney, drove a handful of bitter-tasting wood-ashes against both their faces.

"If I told you three feet was enough, what's that to you? Three feet is deep enough for a boy not twenty-five. They sleep sound then. It's different later. Three feet is a very good depth. Don't throw in any more, I tell you! His skin was always soft. Three feet is more than enough. How do we know they don't feel it falling on 'em? It's clay, mind you. It's thick Dorset clay."

Wolf drew in his breath with a long-drawn sigh. "He'll tell me everything soon, if only I can keep my wits clear."

There was a sharp splash of rain against the open casement, and a violent shaking of the window-catch.

The Squire recommenced his mutterings.

"D'ye think it's an easy thing to walk up and down on the earth with him lying down there? What would it be to stop thinking about it and just do it? . . . Foulness? . . . Abomination? . . . I don't know about that. . . . I . . . don't . . . know. . . ."

His voice died away into complete incoherence. But suddenly it rose once more, shrill and strident. It falls off . . . it falls off . . . the sweet flesh!"

Wolf stiffened himself in his chair and leant forward. Big drops of rain were descending the chimney, each one hissing with an angry hiss, as it touched the burning logs.

"The lips . . . the lips . . . where are his lips now?"

The man's voice sank again; but Wolf seemed to catch

a low, moaning sound coming from him, a strange, sub-human sound, that was ghastly to listen to.

Then there were more articulate words. "Nothing can make him not to be himself! And if he's himself, and I'm *myself*, 'twould be like my life hugging my life to do it!"

He fell into a silence then; and lifting one of his arms from where it sprawled upon the table, he wiped the saliva from his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I'll find out everything in a moment," Wolf thought. "All I've got to do is to keep my brain clear."

The windows had become so dark with rain that the room was in twilight. The upper portion of his companion's face was almost invisible. Over the lower part of it, however, the smouldering fire threw a wavering illumination. It was this obscuring of the man's eyes in the darkened room that made it a surprise to Wolf when, after a long pause, a voice came from him that was pitched in a completely different key—that was, indeed, crafty and foxy in its sobriety!

"Drunk and chattering, eh, me boy? It's when I think of Torp . . . that's what it is . . . Torp and the mess he made of the grave out there! Couldn't even dig it deep enough. Said he came upon an old coffin or something! Torp and his stupidity always upset me. A stone-cutter is what the man is. I was a fool to let him meddle with grave-digging. Torp digging graves is absurd. You can see *that* for yourself, tow-pate, can't you, even though you do go about with Lobbie? What was I saying just now? Oh, I know! That it was all crazy village-gossip when they talk of suicide. Don't you listen to 'em, tow-

pate! Don't you listen to that ridiculous individual down at Pond Cottage either. He takes drugs, that man. You can smell 'em on his clothes. Suicide? Nonsense. It was pneumonia. If he'd stayed at Lenty, Tilly-Valley would never have got at him. They moved him against my wishes. D'ye hear, Solent? Against my wishes. That Lenty place of mine . . . your mother liked it, didn't she? . . . was just right for that boy. What did they move him for? He wasn't fit to be moved. He might have got well if they'd kept Tilly-Valley away from him and hadn't moved him. That . . . was . . . wrong . . . to move . . . him."

With these words Mr. Urquhart's heavy head sank down till his chin rested against his chest. The shock of the jerk to his neck aroused him again, however; and with a crafty, wrinkled leer he glanced at the empty bottle.

"Empty . . . every drop," he muttered. Then, with his elbow resting on the table, he supported his head with his hand.

"Torp's the fellow who upsets me. Why, I can dig a grave better myself! But you must excuse me, Solent. I know you are mixed up with those people. Married the little boy, I mean the little girl, didn't you? Your relative Torp is a prize fool, Solent. Don't defend him! I tell you it's no use. You're . . . a sensible . . . boy . . . Menelaus . . . though you're *not* as good-looking as your father . . . and the best thing you can do is to leave Torp to me. Stone-cutter or undertaker, I understand him. I've known individuals of his kind all my

life. He's pure Dorset, is the good Torp. Leave him . . . to me . . . leave . . . him . . ."

His arm sank down upon the table and his head sank down upon his arm. A gust of wind from the open window swept across the room and lifted into a spiral dance the scattered wood-ashes that lay on the silver tray. Some of those ashes, as they subsided, fell upon the man's glossy black hair and lay there where they fell; so that Wolf was reminded of the men of old time, who, in their grief, strewed ashes on their heads.

He rose quietly to his feet. "I'd better hunt for Monk before I go," he thought, "and tell him to come up and see him."

With this in his mind he stole across the polished floor, opened the door with the utmost caution, and let himself out.

The rain had stopped when he emerged into the manor-garden; and he decided that the best thing he could do would be to walk off the effects of the Malmsey and remain in the open air until tea-time. Then he would drop in at Pond Cottage, where, no doubt, since it was Sunday, he would find all his friends together.

By the elimination of any lunch he would be all the hungrier to enjoy the home-made bread and flaky Scotch scones and honey-in-the-honeycomb which always made Mrs. Otter's teas such solid and delicious repasts.

Feeling a longing for absolute solitude, he looked about for some unfrequented path. He had not passed, by more than two hundred yards, the well-known house inhabited by Roger Monk, when he came upon a cattle-

drove leading due east, which was completely unfamiliar. This he decided to explore; and when it led him into a narrow, grassy lane, heading towards High Stoy, he made up his mind that he would follow this new direction and see what came of it. Every now and then, as he walked, he found himself thrusting his finger and thumb into his waistcoat-pocket to make sure the precious slip of paper was still safely there.

He had never been quite in the mood in which he struggled now. The thought of Christie's invitation to him, the tone of her voice as she uttered the words about her father, the expression of her face as she described what she had been writing—all these things fermented in his veins like drops from the sap of a deadly upas-tree. To die without ever having slept with Christie . . . No! He *couldn't* submit to such a destiny! His heart beat fast as he gathered up his forces for this challenge to the gods. Between the bare branches of rain-soaked elms and the wet leaves of gleaming holly he strode along now like a centaur maddened by juniper-berries! And yet all the while, below this recklessness, lay a furtive, troubled, ghastly dread. Did not his "mythology" depend upon his inmost life-illusion—upon his taking the side of Good against Evil in the great occult struggle? And if Urquhart's book and "Mr. Malakite at Weymouth" killed his mythology, how could he go on living? What feelings does a man have when his inmost integrity is shattered? "You Dorset!" he murmured aloud, as he trailed his stick through a heap of dead leaves. "You've not beaten me yet, you Dorset! Ay! I'll be a match for you yet, you dark rain-scented earth!"

But even as he spoke, the thought of holding Christie against his limbs, stripped of her clothes, brought him an intolerable spasm. The words, "Mr. Malakite at Weymouth," ceased altogether to be words. They became tiny blue veins just above those slender knees! They became —oh, he couldn't give up such a chance! He couldn't!

He had let Christie become a spirit to him. He himself, with his Pharisaic chatter about "Platonic," had turned her into a spirit. Men of his type make their girls into anything. He had made her what he wanted her. He had satisfied his sensuality with the other one and gone to Christie for mental sympathy. He hadn't considered *her* side of it at all. But now—tomorrow night—he would be a magician! He would turn this Ariel, this Elemental, into a living girl! His mind reverted to Gerda. "How pitiful that she should have lost her blackbird-song! That's what I've done to *her!* I've become too solemn. I've wearied her with my pedantic, ponderous thoughts. She's come to feel that I'm 'heavy weather,' a fellow without humour, without gaiety, a lumbering schoolmaster. That's what it is. She's turned to Weevil, for the simplest of all reasons—for pleasant camaraderie!"

Suddenly, with a cynical frankness, he began comparing his feelings for these two girls. "The truth is," he said to himself, "I love them both! I love Gerda because she's so simple, and because I've slept with her all these months; and I love Christie because she's so subtle, and because I've never slept with her!"

He paused by the lane-side, and, stepping over some dripping clumps of rank weeds, whose odour seemed like

all the vague, anonymous scents that had hit his senses for the last four months, he leaned upon a disused gate and stared northward towards Ramsgard.

"Is that the Abbey?" he thought, as he heard faint chimes upon the heavy air. Hovering about the image of Æthelwolf's coffin, his mind reverted to the idea of Christ.

"How extraordinary it would be," he said to himself, "if there really were an incredibly tender and pitiful heart . . . tender to the craziest sentimentalities as well as to the most tragic dilemmas of humanity . . . just outside the circle of time and space!" If there *were* such a heart it would certainly turn all modern scientific theories into something trifling and unimportant. But did he want such a Being to exist? Not to want him . . . not even to *want* him . . . would seem an outrageous cruelty to all the Tilly-Valleys in the world. And, besides, such a Being would look after Gerda and after Christie . . . and settle all their dilemmas . . . ultimately . . . "And yet I don't believe I *do* want Him!" he murmured aloud, as a sprinkling of cold raindrops fell upon his clasped hands from a tree above his head.

As he set himself to answer the question, why it was he didn't "want Him," there came into his mind one of Gerda's recent hints, full of her primitive Blacksod mania for gross scandal, implying that the perverse tendencies of Mr. Malakite had not even yet been eradicated by old age.

"If I take her tomorrow night," he thought, "there'll exist . . . something . . . in common . . . between the old man and me . . . yes! if it's only a . . . only a . . .

Is that the reason why I don't really want 'Him' to exist? For fear my feeling for Christie should have to be a thing purer even than 'Platonic'?"

He stared frowningly at the stubble-furrows in front of him. One especial little pool of water caught his attention, between the melancholy stalks, into whose bosom at intervals single drops, from an extended branch above, kept splashing. So this was the inmost law of nature, was it; that if a man had more than one woman in his life he sank of necessity to such base compromises that he *couldn't* want Christ to exist?

Well, he must content himself with thinking of the coffin of King Æthelwolf when he heard the chimes of Ramsgard!

In his defiantly heathen mood he suddenly found himself chuckling, as he stared at those little periodic water-tongues leaping up in that brown puddle; for he recalled the opinion that Bob Weevil had expressed to him recently, that girls' legs were the most beautiful thing in the world. "Weevil and I are both lucky in one way," he thought. "We both have the sort of intense life-illusion that protects human beings from the futility of the commonplace. But, oh God, oh God! I wish I hadn't taken this two hundred pounds, and I wish Mr. Malakite *wasn't* going to Weymouth tomorrow!"

He lifted his eyes from the wet stubble and let them roam at large across the green expanse of the great vale. And there swept over him an immense loathing for the furtive indecencies of human life and beast life upon the earth. "It would be so much better," he thought, "if all men and all beasts were wiped out, and only birds and

fishes left! Everything that copulates, everything that carries its young, how good if it vanished in one great catastrophe from the earth, leaving only the feathered and the finned!"

And he tried deliberately, as he moved away from that disused gate and strode further eastward along the lane, to visualize all this patient Sabbath landscape as it would be if it were indeed washed clean of all mammals! He imagined the vast cirque of Poll's Camp, couchant like an heraldic lion, and befouled no more by the rabble of Blacksod. He saw Melbury Bub rising out of the calm rain-drenched fields, free from all the privies and dung-heaps and Farmer's Rests and slaughter-sheds that so profaned its leafy purlieus.

The lane rose a little presently, following a slight undulation of the bed of the vale; and when he reached the top of this small eminence, the expanse of country that stretched before him assumed for his imagination that particular look of a land submerged under fathoms of transparent water, which, from his childhood up, had especially thrilled him.

To his left rose the corrugated trunk of an enormous elm-tree, about whose roots a thick covering of green moss held the fallen rain like a sponge.

The sight of this moss swept his mind back to Christie's garden and thence to those slippery wharf-steps and wave-swept pier-posts that he associated with the first discovery of his mystic ecstasy.

So absolutely did he live in symbols of his mental life, that the two things which now threatened this ecstasy—Urquhart's book and a shy, slender Christie,

stripped of her clothes—transformed themselves into the wet, uneven bark of this trunk against which he now pressed his hand. "Two hundred pounds?" he thought. "What is that to spoil a whole life? A thin, bare figure held tight for a second . . . what is that to change a person's whole idea of himself?"

As he went on pressing his bare palm against the wet corrugations of that inert trunk, it seemed to him imperative to make an attempt then and there to evoke his master-sensation. With a desperate straining of all the energy of his spirit, he struggled to merge his identity in that subaqueous landscape. He had, at that moment, a strange feeling, as if he were seeking to embrace in the very act of love the maternal earth herself! For, as he strained his spirit to the uttermost, the landscape before him ceased to be a mere assemblage of contours and colours. It became one enormous water-plant, of vast, cool, curving, wet-rooted leaves—leaves that unfolded themselves, leaves that finally responded and yielded to the outflung intensity of his magnetic gesture! "Not dead yet!" he muttered aloud, as, with an exhausted sigh, he turned to retrace his steps. "Not dead yet!"

In the reaction from this desperate plunge into his mystic vice, Wolf found that he was beginning to feel extremely hungry. "I don't want to have to wait a minute after I get there," he thought. "I can't cope with Jason till I've had my tea. So it's no use walking too fast!"

His mind began fumbling then, puzzled and weary, around that question which always had such a curious interest for him, as to the inner nature of each person's

secret life-illusion—that peculiar consciousness people build up as to their dominant "entelechy" or ultimate life-flowering. Thus it seemed to him now, that while his own life-illusion was his "mythology," Christie's must be those "Platonic essences" about which she was always pondering, Weevil's the mystic beauty of girls' legs, and Urquhart's the idea of his shameless book. He could not help chuckling a little to himself when his exhausted thoughts, like weary gnats that sink down upon water, began hovering round the question as to what Jason's life-illusion was. "He has none! He has none!" he cried aloud; and he found himself so excited by this explanation of Jason's peculiarities that, not thinking what he did, he debouched into a field-path quite different from the one that had led him into this lane.

After walking nearly a mile, this newly discovered path conducted him, to his considerable surprise, into Lenty Great Field—into the opposite side of the field to that of Pond Lane. Indeed, so unfamiliar did the field look from this direction, that it was only by the well-known willow-trees in the centre that he recognized Lenty Pond at all.

"Why, there *is* Jason!" he said to himself; "and the girl with him must be Mattie. Damn! How the devil shall I cope with *this* combination?"

Then in a flash he realized that it was only his mental preoccupation with Jason that had given these complete strangers, sitting on the bank of Lenty Pond, *his* shape and Mattie's. Surely this man and this girl were completely unknown to him! But *were* they? The man certainly was. But the girl? Ah, he knew her! She was the

"automatic young lady" of Farmer's Rest! So that wizened old chap in a bowler-hat was her uncle . . . the unseen invalid he had heard calling out, "Jesus . . . Jesus . . . Jesus!"

As soon as he reached the side of the pond that was nearest to him, the two figures, who were seated on the opposite edge, stood up, the girl helping the man to his feet. He could see they were exchanging remarks about him; and knowing the condition of the man, he hesitated and looked away, flicking the dead reed-stalks with the end of his stick.

But as he hesitated there, he gave them a furtive sidelong glance, and he saw they had begun to come slowly along the side of the water, evidently intending to speak to him.

He advanced to meet them, and they met half-way round the circle of the pond.

"How do you do, Mr. Solent," said the girl quietly. "This is my uncle, Mr. Solent." Then she turned and raised her voice, as if speaking to a deaf man. "This is Mr. Solent, uncle; the gentleman I was telling you about."

It gave Wolf a queer sensation to see this equivocal "Miss Bess" again. Was it Gerda who had told him that she was a friend of Bob Weevil's? Little pleasure Mr. Weevil would get out of her, judging by that evening of the School-Treat!

But as she looked furtively into his eyes now, it was difficult for him to believe that the quiver of chemical attraction which for that single second united their nerves had no normal eroticism in it.

The girl was the first to drop her eyes. "Uncle here takes all the time I've got, these days," she murmured; "uncle and the bar—don't you, you funny old man?"

Mr. Round's countenance flickered all over with little wrinkles of complacent pride.

"She looks arter me as if she were paid to do it," he remarked in a hollow voice.

"I'm sure she does," Wolf responded absent-mindedly, his gaze wandering to the surface of Lenty Pond. "I think you're to be congratulated, Mr. Round, on having so capable a niece," he added after a pause, with a little more emphasis.

Something about the landlord's disordered physiognomy began to suggest to his mind the head of a decapitated criminal carried on a pole. It was just as he was wondering how he was going to slip away from these two, that there came into his head, as if from the lips of a goblin inside him, that queer tag of bawdy gibberish which Manley—or was it Josh Beard?—had chaunted so derisively that night at the Three Peewits. "Jimmy Redfern . . . *he* was there!" mocked this jibing voice,

But the man's face had begun to expand with such maudlin satisfaction that it became absurdly puckered and puffed out, like a toy balloon composed of crocodile-skin.

"One who looks after you so well, Mr. Round——" continued Wolf.

At that moment, however, he caught the eye of the automatic young lady fixed upon him so quizzically that he felt the colour mounting to his cheeks.

"Curse the baggage!" he said to himself. "She's not one to be propitiated."

"You chose a nice day to bring your uncle out," he remarked humbly, turning his back upon Lenty Pond.

"She brought me out. That's what she done. And she will take me in, present! We comes out and we goes in; but 'tis they what bides."

"You're in the right of it *there*, Mr. Round," said Wolf, meeting the niece's eye as boldly as he could. "But I don't think it was very wise of her to let you sit down after all this rain."

"I brought his shawl," cried the girl, smiling. "Look, uncle! You've left it over there."

The innkeeper turned his head. "Over there," he repeated; and pulling at his niece's sleeve, he began shuffling back. Wolf accompanied them round Lenty Pond, and Miss Bess picked up the shawl. Bits of rush-seed were adhering to it; and she shook it in the air.

"Good-bye!" Wolf brought out at this point. "I'm going to call at Pond Cottage before I walk back to Blacksod."

" 'Tweren't either o' they," the innkeeper murmured hurriedly, "what drove him to it."

Wolf looked questioningly at the girl.

"He's worried," she said laconically. "Here, uncle, lean on my arm and we'll soon be home! Have you forgotten what I've got for your tea?"

The puckers and creases came wrinkling back.

"She's got sardines for me tea," he murmured confidentially.

"Capital!" cried Wolf. "I hope they'll have sardines at Pond Cottage!"

He was on the point of leaving them, when the innkeeper suddenly stretched out his free arm towards the centre of the water.

"That's where he do bide!" he murmured hoarsely. "Churchyard can't hold *he!*"

The automatic young lady, to Wolf's consternation, proceeded to shake her relative by both shoulders.

"Stop that, Uncle!" she cried angrily. "Stop that!"

The corners of Mr. Round's mouth fell. "Don't 'ee take no notice, maidie. I weren't thinking what 'ee do reckon I were."

He lowered his voice and leaned close to Wolf. "She were afeard I were thinking of God," he whispered.

"No I weren't, Uncle!" cried Miss Elizabeth. "So don't tell stories to Mr. Solent." She looked Wolf straight in the face. "He's worried," she repeated.

"I see he is," Wolf responded feebly. "Well, I hope you'll enjoy your sardines, Mr. Round." And he added in a firmer voice, "Good-bye! Good-bye!" and, lifting his hat, moved away from them.

As he crossed the field he tried to think of each particular spot of ground he had come to be so familiar with in this locality . . . Lenty Pond . . . Melbury Bub . . . Poll's Camp . . . the Lunt meadows. . . .

"These are the reality. These are what will last," he thought, "when all those agitated people with their crazy fancies have passed into nothingness!"

At the gate of Pond Cottage garden he glanced at his watch. It was ten minutes past four. "I should have

sworn it was five," he said to himself. "Time's like a telescope. It compresses itself or lengthens itself according to our feelings."

The mystery of time continued to tease him as he strode up the path.

His whole past seemed swallowed up by Mr. Urquhart's two hundred pounds and by "Mr. Malakite at Weymouth." "The misery of these decisions assumes time," he thought; "but what if time is itself an illusion?"

After he had rung the bell, he was struck by the curious silence that always falls down on the thresholds of houses, like the feathers of some vast overshadowing bird, when house-bells are rung. . . .

But the door was brusquely flung open now; and there were Darnley and Jason!

"You?" cried the younger brother. "How splendid! Our ladies have gone for a walk; but they'll be back presently. They're sure to be back presently, because it's Dimity's day out. Dimity's gone to tea with Mrs. Martin, up at the House. I've just been making Jason put on a new tie."

He turned and looked affectionately at his brother, while Wolf hung up his coat and hat.

"There!" Darnley cried. "You've been fooling with it again. What a demon you are, Jason, after all my trouble!" And lifting his hands to his brother's throat he set himself to rearrange the tie in question, which was of a brilliant vermilion. Wolf was amazed at the amiable gravity with which the poet submitted to this gesture.

"These young wimming," he mumbled—pronouncing the word more quaintly than Wolf had ever heard Mr. Torp pronounce it—"*like* red ties." And moving to the mirror above the hall-table, he proceeded to regard the improved adornment with whimsical complacency.

They had not been seated many minutes beside the drawing-room fire when Wolf took the bull by the horns.

"Look here, Jason," he began. "Why don't you let me send a selection of your poems up to London, so that we can see what the critics think of them?"

There was an ominous silence. Darnley's hand went up to his beard; while his eyes fixed themselves frowningly upon the coal-scuttle.

Slowly Jason spoke, putting an abysmal malice into his words.

"You think you're God, don't you?" he remarked; while out of a stony countenance his eyes flashed with nervous fury.

Wolf felt a tremor of anger; but he suppressed it resolutely. "Those poems of yours ought to be published," he said.

"For you Londoners to scoff at!" returned the other. "My poems may not be much," Jason went on, "but I don't like their being poked about by you clever dogs, any more than I'd like to have such rogues spit in my porridge."

"My mother has a cousin," continued Wolf obstinately, "who is very good at getting things taken he feels interested in. He happens to be a lord, and had some connection once with a publishing-house. I'd send your poems to him first."

"Will this lord you're boasting about get a share of the money?" asked Jason harshly. "Why don't you introduce Darnley to him? He might give Darnley a place at that—Institution, where you used to teach Latin!"

"Jason! Jason!" protested the young brother indignantly.

But the man went on. "If you're not so much like God as to be angry at everything that isn't praise, I'll give you my advice. My advice is——"

"Shut up, Jason, can't you?" interrupted Darnley.

"My advice is that you go back to London. This Dorset climate isn't good for you! Those Londoners would very soon give you plenty of money, when they heard that your mother was cousin to that lord you were telling us about just now."

"Jason can't forgive you, Solent," interposed Darnley, "for having heard his poems at all. Years ago he read some to me, and afterwards stopped speaking to me for three days!"

Instead of being annoyed at this remarkable reminiscence, the Slow-Worm of Lenty raised his shoulders and chuckled audibly.

"You schoolmasters!" he cried. "Your holidays have lasted too long! Teachers of Latin, like you, always get fidgetty when you're not with your boys."

"I don't teach Latin," murmured Wolf, in a voice almost as silky as the Squire's own. Anger was mounting up within him like a black wave.

"Do you want to know why I advise you to go back to London?" went on Jason, disregarding this protest. "Not because of Urquhart—though I'm tired of warn-

ing you against *him*—but because if you go about with *me* much longer, you'll wake up one fine morning with your merry little ways fallen from you like a snake's skin."

"What ways?" asked Wolf.

"Oh, do shut up, Jason! Do stop making a bloody ass of yourself!" interjected Darnley.

"Those feelings you have when you stretch out your legs in the morning, and when you walk home to tea, swinging your stick, and when you go up those back-stairs of old Malakite's, and when you drink that bottle of gin of yours which I've heard about and forget that it isn't your first night with your young lady, and when you enjoy those books in old Urquhart's library and tell yourself stories about them, and when he brings out his second-best wine and you warm yourself at his fire, and when you look over gates on your walks and think that Nature is something!" He stopped breathlessly, and then added, in the dead silence that followed, "If you go about with me much longer you'll find yourself falling into *reality*, like . . . like an abortion into the Bog-stream!"

"Jason, if you don't shut up," cried Darnley fiercely, "I'll go straight off to Preston Lane with Solent and leave you alone!"

"It's all right," interposed Wolf. "I don't mind hearing these things. But, if Darnley doesn't object, I'd like to ask you one question, Otter. What is it about me that annoys you so?"

The poet's whole frame seemed to hug itself together, to contract, to tighten. Then he said: "I'm not in the least

annoyed by anyone's ways. We're all beetles in the dung of the earth. If you go about with me, Solent, you won't be able to think of yourself like you like to do, or about any of your young ladies either! You'll be glad enough to get three good meals every day and to sleep as long as you can. . . . You'll learn from me more about the value of sleep than about courting young ladies. . . . So my advice is, get back to London, where that lord of yours is, and teach——"

He was interrupted by the opening of the front-door and the sound of Olwen's shrill voice rising above those of her companions. As they all hurried out into the hall to greet the newcomers, Wolf thought to himself, "Now we'll see how three generations of feminine sensibility will take possession of a house!" But things arranged themselves very quietly. Mattie took Olwen upstairs, to tidy her up, while Darnley followed his mother into the kitchen, to help her getting tea. So that soon after their arrival Wolf found himself alone with Jason by the drawing-room fire.

"They'll be a long time," said the poet, with grave solemnity. "They always *are* a long time on Sundays." He then walked gingerly to the door and furtively closed it. Returning to Wolf's side by the hearth, he drew from his pocket a crumpled piece of paper, which he carefully unfolded.

"When you send my poems to London," he began quietly, while Wolf, watching him with astonishment, possessed himself of a seat from which he could see the window, "I think it would be a good thing if you didn't leave out the last one I've written. It's called 'The Owl

and Silence.' Do you mind if I read it to you now?"

"I'd like very much to hear it," Wolf responded humbly; but while the man was thus occupied, he allowed a portion of his consciousness to appropriate to itself a lovely bluish light that, with the falling of that winter twilight, began to fill the uncurtained window.

"Does it mean that the horizon is now clear of clouds?" he thought to himself. And then he thought, "It seems early for the twilight to be setting in." The disarming monotony of Jason's voice blended with the impalpable colour that filled the window-frame. . . .

When the mossy vistas call to the rain
To ravish their fern-fronds green,
Thro' the dripping hazels they dart again,
These points of damascene!
And each root holds blood in its amber cup,
Holds blood in its emerald bowl,
While the White Owl covers silence up
As death covers up the soul.

The great White Owl, he passes by
Like a ghost among the guests.
The wood-mice watch him with frightened eys;
The birds crouch in their nests;
And Silence asleep on her lichen bed,
Asleep on her fungus sheet,
Feels those feathers sink on her drooping head,
And fall on her tender feet!

They have known each other so long, so long,
That Owl and that Silence deep!
The mosses and ferns to life belong;
But they belong to sleep.
They belong to the land behind all lands
Where the greenest leaves look grey;
Where the tree of the unknown sorrow stands
Weeping its well-a-way!

For the Owl is old and Silence is old,
And that tree is older yet!

Its tears, malignant, drizzling, cold,
Make their love-pillow wet!
New moss, new ferns, the new spring brings;
New primroses in death
Are soothed by new moth-flutterings
Of euthanasian breath;

But the Owl that over Silence sinks,
With strange and drooping feathers,
Eternal rest-without-end drinks,
Absolved from all life's weathers.
Each root holds blood in its amber cup,
Holds blood in its emerald bowl,
But the White Owl covers Silence up
As death covers up the soul.

"Oh, I like that *very* much!" he murmured gently, when the man's voice died away. "Certainly we will include *that* in what we send to London!" It somehow seemed quite natural to him now, in the fleeting loveliness of this blue light, that Jason should, without retracting his spleen, have accepted his offer. As he watched the man crouching there between himself and that unearthly atmosphere, his sombre figure became for him a monumental symbol charged with feelings beyond expression. At how many hearths, that winter afternoon, were human beings watching this strange blueness, flung against their casements like the dreamy breath of the earth itself, caught ere it dissolved into space! That aerial transparency might easily be something that never again in all the days of his life would appear exactly as it did now! Oh, how he longed to scoop it up in great handfuls and pour it forth over every wounded spirit in the world! How he longed to sprinkle it like holy water over that face upon the Waterloo steps! A strange melting happiness began to thrill through him—and then,

suddenly, "Mr. Malakite at Weymouth." *No!* He would have supper with Christie; but he would keep his integrity. At eleven o'clock he would go back to Gerda. The idea of this *eleven o'clock* seemed like a penitential offering, heavy to lift, which, by a super-human effort, he would offer up to his Deus Absconditus. But even now, as he heard Olwen's light steps and bursts of laughter in the room above, the thought of the two-hundred dragged his resolution down. He *couldn't* give up the relief of flinging this cheque into his mother's lap; and by some intricate psychic law it seemed useless to renounce Christie's bed and yet accept Urquhart's money!

Jason's voice interrupted his meditations. But it was not of poetry he spoke. "Tell me, Solent," he said, "would you prophesy from what you know of me that I would outlive you by ten years?"

"Not ten, Jason!"

"Five, then?"

"No."

"Four?"

"No."

"By three years, then?"

"Well, perhaps you *may* outlive me by three! But listen, Jason. I wish you'd let me run up for a minute to your room, before they all come in. May I do that?" And he began to move to the door. Jason rose quickly to his feet and followed him. His expression was grave and extremely perturbed.

"I'd go to Darnley's room if I were you," he said eagerly. "The basin's much grander there than in mine.

But, of course, if you're nervous of doing anything in there . . . and would feel happier in mine . . . but mine wouldn't suit you . . . It's not in your style."

"I know very well what style it's in," retorted Wolf, as he opened the door; "but don't be worried. I'll use Darnley's."

It was indeed with a curious relief that he found himself in his friend's room. How refreshingly bare it was! The dressing-gown hanging on a nail upon the door, the three pairs of boots placed in a neat row at the bed's head, the grey schoolmaster's-suit carefully folded upon a chair—all these objects, combined with the faint sea-sand smell that came from the enormous sponge upon the washing-stand, brought to Wolf as he stood among them, washing his hands with Windsor soap, a wholesome and liberating peace.

He, a man, was in a man's fortress, a man's retreat! How cool and quiet did that strip of uncarpeted floor look, with the beautiful blue light lying upon it! How reassuring was the great flat tin bath propped up against the wall!

He couldn't help thinking, as he poured the soap-suds out of the white basin into the white chamber-pot—for evidently Darnley was allowed no slop-pail—how all his agitations had to do with women. "I'm attracted to them," he thought, as he instinctively pressed his friend's great sea-smelling sponge against his face, "but there must be something in my nature that causes them to weary of me . . . that irritates them, that infuriates them . . . unless I behave with diabolical cunning over a long

stretch of time . . . and that is difficult . . . that is almost impossible!"

Half-an-hour later, seated between Olwen and Mrs. Otter, with Darnley and Mattie opposite him, and Jason at the foot of the table, Wolf found that the airy chatter that had been going on, ever since they began their tea, about this and that aspect of the countryside, ended by troubling him with a bitter nostalgia. His brief holiday was already near its close; and how many days and months and years of his life was he destined to spend in that accursed schoolroom! Stirred into magnetic activity by the candlelight and the strong cups of tea, his deepest will set itself to overcome this menace. "I am god of my own mind," he said to himself; "and when I'm not actually teaching history—or 'Latin,' as Jason would say—I can re-create, out of thin air, the essences of earth, grass, rain, wind, valleys, and hills! I've only to concentrate my mind on the living eidolons *in* my mind; and even if they put me into prison—and Blacksod School *is* a prison—I ought still to be able to cry at the end like my father, 'Christ, I've had a happy life!'"

And as he continued to bandy jests with first one and then another, in his heart he thought, "Lenty Pond, the Gwent Lanes, the Lunt Meadows . . . there they remain, all night . . . all the long windy nights . . . there they remain; and I can see them, touch them, smell them, yes! and become them, whatever burdens Fate puts upon me!"

It was at this point that he found himself arrested by something Mattie had begun to say. She was speaking of some recent argument she had had with Darnley; and

as she murmured the words, "Darnley and I," Wolf was suddenly struck by the nature of the look she turned upon his friend. It was a glowing, possessive look, full of just that maternal sensuality which he himself hated to receive more than any other look he could think of! But Darnley seemed to derive satisfaction rather than annoyance from this look of hers; for his eyes darkened to a colour like luminous indigo, as he responded to it.

"Ha!" thought Wolf. "So *that's* how it has worked out! His love for her spirit has been accepted on its own terms; and his inhibition with regard to her body has become a matter of maternal solicitude to her. Ay, what convoluted beings we all are!"

"Go on, my dear," he said cheerfully. "Let's have it! Let's hear everything about it."

Mattie met his eyes with an equivocal response. He knew she was aware of something hostile to her in his mood. There was a flickering half-second of actual contention between them as their grey eyes encountered. Then she said, turning to Mrs. Otter: "It was a long discussion we had . . . it would be silly to tell it all. I happened to say something about plants having souls inside them . . . no! trees it was . . . and Darnley said that the souls of trees and flowers and everything else weren't 'inside' at all, but on the surface . . . I'm putting it right, aren't I, Darnley?"

"I don't——" protested the schoolmaster gravely. "I don't quite know what you mean by 'souls'; but if you mean what's most essential to them . . . colour . . . scent . . . expression . . . appearance . . . yes, it's certainly on the outside!"

"I don't understand, Darnley," threw in Mrs. Otter, with a face full of nervous concern, "how you can talk like that! We've been taught . . . haven't we . . . ?" She broke off and looked appealingly at her eldest son. "What do you think about it, Jason?"

But Olwen, who had been keeping up a surreptitious dialogue with Jason during the whole of tea-time, raised her voice at this.

"*He* knows about it, because he's a tree himself . . . aren't you, Jason? And *I* know about it, because I'm a bird in a tree!"

Jason, who with flushed face had been encouraging her in her mischief—and Wolf fancied that both Mattie and Darnley had been the butts of their roguery—now became gravely sardonic.

"We ought to have Tilly Valley here," he said, "to tell us what he's learnt from the Bishop of Salisbury about the soul!"

"I agree entirely with Darnley!" Wolf burst out with a violence that astonished himself. His annoyance at Mattie's maternal sensuality must have suddenly mingled with a sharp suspicion that Jason and Olwen had been making sport of him too!

"With Darnley?" murmured Mrs. Otter, still anxiously looking at her elder son to see if he had anything further to say.

"Wolf's not a bird *or* a tree, is he, Jason?" whispered Olwen, with teasing eyes.

"It's absurd," cried Wolf excitedly, while his upper-lip began to protrude and tremble so much that an observer might have been reminded of Miss Gault. "It's

absurd to talk of souls being inside things! They're *always* on the outside! They're the glamour of things . . . the magic . . . the bloom . . . the breath. They're the *intention* of things!"

His irritation at this moment was not lessened by a furtive taunt of the demon within himself repeating Mr. Urquhart's biting phrase, "So you *have* a soul, then, Menelaus?"

"But, Wolf," protested Mattie, in an obstinate and sulky tone, "you're contradicting yourself! How can anything be intended and expressed if it isn't there . . . inside . . . already?"

Wolf bit his lip to restrain himself from an outburst of anger.

"It's all so confusing to most of us, Mattie dear," murmured Mrs. Otter. "We can only hope and pray that the Judge of all the earth will do right."

The incongruous piety of this expression seemed to act like the old "*Ite missa est*" to the company about that candle-lighted table. As Wolf rose to go, there swept over him a shuddering vision of what such encounters as this might prove to him in the future, when he had lost all his self-respect. As he said good-bye to Mrs. Otter over the child's head, and felt that hot little forehead pressed against the pit of his stomach, and those long, thin arms clasped passionately round his waist, he realized that to assassinate his self-respect in the manner he intended would be to break the luminous interior life-pool that nourished all his happiness with its fleeting reflections! To feel toward himself in a certain way . . . to recognize himself as a person incapable of doing this

or that . . . such apparently was the "glassy essence" of that ecstasy that was his grand secret.

When at last the garden-gate had closed behind him and he had entered the darkness of Pond Lane, he found that in his mental exhaustion all manner of queer little objects, casually noted during his months in Dorset, were floating in upon him. The bell-handle of Mrs. Herbert's door, the white scar on the hand of that old waiter at the Lovelace, the stunted laburnum-branch in his back-yard—his mind had to make a definite effort to throw off these things.

"I've got a sort of under-life," he thought, "full of morbid hieroglyphics. Something must have died down there, and the blow-flies are laying their eggs in it."

Gathering up all the spiritual strength he possessed, he flung his mind outwards, far over those silent reaches of meadow-grass and fallow land. He imagined as vividly as he could all that was going on in that darkened margin of Blackmore. He followed the skulking of foxes under the hazels, the stirrings of hedgehogs in their hibernating-quiescence, the crouching of birds on leafless boughs, the burrowing of moles under their hillocks, the breathing of cattle in their barns.

He imagined all these things so intensely, one by one, that he began to feel that he shared those nocturnal movements—that he was no stranger among them, but himself a furtive, lonely earth-life among other earth-lives, drawing, as they did, some curative magnetism from the dark greenish-black hide of the great planetary body! And he thought how stoically all these living things—the patient trees most of all—endured those

diseased portions of their identities, those morbid under-lives, where the blow-flies of dissolution were at work.

"I can do it!" he thought. "It isn't for ever." And in his necessity he laid hold of those two dark horns of non-existence, from the cold slippery touch of which all flesh shrinks back—the horn of the ages before he was born, the horn of the ages when he would have ceased to be. "I can plough on," he said to himself.

The clock in the mid-Victorian tower of the town-hall was just beginning to strike a quarter to seven when Wolf reached the Blacksod High Street. The words of an unknown farm-labourer he had met on the road repeated themselves in his brain as he turned up his collar against a merciless downpour. "Blowing up for rain, Mister!" and Wolf's mind turned these harmless words into a vast non-human menace, directed against him by some malignancy in the very system of things.

He stopped for a minute at the entrance to Preston Lane, to decide whether to go straight to Mrs. Herbert's and give his mother the cheque, or to let it wait till the following morning.

"If I were a bit more superstitious," he thought, "I'd curse Mukalog for this!"

He stood disconsolately watching the splashing of the water-drops in the puddles by the roadside. "They don't *dance!*" he said to himself. "Reality's always different from the way people put it."

With an obscure instinct to postpone giving the cheque to his mother, he stared intently at those splashing drops, to see what they really *did* do under the flickering lamp-light!

No, they didn't "dance." Each individual drop, as it fell, seemed to draw up the water of that dark puddle in a tiny pyramid; but there were so many of them that it was hard to focus the attention upon any single one of those minute waterspouts. When, however, he lifted his head, the volume of rain driving eastward along pavement and gutter took a continuity of form, like the identity of some desperate living thing, bent on pursuit or escape.

Against this cold, blind presence he now resolutely pushed on. "If there's a light in mother's room," he said to himself, "I'll go straight in and give it to her."

True to the usual caprice of Chance, when it's invoked as an oracle, there *was* a light, and yet there was *not* a light. It was clear to him, as he approached Mrs. Herbert's door, that there was a glow in his mother's room that came from the fire and not from any lamp or candle.

"I'll have done something for *you*, old Truepenny," he muttered, "if you care anything what becomes of her!"

He opened the little iron gate and moved stealthily to the door of the house. Before ringing, he peered as closely as he could into the fire-lit room.

"God!" he gasped, in a spasm of irrational fury, "if that brute isn't with her now." There was, indeed, no doubt about it. Mr. Manley was snugly ensconced by Mrs. Solent's fireside, though all Wolf could detect of their two figures was the shoulders of the man, upright in a high-backed chair, and a fragment of his mother's profile as she bent over the fire.

"Oh, the brute! Oh, the brute!" he groaned, as he

sneaked back, returning as stealthily as he had come. "If they'd had the lamp lit——" he added weakly.

He crossed the road; and lurching forward against the torrential rain, he stopped when he reached the pigsty. A fantastic dread lest he should find the same fire-lit glow in Gerda's parlour—with Bob Weevil installed there, like a maggot in an apple—made him reluctant so much as to glance at his own house. Was Christie, too, sitting by *her* fire, acting the devoted daughter to Mr. Malakite?

Three fires and three women—and Mr. Wolf Solent leaning against the pigsty!

The rain now began to find his skin. A little trickle of ice-cold drops descended between his coat-collar and his neck.

As he clung with his hands to the wet railing, he could hear one of the animals rustling in the straw in the interior shed. Was it ill? Was it moving in its sleep? Or was it simply guzzling in there . . . in warm, dry darkness?

He pushed the outer gate open, hardly knowing what he did. So here he was, standing shivering inside that so-often-observed enclosure, from which the familiar stench emerged that had been the accompaniment of all these eventful months!

"Weevil's with her," he thought. "I know it as well as if I'd seen his Panurge nose! He's with her. She's going to give him supper . . . or perhaps they're roasting chestnuts! She said once they used to roast chestnuts together."

He fumbled about with his fingers for the latch of the inner door. How soaked with rain the woodwork was! A

second pig began to stir now and emitted a feeble grunt. Then he gave up trying to find the latch; and pressing his two hands against the jambs of the door, he bowed down his head until his forehead rested upon the low wooden lintel. At this moment it was given to him to taste those secret dregs of misery, cold as ice and black as pitch, that lie dormant under the lips of every descendant of Adam.

Here he remained perfectly still, while it seemed to him that the wind was whistling a special little tune, composed for his benefit, through the dripping boards of the pigsty.

"Wishaloog! . . . wishaloog!" whistled the wind. . . . Then all of a sudden he burst out laughing. "A comic King Lear! That's what I am! There's nothing tragic about this, Wolf, my friend! What you've got to do is to defy omens and fight for your own hand."

He rose up erect, tightened his fingers round his stick, and straightened his shoulders.

"I've got Urquhart's cheque," he thought, "and by this time tomorrow—'Mr. Malakite at Weymouth.'" Once more, while he used these words, what he saw in his mind was the little blue veins under Christie's satiny skin—just above her knees.

It was then—and he had remarked it in himself before—that the constriction of lust endowed his spirit with a recklessness that was alien to his character. "Wishaloog! Wishaloog!" whistled the wind; but mounting up, out of the chill of the nether pit, something in his nature, some savage stirring of his animal will, mocked back now at this impish derision.

"Whi . . . Hoo! *thee own self!*" he cried aloud, mimicking the tone in which Gerda's father used this West Country retort. Without further delay he left the pigsty, crossed the road, and rushed into his house. . . .

Not a sign of Bob Weevil. But oh, what a relief it was, a relief beyond anything he had expected, when he entered his own kitchen and found Gerda, arrayed in a spotless print apron, laying the supper.

He could see how pleased the girl was at the obvious genuineness of the emotion with which he greeted her. And genuine indeed his feelings were; though not all of them would have caused her equal satisfaction had they been exposed.

He ran upstairs to change his clothes, bringing the drenched ones down with him a minute or two later to dry them by the stove. The warmth of the kitchen, the steam that came from his wet things, the rank earthy smell of boiling turnips, the affectionate scolding of this beautiful young being, betrayed him quickly enough into that peculiar intimacy where the safety of virtue becomes the voluptuousness of content. The beat of the rain on the roof enhanced this security; while everything outside his four walls seemed a sweet shiver of excluded danger.

"I've agreed to finish Urquhart's book," he said, "and he's paid me in advance. But the chances are that I'll have to lend this money to Mother. Anyhow, I'm not going to think about it tonight. I'll wrap it round Jason's idol for the present . . . then *you* won't want to meddle with it any more than I do!"

Saying this, he opened the dresser-drawer with a jerk

and thrust Mr. Urquhart's cheque under the stomach of the prostrate god of rain.

Though he did all this with an air of careless decision, it was with several anxious side-glances that he scanned Gerda's face as he washed his hands in the little tin basin.

This process of washing his hands before a meal was one that he always prolonged with elaborate punctiliousness; and now, as he played with the iridescent bubbles and squeezed the yellow soap into a foaming lather, he could not help making a grimace into the little square mirror that Gerda had hung above the sink, as the thought crossed his mind that although he had sold half his soul that morning and was intending to sell the other half of it tomorrow night, he could still enjoy with childish satisfaction the pleasure of sitting down to supper, in his own kitchen, opposite his own girl!

As far as he could read her thoughts Gerda had decided to remain entirely non-committal over the matter of the two hundred, postponing, he suspected, any struggle about it until she realized more clearly which way the wind was going to blow. She gave him a lively description, as they sat down to their meal, of a visit she had had that morning from her mother and Lobbie. It transpired that Lob was to start his first term at the Grammar School when the holidays ended, and that Mrs. Torp, in complete ignorance of the ways of such places, was assuming that her son-in-law would be her son's constant and indulgent preceptor!

When their supper was finished Gerda leaned over and reached for an open book that lay on the edge of

the dresser. Lighting a cigarette as frowningly and awkwardly as if it had been the first she had ever smoked, she pulled the lamp towards her. "I've got to an exciting part," she said. And then, a second later, "I think 'Theodoric the Icelander' is the nicest book I've ever read!"

Her fair head, for she was a little short-sighted, sank down over the open volume; and Wolf, still seated opposite her on his kitchen-chair, was left to stare at the polished handles of the drawer that contained both Mukalog and the cheque.

His pleasant relapse into the comfort of virtue ebbed and vanished with the girl's absorption in her story.

Tomorrow . . . tomorrow . . . what *would* the upshot be? He sat bolt upright in his chair, holding a match-box in one hand and an unlit cigarette in the other. It was as if he were secretly praying for some unexpected external event, like a sudden uncharted reef, to break up the dark-swelling wave upon which he was being carried.

Soon he let both match-box and cigarette slip from his fingers, and, lifting his elbows upon the table, pressed his knuckles against his closed eyeballs. How they throbbed . . . those eyeballs . . . and what surprising shapes and colours those were, that appeared before his inner vision!

With a sort of sullen curiosity he watched those floating geometric shapes—green and purple and yellow and violet. "Each of these," he thought, "might be a world. Perhaps it *is* . . . and from the point of view of the Absolute just as important a world as this of ours!"

And then something completely different from geometric shapes appeared. Well enough he knew what *this* was . . . even before its lineaments had grown distinct. . . . The unhappy one of the Waterloo steps!

"Very well, then," he muttered under his breath, taking his hands from his face. "Very well, then, I shall see thee at Philippi!"

And as he folded his hands behind his head, looking across at Gerda and her Icelander, he set himself to curse the misery the human mind can go through because of this wretched necessity for action, for decision, for using what is called "the will." What did a person feel when the hard little crystal of his inmost life lost its integrity? What did food taste like, what did the warmth of fire mean to such a derelict? A Wolf who had gone back to *that book* . . . a Wolf who had seduced Christie . . . how could such a Wolf ever swing his stick, ever drink up "the sweet of the morning," ever feel the wind upon his face, with the old thrill?

Among the fragments of their meal his eye now fell upon a chicken-bone upon Gerda's plate, the last surviving relic of their meagre Christmas dinner. It was a "wishing-bone," from which Gerda, as they had pulled it between them, had won the right of "wishing"; and it lay there now, with the library-cover of "Theodoric the Icelander" just touching its forked and bare forlornness. But the sight of it sent Wolf's mind upon a long, fantastic quest. He seemed compelled, by some hypnosis proceeding from the wishing-bone, to make a Domesday Survey of all the trivial and repulsive objects he had ever passed by. Wolf and the wishing-bone set out to-

gether, in fact, upon a pilgrimage through the limbo of the world's rubbish-heaps.

Some of the objects were commonplace enough; others were fantastic. The scavenging-obsession of the wishing-bone allowed him to omit nothing that he could rake up out of a thousand obscure half-memories. The thumbnail-parings of a nameless old tramp sitting by a milestone on the Bristol road . . . the amber-coloured drop of rheum in the eye of a one-eyed door-keeper of a house of ill-fame in Soho . . . the torn-off corner of a butcher's advertisement lying in a gutter outside St. Paul's . . . the left arm of a china doll thrown on an ash-can under the west door of Ely Cathedral . . . the yellow excrement of a dog, shaped like a dolphin, adhering to the north wall of the Brighton Aquarium . . . the white spittle of a drunken cabman outside the station at Charing Cross . . . the hair-clippings from an unknown head, wrapped in a French comic paper and dropped in the public urinal at Eastbourne . . . such things, and others like them, all parts and parcels of what humanity *sets itself to forget,* did Wolf and the wishing-bone redeem from the limbo of obliterated memory and gather in a heap on the kitchen-table of Number Thirty-Seven Preston Lane!

Was it a sign that his "mythology" was already dying, that his mind became so easily servile to these rakings among the offscourings of the earth?

He struggled to shake off this curious morbidity; and in order to give Gerda a further chance of enjoying "Theodoric" in peace, he rose from the table now, and carrying their plates and dishes to the sink in the corner,

he set himself to wash them up with a slow and concentrated nicety. This mechanical task, at which he was inordinately clumsy, acted as an opiate to his mind. He felt, as he proceeded to dry those various objects, as if, with the wet cloth he held, he were obliterating much more than ever the wishing-bone had called up!

Finally, before Gerda and he put out their lamp, he deliberately endeavoured to prolong this pleasant numbness by drinking several stiff glasses of gin. This gin had been their Christmas present from Mr. Torp; and most friendly did Wolf feel to his father-in-law, when under its beneficent influence he slipped into bed beside the already unconscious girl.

"It's the best of all drinks," he thought. "By God, I'll be economical with it! It's a good thing Bob Weevil doesn't like it."

His mind seemed preternaturally clear now, as he lay on his back listening to Gerda's soft breathing and to the intermittent wind-gusts that kept tossing into that darkened room a brackish odour from the far-off Sedgemoor marshes.

"It's the stream of life itself that is important," he thought, "not any particular event or emotion! Just to be thrillingly happy over a crowd of little half-remembered, half-forgotten sensations . . . that's the whole thing. And it has got in it something much more than that . . . something more spiritual than anyone knows. It has effects beyond the visible world. It needs an effort of will as great as what saints and artists use! Oh, if only I could find words for this . . . but I never shall, I never shall."

He stretched himself stiff and tense as he lay there,

while like an aerial landscape, luminous and yet minutely distinct, his vision of things gathered, clarified, mounted up, as if out of a transparent sea.

"The stream of life is made of little things," he said to himself. "To forget the disgusting ones and fill yourself with the lovely ones . . . that's the secret. What a fool I was to try and make my soul into a round, hard crystal! It's a lake . . . *that's* what it is . . . with a stream of shadows drifting over it . . . like so many leaves!"

Instinctively he avoided any definite thought of Urquhart's cheque and of the morrow's supper. But they were both there. They were like a dull throbbing at the back of his closed eyes.

"What people call 'futility,' " so his thoughts ran on, "is just the failure of great emotions. But it's a good thing for them to fail. Let them fail! Only when they fail does the under-tide of life itself rise to the surface. Futility is the transparency of the lake . . . what makes the shadows fall and float . . . beautiful . . . like leaves!"

Before he knew that sleep was anywhere near him, he sank, just as he was, like a drifting log in his own leaf-strewn lake, into the region where the living are as the dead. But the suppressed intention at the back of his brain awoke him into full consciousness again, just before dawn.

There was by this time an indescribable chilliness in the room, different from the chilliness of the rain and the wind as they had been when he had gone to sleep. Lying with hunched shoulders and hooked knees close to

Gerda's side, his arm flung across the girl's body, he felt through every nerve this new feeling in the air.

His human soul seemed to leave its body and pass out of that small room into the great air-spaces that suspended themselves above the West Country. The interior chilliness of the darkness as the delaying dawn drew him forth, had that within it which corresponded to the spring of the year; only, *this* was the spring of one winter's night! There was a greenish, wet-growing stir in that dawn's approach; and the whole night about him seemed to shudder and contract like the cramped shuddering of an unborn child.

Not a muscle did he move as he lay there, hunched and inert, his stiff fingers folded around Gerda's right breast like the fingers of an infant around the toy with which it has been soothed to sleep. But within his curved skeleton his mind was lucid with the lucidity of something starkly at bay.

"Mr. Malakite at Weymouth" and that piece of paper wrapped about Mukalog had become part of his very brain . . . part of the machinery of his brain . . . but his mind was grappling now with something more than machinery. More? Yes! There was more . . . somewhere . . . more . . . than just this dawn-chilled Space, through which, like a wingless, tail-less, beakless bird's head, with oceans for eyes, the earth he lived upon lurched, darted, oscillated, shivered, spun!

WOLF'S INMOST SOUL SEEMED TORN UP, LIKE A PIECE of turf under a sharp ploughshare, as, driven by a power beyond his resistance, he put one foot in front of the other in his obstinate march to the Malakite house.

As he moved on past the shop-windows oblivious of everything but the drama within him, he tried to anticipate the result of what he was projecting. His "mythology" had always implied for him some sort of mystic participation in a deep occult struggle going on in the hidden reservoirs of Nature. Stripped of it, there would be nothing left but a stoical endurance—endurance of his own misery and a few attempts to soften the misery of others! He would be left with a soul that had the power of moving his arms and legs, the power of throwing itself into other people's tortured nerves—and that would be all! He would be able to deny himself this and that for the sake of these people, paying back what he owed, sharing the burden of the cruelty of the ultimate Power—but that would be all! The old Wolf, the old, obsessed medium for lovely, magical, invisible influences, would be gone for ever!

And even now, if he could only stiffen his will to leave Christie early that night, he might save what he was losing. Oh, what cruelty the Power behind life possessed, to transfix him upon such a dilemma! Oh, what cruelty it possessed! Well, he would defy it. That was the word. He would defy it. Whether he chose his "my-

thology" or whether he chose his satisfaction, this ultimate thing was something so inhuman, that defiance was the only retort! If he chose his "mythology" it would not be in submission to *this cause of all suffering.* It would be a league with invisible forces that resembled himself—compassionate forces, that were also defying this inhuman thing. Dante had said, "*E la sua voluntade è nostra pace.*" He would reverse this saying. The will of the power behind life was clearly that human nerves should be confronted by monstrous, hideous dilemmas. To the end of his days he would protest! He would be the champion of human nerves against this ultimate tormentor. If he kept his self-respect and left Christie in peace, he would use his "mythology" to defy this power. If he seduced Christie and lost his life-illusion, he would still defy this power. . . .

His mechanical advance had brought him now to the turn into the narrower street. In three minutes he would be in Christie's room! He took off his hat and looked up at the drifting rain-clouds. The gusty rain made it impossible for him to keep his eyes open; but with his eyelids tight shut he cursed the power behind life. "You Mukalog up there!" he muttered. "You scurvy Mukalog up there!"

It was not ten minutes past nine by the small clock upon Christie's mantelpiece when she and Wolf returned to her sitting-room and closed the door, after washing up the supper-things in the little alcove between that room and the girl's bedroom.

Wolf sank down in the chair by the fire which faced the window, and leisurely lit a cigarette; while Christie,

seated upon a four-legged stool opposite him, a stool embroidered with pale early-Victorian pansies by the hands of her mother, leaned forward towards the bars, and with a thin outstretched bare arm prodded the coals into flame.

This done, she impetuously rose to her feet; and taking a "spill" from one of the blue vases that stood on each side of the clock, she also lit a cigarette. And then, resettling herself upon the stool, one lean arm encircling her knees and the other holding the cigarette, she turned her head round and surveyed the tumbled litter of books, some open and some shut, that covered the lavender-coloured sofa.

"No; I've tired of 'Tristram Shandy,'" she said. "In fact, I've got at present a reaction against all those old books which are so entirely *men's books*—full of masculine prejudices, masculine vices, masculine complacency! You know, Wolf, I think it's such a pity that the best old books should all be written by men. What I'd like to read would be an Elizabethan Jane Austen, a Jacobean Emily Brontë," an eighteenth-century George Eliot. It's so annoying to me that the best women writers all belong to the time when the custom had stopped of calling a spade a spade."

There was something so quaint to his mind in Christie's fragile identity being stirred by the urge of drastic realism, that he looked at her in amazement.

"They're not so reticent now, are they?" he said.

But it was difficult for him to give his full attention to this dialogue between them. Another dialogue, far more important, was going on in his own mind. With

concentrated interest he had already noticed that she was wearing brown silk stockings under her thin brown skirt. The sight of her bare arms made him shiver at the thought of her slipping off those stockings! It seemed absurd that he dared not even kneel down and unbutton the straps of her little-girl black slippers! The thought, "She's never had a lover . . . no one has ever undressed her . . . she doesn't know what it is to be idolized from head to foot," ran like ravishing little drops of quicksilver through his tingling nerves. "Under that brown dress, under all she's got on, she's as slim and slippery as a bluebell-stalk pulled up by the root!"

"I wouldn't call them reticent today," he repeated aloud. But his mind raced back over the whole course of his life in Dorset as he looked at her now . . . so virginal . . . and so free from conscience!

Far more—oh, far more than Gerda, who seemed like a recognized, an *accepted* portion of his destiny—did this evasive little being seem to embody all his hovering, intangible dreams! It was hard to shake off a quivering cloud, beyond the cloud of cigarette-smoke, that dimmed his vision, as he looked at her. How he longed to snatch away that brown dress, wintry-withered as it was, that hid her from him!

"Not reticent, perhaps," she was saying. "But it's utterly different in these days, Wolf. They don't do it for simple, mischievous pleasure. They do it for principle's sake, for the sake of science, for the sake of a new fashion in art. It's all premeditated and deliberate."

He began to feel such an overpowering desire to seize upon her now, that the idea of losing his life-illusion

seemed like tearing a mask from his face, a mask that hurt his flesh.

"How does your own writing go, Chris?" he asked in a forced, queer voice.

She reached over to the sofa and piled "Tristram Shandy" on the top of "Humphrey Clinker," and the "Anatomy of Melancholy" on the top of "Tristram Shandy." As she did this she smiled sideways at him, while the smoke from her cigarette rose up as if from a hidden crucible of incense pressed against her knees. He had noticed before, that she never said anything important to him except while making some physical movement to distract attention from her words!

Reaching over still further, in order to balance the "Urn-Burial" on the top of the "Anatomy," "I've finished," she murmured, "my seventh chapter."

"Is it a real story, then?" he asked, wondering if she would yield to him without a struggle if he took her quickly by the wrists.

Her defensive gesture this time, as she responded to his question, was to flick off a small grey ash upon the cover of "Hydriotaphia." He had long ago observed with an amused interest what a dislike to the use of ash-trays she had.

"I hope it's real!" she murmured, in her most straw-like voice.

"The best thing would be," he thought to himself, "just to take hold of her by her hands and lift her up!" Aloud he said, "What's its title, if you don't mind my asking that?"

"Guess, Wolf!" she said, without a smile. Indeed, she

had never looked graver or more concerned than she looked then. "I thought of it when I was out marketing in High Street the other day."

"The Grey Feather?" he flung out, as he rose with a bound from his chair and groped on the floor. He had caught sight of the feather lying there at his feet. It must have fluttered out when she moved the book. As he picked it up, his contact with Christie's floor made him think of Gerda's floor . . . which had so different a carpet!

There was a moment, as he replaced the feather, when a featherweight decided it. What he fancied made him pause was a sudden memory of the confiding repose of Gerda's expression as she bent so closely over "Theodoric the Icelander"; but when he recalled all this later, the conclusion he came to was that the touch of the feather itself had restrained him!

" 'The Grey Feather' . . . is your title," he repeated, while Christie managed with fair success to conceal her face in a dense cloud of smoke.

"No," she said, "I've called it 'Slate.' "

The astonishment with which he received this piece of news was quite genuine.

"Because of the view from your window?" he enquired.

"No. Because of——"

But the creaking of his wicker-chair, as he resumed his seat with a helpless groan, drowned her faint words.

"I didn't hear, Chris," he said. But he knew by the way she raised her chin that nothing would induce her to repeat what she had just uttered.

"What I'm trying to do, Wolf," she went on, in a tone that seemed to him to have in it something like a challenge, "is to express a point of view entirely feminine!"

"It will be the view of a feminine Elemental, then," he said to himself. "Does she think that she's like the rest of them? God! It'll be the view of a sylph in the Lunt mists, or of Jason's Nymph in Lenty Pond!"

"All the clever ones nowadays just copy men," she remarked, with the same nuance of defiance, holding her chin high and sitting very straight upon her stool. "And none of the men themselves, or hardly any of them, *enjoy* writing outrageous things. They do it from artistic duty . . . and that's why it's all so different from reality, don't you think so? And so dull, as well as so disgusting! Just imagine what it would be like, Wolf, to have a Jane Austen ready to write of the most scandalous things! She'd write really mischievously, with zest and satisfaction, not like a solemn scientific journal."

"Well, I'm sure I wish you luck with your 'Slate,' Chris! Don't sponge out anything, though, I beg you. I mean, don't tear anything up, however much you revise!"

Even while he was uttering this harmless encouragement, some devilish analytical self-consciousness in him was noting the fact that he didn't like the thought of Christie's appreciation of any sort of Rabelaisianism. "Christ! What a selfish, lecherous demon I am!" he said to himself. "I suppose I want her response to *my love-making* to be her one and only awareness of the amorous element in life!"

He became at this moment intensely anxious to clear up certain things in his own mind.

"What feather *is* that, Christie, that you keep in your 'Urn-Burial'?"

She looked at him very straight now, with the eager, level stare of an interested child.

"A heron's," she answered. And then, as if for the mere pleasure of repeating the word: "A heron's, Wolf. I found it just exactly a year ago . . . two months before I first saw you. I was walking by myself in those Lunt meadows that you see from the lower road to King's Barton. You know where I mean? I was walking by myself along the river-bank."

Wolf continued to listen intently to every word, as the girl went on with her story; but even as he listened, his mind was still struggling with the shock of finding himself so shamefully possessive as to dislike the idea of her encountering any sort of amorousness where it was disassociated from himself. "I really am scandalous," he thought. "I'd like her to be virginal in mind, body, soul, spirit, intellect, nerves, humour!"

His thoughts, before she had finished her story, had wandered a second time from what she was saying. "Is this interest of hers in these shameless books inherited from the old man?" he thought. "Is it a vice in her, like my own?" And his mind recalled the trembling, drunken ecstasy with which he had read that appalling book in the library-window.

"And so I picked up the feather out of the mud and brought it home," she concluded; "but whether the heron caught another minnow, or whether the hawk frightened

it away for the rest of the day, I shall never know."

"I wish you'd let me see a page . . . just a single page of 'Slate,' " he said presently. "Somehow I cannot imagine the manuscript of a real story of yours. I cannot see you writing it, Chris, nor how you would hold your pen."

The colour went to Christie's cheeks. "Oh, Wolf," she cried, "don't . . . don't ever ask me to let you see what I write! I love to tell you about it; but I think I'd die if you ever saw it."

"Oh, all right . . . all right, sweetheart," he said soothingly. "You talk as if I asked to see your shift! By the way, Chris, I suppose you don't realize that I never *have* seen that room in there where you spend your nights?"

Christie smiled with intense amusement at this. She rose lightly, without a trace of embarrassment, took a candle from the mantelpiece, threw her cigarette into the fire, and opened the door into the alcove. A second door on the further side of this recess she opened with the same docile unconcern, standing aside to let him enter, while the flame of her candle flickered in the draught.

Her apparent complete freedom from any self-consciousness as she did all this had a complicated effect upon Wolf's mood. It made it possible for him to sit down upon her bed, and to stare in silence at the darkness between the white curtains of her window. It made it possible for him to ponder as to what her feelings and thoughts were, night by night, left to herself in this oblong little room. It made it possible for him to ask

her whether she used the green lamp he saw standing on the chest of drawers on one side of the mirror, or contented herself with a couple of candles which, in old-fashioned Dresden candlesticks, stood on a little table by the bed's head. But it also seemed to make any attempt at love-making curiously difficult!

Christie slid down into a chair between the little table and the window; and as she did so she explained to him that she used the lamp till she was actually in bed, and then lit the candles to read by.

"I've often wondered," she said to him, "whether you can see my light as you come home from King's Barton."

"And I've often wondered," he answered, "which of the lights I've seen from the top of Babylon Hill was yours."

"We neither of us know," she said sadly.

"Neither of us," he echoed.

The flame of the candle she had picked up from the parlour-mantelpiece was now blowing sideways, and the grease guttering down. "I'll light the lamp and then you'll see how it looks," she said eagerly. "It's not an ordinary green. It's a peculiar kind of green. I wish we did know whether it could be seen from Babylon Hill!"

Wolf turned half-round on her bed and let his shoulders rest against the woodwork above the pillow. There he watched her as she stood with her back to him at the chest of drawers, busied with the lamp. As the green light slowly awakened into being, there came over him an overpowering sense of this fleeting moment. Christie's

small head, dark and dainty in that emerald-coloured glow, the shadowy nape of her little neck, the dusky fall of her straight sepia-brown dress, hovered before him at the end of that white bed, like things seen in a magic crystal. He dared not breathe lest he should break the spell! It may have been that unusual greenish light, glimpsed across the old-fashioned counterpane stretched before him like an expanse of shining water, or it may have been a hovering emanation from some old forgotten dream, unfolding, like an invisible nocturnal flower, from the girl's pillow. He could not explain it. But whatever it was, the sight of her there, bent down over that lamp's wick, enthralled him with a feeling he had never anticipated, with a sense of the possibilities of *new* feelings beyond anything he had known! When his normal consciousness came back to him, it came back with a heavy sigh; and with it came the thought, like the galloping of a black horse against the horizon, that when this girl was dead and he was dead, *that* was the absolute end! Dreams of anything but of such an end were fancies—pitiful human fancies! Moments as perfect as this *required* death as their inevitable counterpoise.

With a furtive movement of his shoulders he suddenly found himself meeting the girl's steady gaze, as her face looked out at him from the little square looking-glass. With her hand still regulating the newly-lit wick of the green lamp, she was staring directly at him out of this looking-glass, staring with a fixed, calm, dreamy stare, like that of one whose mind is full of the end of some exciting book, just laid down.

"Take down your hair, Christie," he said in a low voice, as he met this strange gaze. "I've never seen you with your hair down."

She gave him the most whimsical smile at this; but it flickered away as quickly as it came, and a frown appeared between her arched eyebrows.

"I don't mind," she murmured, with a sigh, "if you really want me to. But what's the use of it, Wolf? My hair's not pretty. It'll probably spoil your illusion of me."

But Wolf's heart had begun to beat now with the old unconquerable beating, the beat of the rise and fall of the sea, drawing close to its destined shore. "Take it down, Chrissie. I must see you with it down!"

Calmly and quietly, having given the shiny little knob of the lamp its final adjustment, she lifted her thin bare arms to her head and began to take out her hairpins. Her movements as she did this had the obedient docility, humble and submissive, of an Arabian slave.

Wolf's position, as he sat on the edge of the bed, with his back against the woodwork, had grown extremely uncomfortable. Nothing would have induced him to rest his dirty boots upon that glimmering counterpane; but his body was twisted askew in consequence of this self-denial, and the woodwork hurt his head. This physical discomfort had the effect of destroying what remained of that moment of vision, and of once more rousing in his nerves a spasm of the old tyrannous lust.

From that little oval head by the green lamp the waves of dusky hair slipped down now to the girl's slim waist.

"Oh, Chris, it's beautiful! You look perfectly beauti-

ful!" he cried hoarsely, sitting up straight on the edge of the bed and stretching out one of his hands towards her with a fumbling movement. "Come here, Chris, and let me see you closer!"

Moving calmly, and with perfect self-possession, she came towards him till only a yard of floor divided them. Then she stopped, fixing him with the same dreamy stare as if she had been walking in her sleep.

He got up upon his feet now; and between the light of the candle in the silver candlestick, which she had put down upon the little table at the h-d's head, and the light of the green lamp upon the chest of drawers, they stood looking at each other, like two ensorcerized automatons under the power of an invisible magician.

She had pulled the green lamp, after lighting it, to the edge of the chest of drawers, so that its globe was now reflected in the looking-glass, a reflection that seemed to push backwards in some mysterious way everything else reflected there. The whole contents, indeed, of the illuminated mirror seemed to fall into a long, dwindling perspective, like the outlet from a shadowy cave, a tunnel-like outlet, full of mosses and ferns and tree-roots, which were all silhouetted against the round little circle of empty sky at the end.

Contrary to his own will, which would fain have hypnotized her to approach him, he found himself glancing aside from Christie's steady look, very much as a wild animal, hesitating whether to leap or not, might turn aside from the conscious expectancy of its prey.

This avoidance of her eyes gave him a moment's respite, during which his glance plunged into the receding

depths of that looking-glass, depths lit up by the lamp as if by the swollen green bud of a luminous water-lily.

Round that green globe little phosphorescent rays flickered and darted. "If I meet her eyes again," he thought, "she will come to me. She will let me undress her."

A strange fear came upon him; and he felt as if he couldn't take his eyes away from the looking-glass. Those darting radiations became like the transparent moons, surrounded by dim haloes, that move along at the bottom of ponds under the sticky feet of skimming water-flies. In the turmoil of his agitation, with the sense upon him that this was the crisis towards which his life had been moving for weeks and months, that mirror seemed no longer to reflect Christie's bedroom. It seemed to him to be reflecting the mysterious depths of Lenty Pond!

His mind felt as if it were being torn asunder, so terrible was the swaying of his tight-rope of indecision! On the one hand he knew that in a moment he must draw down upon the bed this hushed, submissive figure, standing thus patient and docile before him. On the other hand, a mounting fear—a fear that had unspeakable awe in it, that had a supernatural shudder in it—held him back. Beat by beat of his heart it held him back. It tugged at him like a chain fixed to a post.

"Slip off that sad-looking dress, I beg you, Chris! Let me see you all in white!"

Had he whispered those words aloud? Had he only *thought* them?

The form he loved best of all was here by his side . . . pliant . . . soft . . . submissive. This bed was *her*

bed. They two were alone, without the faintest risk of interruption. Long ago had the last train from Weymouth come in!

It was Christie herself who made the next move. Naturally and easily she slid down by his side on the edge of the bed . . . and then . . . what was this? Had those thin bare arms been raised to her shoulders to untie the fastenings of her dress?

But still he was staring, obstinately, almost rudely—staring past her drooping profile into that devilish mirror!

The thought hit him with a kind of mockery how he had played with that lovely Shakespearean phrase about a white peeled willow-wand on his journey down to Dorset. Well, he was in a world of whiteness now. Phantasmal was the glimmer of her white counterpane . . . phantasmal the whiteness of her profile against the silky fall of loosened hair. There were white reflections in that mirror too! It was as if a supernatural musician had suddenly begun playing a "White Mass"!

"Slip off that sad-looking dress, Chris!" Had he really uttered those words aloud? Or had it been no more than his heart speaking to his heart? Was one of her fragile shoulders free now of that dress . . . and become white, as everything else was white, at that fatal moment?

"You're looking at my mirror, Wolf?" Ah! She was speaking to him at last! But why did not the sound of her voice relax the tension? "It's old, that looking-glass. It belonged to my mother."

His eyes seemed to be dimmed now by a film of gauzy mist, which, as it floated before him, made everything

vague and fluctuating. And then—without a second's warning—there appeared, at the end of the reflected perspective in that mirror on the chest of drawers, the lamentable countenance of the man on the Waterloo steps!

The pitiful face looked straight into his face, and it was in vain that he struggled to turn away from it.

All the sorrows in the world seemed incarnated in that face, all the oppressions that are done under the sun, all the outrages, all the wrongs! They seemed to cry shame upon him, these things; as if the indecision that tore at his vitals were a portion of whatever it was that caused such suffering. He instinctively lifted his hands to his eyes and pressed his knuckles against his eyeballs. "Chris!" he cried hoarsely . . . "Little Chris! my little Chris!" . . . just as if her form were being carried down some receding distance like a lost Eurydice.

She moved up closely to his side then, and touched his clenched hands with her own, not trying to pull them away from his eyes, but just laying her own fingers over them. "What is it, Wolf?" she whispered with vibrating alarm. "What is it?"

He reeled awkwardly to one side, and, snatching his hands away from her, sank down against her pillow. For a second or two the struggle within him gave him a sensation as if the very core of his consciousness—that "hard little crystal" within the nucleus of his soul—were breaking into two halves! Then he felt as if his whole being were flowing away in water, whirling away, like a mist of rain, out upon the night, over the roofs, over the darkened hills! There came a moment's sinking into nothingness, into a grey gulf of non-existence; and then

it was as if a will within him that was beyond thought, gathered itself together in that frozen chaos and rose upwards—rose upwards like a shining-scaled fish, electric, vibrant, taut, and leapt into the greenish-coloured vapour that filled the room!

The part of his consciousness that remained still clouded seemed quivering with a vision of the girl with her hands raised to her shoulders in the act of slipping off her dusky dress; but as his full awareness returned to him he saw that she had left his side and was standing by the green lamp, her eyes fixed reproachfully upon him out of the foreground of that mirror of her mother's —of that woman's who believed in spirits—and her fingers occupied in fastening up her hair.

Automatically, and with a hand that shook, like a man's who has seen a ghost, he took out his packet of cigarettes and lit a match.

His cigarette alight, he got up from the bed; and walking with shaky knees across the room—he felt far more dizzy in the head than under the power of Mr. Urquhart's Malmsey!—he offered his packet to her. But Christie, with eyes whose pupils were so large that they completely dominated her face, refused his offer with a wordless shake of her head.

The girl's hands seemed to him to be shaking too, as she thrust in the last hairpins and pressed her two palms against the sides of her small head.

"Come," she said, "I'll put out the lamp now, and we'll go back to the sitting-room."

When they were back by the fire, they both instinctively drew their chairs close up to the bars and held

out their arms towards the warmth. Long-drawn shivers kept running through Wolf's body, as if he had been drenched in floods of ice-cold rain; and he felt certain that the slender form by his side was experiencing an identical sensation.

At the moment of seating herself there—it was in a chair this time, and not upon her four-legged stool—she had given Wolf a look that filled him with self-reproach. "I have hurt her feelings," he said to himself, "in the one unpardonable way."

Listlessly taking up the silver-knobbed poker from the side of the fender, he broke a great smouldering lump of coal into blazing flame.

"Did I," he said to himself, "actually beg her to undress, and then, as soon as she began to do it, act like a madman?"

"I can't have done that," he repeated. "I can't have done that to my little Chris."

"*The rain seems to have cleared off, doesn't it?*"

As he made this remark, he felt as if not he at all, but some sardonic Lord Carfax, were making it, in cold-blooded mockery!

"I hadn't noticed it," she answered faintly; and then, turning her head towards the window, "Yes," she said, "it seems to have cleared up."

"I must be," thought Wolf, "the most heartless, self-centred brute in Dorsetshire. Mr. Manley must be a considerate man of honour compared with me."

"The wind's still blowing," he said aloud. "Wind without rain," he said, "is a different thing altogether from wind *with* rain. Don't you think so, Chris?"

"Very different," murmured the girl, almost inaudibly.

"If I'd made love to her, in there, on her bed," he thought, "would it have meant *everything?* And if it *had* . . . would we have been miserable like this, or happy?" He turned his chair round and reached over to the sofa, picking up the volume of Sir Thomas Browne.

"Let me read to you a little, Chris dear," he said gently.

"As you like, Wolf," came the faint response, as she propped her chin on the palms of her two hands and stared into the fire.

He turned the pages of the book, sadly and slowly, carefully moving the grey heron's-feather to the middle of the "Religio," where it would not be disturbed.

When he came to one of those majestic, far-echoing passages—passages that had always struck him as superior, after their fashion, to anything else in literature, except certain single lines in Milton—he set himself to intone the familiar cadences in a low, monotonous sing-song.

He dared not give more than a furtive glance now and then at the delicate profile beside him; but his impression was—whether a true or a false one he could not be sure—that Christie was not unaffected by those plangent, cosmogonic litanies.

As for himself, as he read on, it seemed to him that the bitterness of their fate did soften a little. These human contrarities, were they not, after all, so much sandalwood, so much cinnamon, burned in the bonfires of chance, but liberating a sweet, strange smoke, purged of the worst misery of despair? "But the iniquity of obliv-

ion," he read, "blindly scattereth her poppy, and deals with the memory of men without distinction to merit of perpetuity. Who can but pity the founder of the pyramids? Herostratus lives that burnt the temple of Diana, he is almost lost that built it. Time hath spared the epitaph of Adrian's horse, confounded that of himself. In vain we compute our felicities by the advantage of our good names, since bad have equal durations, and Thersites is like to live as long as Agamemnon. Who knows whether the best of men be known, or whether there be not more remarkable persons forgot, than any that stand remembered in the known account of time? . . . The number of the dead long exceedeth all that shall live. The night of time far surpasseth the day, and who knows when was the equinox? . . . In vain do individuals hope for immortality, or any patent from oblivion, in preservations below the moon; men have been deceived even in their flatteries above the sun, and studied conceits to perpetuate their names in heaven. The various cosmography of that part hath already varied the names of contrived constellations; Nimrod is lost in Orion, and Osyris in the Dog-star."

As he murmured these rhythmical dirges with his lips and got a kind of comfort from them and a doubtful hope that Christie did too, his own mind—like hers no doubt—went circling the bruised ground of their trouble, of this wretched dilemma of his, like a dragon-fly hovering over a stagnant pool.

"I must have," he kept thinking, "the most selfish and heartless soul in Dorsetshire. Mr. Manley of Willum's Mill must be far more aware of other people's feelings

than I am! Oh, God, what would Carfax say *now?* He'd say, 'So this is your delicacy—this is your precious consideration—to hurt a girl's feelings by your bloody equivocations far worse than by all the ravishings in the world!'" As little by little the opiate of Sir Thomas's rhythms soothed his remorse, he shook away the thought of Carfax. But Jason's "Lord in London" had no sooner vanished than his father's skull took up the tale. "Your metaphysical virtue, my most moral son, has caused more unhappiness this night to this Love of yours than all my sensuality ever caused to any woman! And what's all the fuss about? Nature can right herself. Nature can justify herself. It's these withdrawings and shirkings that do the harm!"

As he went on intoning the sonorous sentences with half his attention, Wolf seemed to see himself, under those imaginary strictures, reduced to the meanness of a cowardly hypocrite. His mother's hard, gallant voice joined in the chorus. "I have only one word for you, Wolf," he heard her say, "and that is contempt!"

But underneath all these fanciful upbraidings, underneath the real comfort of his chanting of "Hydriotaphia," there steadily went on gathering itself together, in the subsoil of Wolf's being, a certain obstinate recovery of his secret soul.

"It was my snatching at you like that," he whispered to Christie, in an unspoken dialogue, "that was the wicked thing! I should have made you far more unhappy if I hadn't seen that face. That face saved us both, and Gerda too!"

What kept hitting him to the heart as he glanced

sideways at Christie's profile was its innocence. "She doesn't look like a grown woman whose deepest self-respect has been outraged," he said to himself. "She looks like a proud little girl whose hidden fairy-tale has been violated by some heavy-footed elder."

Wolf was honest enough with himself, in the midst of all these criss-cross communings, to recognize that there was, somewhere within him, a furtive upwelling of profound gratitude to the gods. His life-illusion *had* been given back to him! He was still the same Wolf Solent who had seen that face on the steps, who had seen that animal feeding in the paddock at Basingstoke, who had heard the milk-cans clattering on the platform at Sandbourne Port. He would not have to return to Preston Lane, to take up his burden, with his soul a shapeless lump of whale's blubber! He was still himself. He was still the old Wolf, whose philosophy—such as it was—kept its hand on the rudder.

"O Christie, O Christie!" he cried to her in his heart, "I couldn't have been any good to you, I couldn't have been myself with you any more, if that face in your glass hadn't stopped me! It would have changed everything, Chris! It would have ruined everything."

The inner voice of self-dialogue died down, as the outer voice of his monotonous intoning sank into silence; and the only sound in the room was the ticking of the clock and the faint, weird whisper of the wind in the chimney.

"Christie," he said aloud; and so deep had been the silence, and so drowned had they both been in their

separate thoughts, that the syllables of her name seemed to fall into an invisible stretch of water.

She lifted her head from her hands and sat up straight, fixing her gaze upon him in the old, steady, unfaltering manner.

"Yes, Wolf?" she murmured.

"I want to tell you something, Christie."

As he spoke he couldn't help recalling the advice he had so often given to Darnley. He had told Darnley to explain everything to Mattie. Ah, it was easier to tell a person to explain everything than to do it oneself!

"I was reckless just now, Chris. I just snatched at the chance! It seemed so wonderful our being alone. But do you know what stopped me? Don't look like that, my precious! You'll understand when I tell you."

"What, Wolf?" she whispered.

"The day I left London from Waterloo Station, I saw a tramp on the steps there." As he uttered these simple words he experienced a most curious sensation. It was as if he were smashing with his clenched hand one of those glass coverings which on certain express-trains preserve from casual contact the electric bell that has the power of stopping the train. "It was a man," Wolf went on; "and the look on his face was terrible in its misery. It must have been a look of that kind on the face of someone—though *his* sufferers were children, weren't they? —that made Ivan Karamazov 'return the ticket.' But all this time down here—*that* was March the third—ten months of my life, I have remembered that look. It has become to me like a sort of conscience, a sort of test for everything I——" He stopped abruptly; for a spasm of

ice-cold integrity in his mind whispered suddenly, "Don't be dramatic now!"

"A test for everything you——" Christie repeated, showing more spirit in her expression than he had seen there since they returned to her sitting-room.

"Well, a test for tonight, anyway!" he added, with the flicker of a smile.

She pondered for a minute with puckered forehead.

"Enough to make me do up my hair again!" she said, while little wrinkles of amusement began to appear at the corners of her eyes.

He longed to ask her whether she had actually heard him beg her to take off her dress. He felt completely confused about that whole scene in her bedroom—confused as to what he had said and what he had only wished to say. Most of all he felt bewildered as to what *her* feelings had been between that green lamp and that glimmering counterpane! Had she really lifted those cold bare arms, that he looked at now, so calmly, to unfasten that old-fashioned gown?

He decided, as he glanced at her shoulders at this moment, that it *would* have been those particular fastenings she would have to unloose to get off the brown dress.

"I wonder whether our time together tonight," he said bitterly, "will have helped to make your writing more what you want it to be and less of the sort that 'copies men'?"

Christie gave a faint toss of her head and a faint tilt of her arched eyebrows. She got up from her seat and shook out her wide brown skirt with both hands. The

combination of these gestures filled Wolf with discomfort; for it was as if he had said to her something so brutal that she had to shake it from her petticoats, like burdock-seed or cuckoo-spit!

"I really was serious, Wolf," she said gravely, "when I told you just now that I'd almost sooner be dead than read to you anything I've written. I'm not even sure"—here she moved to the window and laid her hand on the sash of the closed pane—"that I shan't have to change its title now."

"I'll forget," said Wolf grimly. "It's the one thing I'm good at. I don't know now whether it was 'Slate' or 'Slates'!"

She turned away and lowered the top sash of the window, letting in a great gust of damp night-air.

The flame of the two candles on the chimneypiece blew wildly to the left; and the third one, in the flat silver candlestick, which she had brought back from the bedroom and had put down on her tea-table, began to gutter so extremely that a solid buttress of white grease formed itself against its side. Many loose pieces of paper were swept off their resting-places and were blown across the floor.

"I should think you'd aired your room enough already," remarked Wolf, pressing his knuckles against the volume of Sir Thomas so that it should not flutter as some of the books were doing.

"It smells of peat-bogs!" cried Christie excitedly, holding her head out of the window.

"It must be a south wind," he muttered, rising to his feet and moving one of the flickering candles so as to

adjust its guttering. "It must be blowing across from High Stoy; so it can't be peat you smell. I expect it's Lunt mud," he added morosely.

"Whatever it is, it smells delicious to me," she answered. "I wish we were both on the top of Melbury Bub!"

"I wish we were both at the bottom of Lenty Pond!" cried Wolf fiercely.

She turned at that, startled by his tone, and closed the window with a jerk.

"What is it, Wolf? Why did you say that? I should think I'm the one to say that, not you! Everything that's happened this evening has been exactly as you wanted it to happen, hasn't it? Why aren't you satisfied, then?"

The indignation in her tone was in a way a relief to him. "Let's have the worst," he thought. "Better in the open, while I'm here, than after I'm gone."

"Christie," he began, "I *have*, I know, thought only of myself . . . and yet I *do* love . . . you know I *do* love you!"

She looked at him scornfully.

"What you always do, Wolf, is to get out of things by accusing yourself . . . but if you really *felt* what other people feel, you would——" She broke off. "Oh, I don't know what you'd do! But at least you wouldn't be having it both ways."

Almost automatically, in spite of his remorse, something seemed to shut up within him like the shutting of a door that closes inwards.

"You're unfair——" he murmured.

Her eyes flashed. "Everything that happens," she cried

passionately, "is only something to be fixed up in your own mind. Once you've got it arranged *there*, the whole thing's settled . . . all is well. What you never seem to realize, for all your talk about 'good' and 'evil,' is that events are something outside any one person's mind. *Nothing's finished* . . . until you take in the feelings of everyone concerned! And what's more, Wolf," she went on, "not only do you refuse *really* to understand other people; but I sometimes think there's something in you yourself you're never even aware of, with all your self-accusations. It's this blindness to what you're really doing that *lets you off*, not your gestures, not even your sideway flashes of compassion."

A certain direct and childish humility in Wolf's nature came to the surface now under this attack.

"I expect all that you say is true, Christie dear, and that you are 'letting me off' yourself, in spite of what you say, lightly enough, if all were known. I'm a strange one, I suppose, and there it is!" He smiled ruefully. "But we're a fair pair when it comes to that, aren't we, my dear?" he added. "And all the same, if I hadn't seen that face——"

All the fire of her indignant arraignment seemed to die out at these words; and as her frail figure sank down on the rose-embroidered sofa, it seemed to be entirely divested of any spirit.

"If that man's face," she sighed wearily, "hadn't appeared to you I should have known tonight——"

He moved a step towards her.

"What's that, Christie?"

She leaned forward and her eyes narrowed between her

eyelids in an expression he had never seen on her face before. Then she continued, with a peculiar solemnity, almost like a young neophyte repeating a fatal ritual, "I should have known . . . tonight . . . what . . . now . . . I . . . shall . . . never . . . know!"

Staring at that little oval face, with that strange expression of finality upon it, he muttered huskily: "Christie, Christie, I love you. I love you." His voice had a groaning intensity, like that of a branch creaking in a storm. "I have been thinking only of myself. But I love you, Christie! I love you more than anyone in the world!"

She looked steadily into his face; and thus they waited, listening as before to the weird wailing sound that the wind was still making in the chimney.

This whistling of the wind brought suddenly to his mind that night at the pigsty when he had gathered together his deepest powers of resistance. He burst out with his favourite quotation from King Lear: "The goujeres shall devour them, flesh and fell, ere they shall make us weep! We'll see 'em starve first!"

He caught her hands and drew her up to her feet with a flashing look that was almost exultant: "He that parts us shall bring a brand from heaven and fire us hence like foxes!"

When he released her, a most whimsical and penetrating smile flickered over her face.

"I believe that something has happened tonight, or has not happened, that has taken some great weight off your mind!" she said. "Is that it? You look relieved and relaxed . . . different altogether from when we had

supper." . . . As she spoke she glanced at the clock, and his own eyes followed. Together they realized that it was a quarter to twelve.

"Oh, what will Gerda do?" he cried. "Christ! she'll be so vexed!" Blankly and irritably he looked at Christie; and in that expression of confused dismay there was—and he knew well enough there was—a faint tinge of reproach. But the girl was apparently too tired to notice this.

He was unable to catch the faintest irony upon her anxious, sympathetic face, as she let him out by the little side-door into the street. It did occur to him, however, as he strode rapidly down the echoing High Street, to wonder a little uneasily what kind of expression her face would wear when, alone in her bedroom, she looked at herself in her mirror. It was not, all the same, till he was opposite Mrs. Herbert's darkened house that the full poignancy of one of her remarks hit him with its barbed arrow-head. "I wonder if that *will* be her destiny," he thought.

"She was perfectly right about my selfishness, though. What a brute I am! Oh, my true-love Christie! What I do make you put up with in one way and another!"

He stopped when he reached the pigsty; for there was the light in Gerda's bedroom!

How different this home-coming was from all that he had expected! Well, that was the way things worked out! Instead of either of the great clear horns of Fate's dilemma, a sort of blurred and woolly forehead of the wild goat Chance!

He had managed to keep his life-illusion. His precious

"mythology" could live still. But at what expense?

"If you hadn't seen that face, I should have known tonight what now I shall never know!" O fool . . . fool . . . fool!

He crossed the road with dragging steps and opened the little iron gate as quietly as he could.

"I have thought only of myself," he muttered, as he shut the gate behind him; "and yet I love you, Christie. I love you! I love you!"

ALL THROUGH JANUARY AND FEBRUARY WOLF LIVED OUT his life with obstinate, stoical acceptance. He led his pupils at the Grammar School patiently and thoroughly through the reigns of Richard II and Henry IV.

His interviews with Christie had grown gentler and tenderer, though in some ways sadder, since that night of "Mr. Malakite at Weymouth"; and whatever deception of Gerda they still implied, Gerda herself gave no sign of suspicion with regard to them. His mother's new tea-shop, furnished with money borrowed at reasonable interest from Mr. Manley, had already proved itself a most promising venture; and Mrs. Solent's spirits, as the weeks passed by, were steadily rising. Wolf had worked at top-speed during those two months at Mr. Urquhart's book, writing every day between tea and their late supper at the little card-table by their parlour-fire, while Gerda read a series of romantic tales.

Almost to his own surprise—and certainly to Mr. Urquhart's—the "History of Dorset" showed signs of drawing to its close. Writing day after day from seven o'clock to ten o'clock, Wolf had come to hit upon a style of chronicling shameful events and disconcerting episodes that cost him less and less effort, as the weeks advanced. What really gave him impetus was a trick he discovered of diffusing his own resentment against the Power behind the universe into his commentaries upon these human aberrations unearthed by his employer! The more

disgust he felt for his task, the more saturnine his style became and the faster he wrote! Some of his sentences, when he revised them in cold blood, struck him as possessing quite a Swift-like malignity. He astonished himself by certain misanthropic outbursts. His habitual optimism seemed to fall away at such times, and a ferocious contempt for both men and women lay revealed, like a sullen, evil-looking, drained-out pond!

It was a surprise to him to find that this business of writing "immoral history" lent itself as well as it did to his natural method of expression. Each time he carried his new quota of pages up to King's Barton Manor, Mr. Urquhart seemed more delighted than the time before. "Stick to the facts . . . yellow Menelaus . . . stick to the facts . . . and we'll show 'em for all time . . . eh, me boy? . . . what our 'wold Darset' is made of!"

As February drew to an end, it became more and more probable that the anniversary of his reappearance in his native land—the third day of March—would be, as he wished to make it, the date of the book's completion.

As to Mr. Urquhart's cheque for two hundred pounds, it still remained where Wolf had first placed it—under the stomach of Mukalog at the bottom of that unused dresser-drawer in Gerda's kitchen.

Several events of importance occurred during those two months of exhausting work. One of these was the acceptance, under Lord Carfax's patronage, of a small volume of Jason's poetry by a well-known publishing-house. Not only were these poems accepted, but Jason received—so highly were they praised by the inner cir-

cles of London taste—the sum of fifty pounds as an advance royalty, an event which, when it occurred, a few weeks after the book was taken, seemed to impress the author himself a great deal more deeply than the many tactful letters that reached Pond Cottage from "that lord of yours in London."

Even more pleasing to Wolf than the success of Mr. Valley's suggestion about Jason's poetry was the upshot of his own advice to Darnley about his relations with Mattie. These two were definitely going to be married on the first Saturday in March, a day that happened to occur just one day after the anniversary of his own appearance on the scene. T. E. Valley had already begun reading their banns in the church; and on the strength of his approaching marriage, Darnley had obtained a small rise of salary at the Blacksod Grammar School.

On Saturday, February the twenty-fifth, Wolf awoke, after writing very late into the night, to a happy consciousness that Mr. Urquhart's finished manuscript lay on the card-table in their parlour!

Saturday was a "whole holiday" for the Blacksod boys, although for Ramsgard it was only a "half," so that Wolf had a solid expanse of forty-eight hours before him of delectable idleness before his work began again on Monday. The following Friday, the third of March, was the eventful day when, just a year ago, he had arrived in Dorset; and on the day after that, a week from this morning, Darnley and Mattie were to be married. Wolf surmised that there must have been some eventful conversation wherein Darnley had "explained

everything"; and it was apparently accepted at Pond Cottage that the rise in Darnley's salary—little as it was —would smooth over every new economic strain.

"I shall take the book to Urquhart after breakfast," were the first words Wolf addressed to Gerda when she opened her eyes.

"And then we can change that cheque!" responded the girl, excitedly. "I've not teased you about it, Wolf; because I know what men are like. But now it's done! Now it'll be just the same as if he gave it to you today, won't it? We can change it at Stuckey's this afternoon, if you get back in time. No, I forgot. It's Saturday. Well, we can change it on Monday, anyhow. Oh, Wolf, what a good thing your mother didn't need this money! I'm going to buy a new carpet for the parlour and a set of dinner-plates and a new frying-pan and two pairs of sheets and a set of silver spoons—oh, and something else that I've always wanted, Wolf, and that's a grandfather's clock for the kitchen—same as Mother has!"

Wolf's face clouded. "I'm sorry you brought up that cheque, honey," he said. "I've not made up my mind about it. I've got an odd feeling about it. In fact, I have an idea that we'll all be much happier, much more lucky, if I just tear it up and hand back the pieces to him!"

Gerda jerked herself up on her elbow and looked at him with flashing eyes. "Wolf! How can you think or dream of such nonsense? Of course we must change that cheque! You've worked for it. You've earned it. Do you think I'd have been so good and quiet about it if I'd thought you were going to act like this at the end? I said nothing when you told me it was for your mother.

I've got my pride, though you may not think so; and I'd have sooner bitten off my tongue than for her to have said I stopped you from giving her money! But you never *did* give it to her. You just kept it. So I made sure it was only that you didn't want to be paid till you'd finished the job. And now you go and talk like this!"

Wolf's mind was so bewildered and nonplussed by this unexpected outburst, that he just stupidly straightened out the sheet, which had got rolled into a weft under his chin, and slipped slowly out of bed. He certainly *had*, as she said, completely misunderstood her silence about the cheque. Well, here was a new complication. But he must gain time to think. Perhaps, sooner than disappoint her as much as this, he *would* relinquish his idea of "getting even" with his employer.

After all, he would be glad enough, himself, to have two hundred pounds at his disposal! He had already spent a third of all his and Gerda's savings in the purchase of a cut-glass decanter and a set of wine-glasses for Darnley and Mattie. It would be riches to have such a sum as this added to their account in the Post Office! All he knew was that ever since he had wrapped the cheque about the belly of Mukalog he had been profoundly unwilling to touch it. The thing seemed unholy to him . . . unholy. It was a sort of blood-money for the sale of his "mythology." He had pilfered back this precious possession . . . desperately, cowardly, meanly done so . . . by his equivocal behaviour to Christie. To fling down the torn bits of the cheque upon Urquhart's table would be an equivalent for many snake-like turns and twists!

But in spite of these thoughts he felt at that moment an uneasy stirring of self-reproach. He had treated Christie abominably the night before. Was he going to treat Gerda still worse today? "It's all very well," he said in his heart, "to follow these niceties of honour for my own sake. But how arbitrary, how monstrous, to snatch this money from Gerda when it means so much to her!"

"There's something in what you say, sweetheart," he muttered aloud; and he began wrapping himself in his dressing-gown and tightening it round him in the way he liked to do, preparatory to opening the door. "Don't get the idea I'm going to be silly or obstinate!" he added. "We'll discuss it all later."

There seemed to be a cold wind from the east that morning; and Wolf, when he reached the kitchen, was glad enough to find the stove still alight. But just for the sake of getting into the air he unbolted the back-door and shuffled in his slippers across the yard. "I'll fetch two or three pieces of wood," he thought. The shock of the east wind cutting at his lean frame and whistling past it as if it had been the post of a clothes-line, roused a grim and yet an exuberant feeling in him that sent him back to the kitchen in high spirits.

"Ay!" he thought, "how it all depends on these little things! What was that that Mother told me about Carfax? That he used to 'play' with these accidents, like a fisherman with a trout, making 'em serve his sensations!"

Back by the side of the stove he gave himself up to enjoying the flames that came out of that round iron hole. "Jason was certainly right when he said that to have a

roof over you, and a fire to get warm by, and three meals a day, was enough to be grateful for in this world." And what about the straight, sweet, flexible body of Gerda? Wouldn't he be a fool if he let his craving for Christie kill every element of natural pleasure? And after all, he *had* Christie. Had her, at any rate, in a sense that was as important to his imagination as Gerda's body was to his senses!

He covered up the iron hole with the bigger of their two kettles. This extra-large kettle was a recent present from Gerda's mother; and Wolf suspected, perhaps unfairly, that the gift was an insult to their hand-to-mouth household! He ran upstairs after adjusting this kettle, and with his back to Gerda, who still lay supine, with the blankets tight under her throat, he began his slow process of shaving, while a thin in-rush of bitter cold through an inch of open window kept alive the taut stoicism of his mood.

"You needn't think I'll get up while the room's as cold as this," cried Gerda crossly.

"All right, sweetheart," he said; "don't get up. It doesn't matter." But he thought in his heart: "Unselfish or selfish, we are all forced to fight for our own hands! If I'm selfish in being happy this morning, if I'm heartless in enjoying this heavenly east wind, I can't help it! If no one were allowed to be thrilled by anything, as long as someone is made wretched by something, the life of the whole planet would perish!"

But his blessedness, whatever its nature was, was brought speedily to an end by Gerda's voice from the bed behind him.

"If you don't change that cheque, Wolf," came her words, "I simply won't live with you any more! I'm tired of the life we lead . . . and it seems to me that it gets worse and worse, instead of better!"

At his own image in the glass Wolf made a vicious grimace. But he held his tongue. What a different looking-glass this was from the one inherited from the woman who "believed in spirits"! . . . But he held his tongue; and by various crafty tricks he turned her thoughts to other channels. It was not till the middle of their breakfast that he deemed it advisable to refer again to the two hundred pounds.

"I'm afraid I must take that cheque back to Urquhart," he remarked abruptly. "I have to live with myself, Gerda, as well as with you; and I couldn't endure myself if I thought I'd been paid for a thing like that book."

She put down her porridge-spoon and stared at him.

"Why did you do it, then, if not for the money . . . working every night and not speaking a word! Do you think *this* is any life for a girl?"

He made a stupendous effort to put a caressing tone into his voice. The justice of her outcry had, however, hit him pretty shrewdly; and feeling ashamed of himself he began to lose his temper.

"It's hard, I know," he said, "Gerda honey, to make you understand. I felt on my mettle to get the thing done. And I *wanted* to do it. And in the way I've done it, it isn't such an awful thing."

"I don't care what it is!" she cried. "It's not the book I'm thinking about. It's the money. Oh, I do so want to

get those plates and that clock! Do be reasonable, Wolf darling!"

She must have made as great an effort as he had done, to take this gentle tone, and he recognized fully the pathetic justice of her appeal; but something obscurely and dangerously obstinate in his nature seemed to rise up against her, something that he could actually feel, like a physical pressure, at the back of his windpipe.

"I won't say I'll tear it up, Gerda, and I won't say I *won't* tear it up. I know you do want those things, and I want you to have them."

The middle of their breakfast seemed likely to be the end of it too; for both of them, with simultaneous instinctive movements, pushed back their empty porridge-bowls and got up from their chairs, facing each other across the table.

"I *do* want you to have them!" he repeated. "And you're not playing fair if you think I don't! It . . . it goes much deeper than plates or carpets or clocks!"

His voice had risen now, and to his own surprise he found his lip trembling. What he felt was: "How *can* she force my hand when she sees it's so serious to me? How *can* she do it when she sees that it's a matter of life and death to me how I act with Urquhart? How can she care so little whether I'm tortured by this cheque or not?" That particular word "tortured" seemed to form itself into a wicked pellet in his throat, rising up from the nameless pressure at the back of his gullet.

"I never thought," she cried, "that you weren't going to be paid! And I sitting so quietly every night and having no life at all!"

Then, as he only fumbled with his unused knife and stared heavily at her, "It's just what I expected from you, Wolf," she went on, a hard, mocking smile coming to her lips. "I've always known you were the most monstrously selfish man any girl could live with!"

That ugly pellet in his throat became a rough piece of gravel that he *had* to spit out or it would choke him.

"How can you care nothing about my deepest feelings, Gerda?" he cried loudly, while the trembling of his fingers made the knife he held rattle against the porridge-bowl. "Don't you see it's torture to me . . . torture . . . torture . . . torture . . . to change that cheque?" The nervous emotion he suffered from had grown to something out of all proportion to the occasion.

Frightened by his outburst, but supported still by her burning sense of just indignation, Gerda—still a practical housewife, even at the moment she felt like rushing from the house—went off to the stove to move aside from the fire the saucepan in which their eggs were boiling. Wolf, still shaking from head to foot, strode round the table, and, advancing to the dresser-drawer, flung it noisily open. His movement brought Gerda flying to his side. What ensued then was all so violent and instinctive that it hardly seemed to register itself as a real occurrence at all in his agitated brain. . . . Their clock in the parlour had, however, barely ticked two hundred seconds before he found himself standing breathless and shaky on the pavement before Mrs. Herbert's house-door, the manuscript of Mr. Urquhart's book clutched tightly

in a hand that seemed to be all one single beating wrist-pulse!

"I must see Mother," a voice seemed to cry out from some long-obliterated bruise in the pit of his stomach —some navel-string nerve of prenatal origin. . . . "I must see Mother!"

He went to the door, and Mrs. Herbert promptly answered the ring.

"She's still at breakfast," whispered the woman confidentially, when she'd closed the door behind him. "She had a visitor last night," she added. Wolf hung up his coat and hat on one peg in the little hall, and his stick upon another peg. Each of these pegs looked like the head of Mukalog, as he used them. He received a vague impression that the landlady had jerked an insulting and libidinous thumb towards his mother's room before she went off down the passage!

He knocked, heard his mother's indolent reply, and entered.

She welcomed him radiantly. She was fully dressed and looked surprisingly young.

"Sit down, my dear one," she said, "and smoke while I finish my coffee."

He felt she must have perceived his agitation, but she made no sign of that knowledge; and as they chatted, easily and freely, about her new tea-shop, his heart and his two wrists began to stop their wild dance.

By degrees, under her hypnotic power, he even began to feel that he had made too much of the whole incident. Mentally he qualified and softened both his own anger

and Gerda's anger. "I'll run in and speak to her before I start," he thought. And then: "No! I'd better not begin it all over again! But maybe, after all, I *will* come back with the cheque changed!"

His attention gradually became given up, free-mindedly, to his mother's affairs. But he remained touchy and nervous; and when after a time the talk drifted round to Mr. Manley, this touchiness reached a climax.

"I can't make you out, Mother," he said. "Either that fellow wants to get social prestige by persuading you to marry him, or you are just exploiting him . . . playing on his infatuation and using him. Whichever way it is, I don't like it."

Instead of replying to him directly, Mrs. Solent glanced at the great manuscript-packet, which he had put down carelessly between her coffee-pot and her loaf of brown bread.

"What's that you've got there, Wolf?" she asked; and, though apparently innocent, her question carried for him a mischievous implication.

"His book, Mother . . . Urquhart's book. I finished it last night."

Her eyes glittered like those of a triumphant witch, and her bright cheeks glowed like a couple of russet apples.

"A compromise with Satan, little Wolf! Have you forgotten all you told me when you left him? All that about his book being simply naughty scandal? Will you *never* face the facts of life, my son? Can't you accept once for all that we all *have to be bad* sometimes . . . just as we all *have to be good* sometimes? Where you

make your great mistake, Wolf"—here her voice became gentler and her eyes strangely illuminated—"is in not recognizing the loneliness of everyone. We *have* to do outrageous things sometimes, just because we are lonely! It was in a mood like yours when you came in just now that God created the world. What could have been more outrageous than to set such a thing as *this* in motion? But we're in it now; and we've got to move as it moves."

She lifted the cold dregs of her coffee-cup to her lips and drained them with a sigh.

"Go on, Mother," he said.

She smiled at him—a swift, mysterious smile, neither bitter nor ironical, but proud and contemptuous, like the dip of a falcon's wing in a farmyard-tank.

"Every movement we make must be bad or good," she said: "and we've *got* to make movements! We make bad movements anyhow . . . all of us . . . outrageous ones . . . like the creation of the world! Isn't it better, then, to make them with our eyes open . . . to make them honestly, without any fuss . . . than just to be pushed, while we turn our heads round and pretend to be looking the other way? That's what you do, Wolf. *You look the other way!* You do that when your feet take you to the Malakite shop. You're doing that now, when you carry this naughty book back to that old rogue. Why do you always try and make out that your motives are good, Wolf? They're often abominable! Just as mine are. There's only one thing required of us in this world, and that's not to be a burden . . . not to hang round people's necks! My Manley-man, whom you hate so, at any

rate stands on his own feet. He gives nothing for nothing. He keeps his thoughts to himself."

Wolf was listening to his mother at this juncture very much as an unmusical person listens to music, making use of it as a raft whereon his thoughts are free to cross far horizons. It was when he heard her say "your father" that this voyaging stopped abruptly.

"Your father never once," she said, striking a match with so sweeping a stroke to light one of her favourite "Three Castles" cigarettes that he felt as if she'd struck it on that skull itself, "never once stood on his own feet! He clung to me. He clung to the Monster. He clung to Lorna."

Wolf might have interrupted this invective, if a portion of his mind had not slipped off again to Gerda's kitchen. What did she mean by what she said at the end?

"He shirked everything," his mother went on. "He lapped up the cream of those silly women's love like a leering cat. He laughed at people who did anything in life. He wasn't afraid of being broken, because there wasn't anything in him hard enough to break. He oozed and seeped into women's hearts like bad water into leaky pipes. And he justified himself all the time. He never said, 'This is outrageous, but I'm going to do it.' He said——" But at this point Wolf began wondering why his mother kept her window shut when the wind was in the east.

"East wind is different from all other winds," he thought. "Something to do with the roll of the earth, I suppose." And he imagined his soul shooting like a projectile out of that closed window—shooting, whiz-

zing, darting against the sharp wind, till it reached the wind's home. And he visualized the wind's home as a promontory like St. Alban's Head. But his mother was still going on abusing his father. "How she must have loved him," he thought, "to hate him like this after twenty-five years!"

"There was no hardness in him, Wolf, no ambition, no pride, no independence! *He* didn't know what it was to feel alone! He sucked up women's life-blood like an incubus; and nothing would make him confess it—nothing would make him say, 'Yes . . . it *is* outrageous!' He justified himself all the time."

Wolf looked away from those fierce brown eyes, out of Mrs. Herbert's front-room window, into the cold iron-coloured sky, a sky swept clean of all softness by the east wind.

"I'm not going to quarrel with you, Mother, about him," he said heavily. "I suppose I'm more like him than like you. But you're wrong if you don't think I feel alone!"

"My dearest one!" she murmured, with a rich gusto of tenderness in her voice; and stretching out her rounded arm, she stroked the back of one of his hands. As she did this her formidable lineaments assumed the warm, amorous playfulness of a dusky-skinned puma, dallying with its first-born in a sunlit glade of the jungle!

"How much healthier-minded she is," he thought, "than I am! But so was *he*, too, after his fashion. It's the mixture of them in me, I suppose, that creates these miseries of indecision!"

"Well, Mother darling," he said aloud, as he got up from his seat, and, taking her head between his hands, kissed her lightly on the forehead. "I won't tease you about Willum's Mill, if you won't tease me about the Malakite shop. We'll agree to be indulgent to each other's outrageous behaviour! I'll try and learn your philosophy and accept my badness as part of the game. Good-bye, dear one! I'll come in sometime tomorrow." And with that he snatched up the manuscript from the table and took himself off.

He looked back at her window, however, when he was in the road—and there her figure was, smiling and kissing her hand to him! "The truth of it is," he thought, as he moved away, "she was intended to be a *grande dame*, with a house and servants and guests, with a *salon*, too, perhaps, where political magnates came that she could chaff and fool and put in their place! It's action she enjoys. I can see it all now like a map! Life's simply tedious to her when she isn't stirring. How I must have disappointed her! How she must have hoped against hope in those London years!"

His mother's personality filled his mind completely, as he passed Pimpernel's and steered his way through the Saturday crowds in High Street. "Her nature's never had its proper fling," he thought. "No wonder she treats people carelessly and ironically. She's like a great lioness whose only food for years has been rats and mice and skimmed milk! The mere brutality of that fellow appeals to her. At least it's something formidable and positive. I wonder"—here he paused on the pavement, just as he debouched into Chequers Street—"whether she lets

the brute kiss her." As this thought began to transform itself into an impious, unseemly image, he pushed a sprig of greenery of some kind that someone had dropped there, with the end of his stick, along the pavement, till he got it into an empty little space behind some railings, where a patch of grass was growing. "God!" he said to himself as he recognized this spot; "this is where I read her letter the day I ate Yorkshire pudding at the Torps', and she first spoke about coming down here! If I hadn't sat by Gerda that day and eaten that Yorkshire pudding and taken her up to Poll's Camp . . . I'd have been free now . . . to . . . to——" At that point he tossed his thought away from him. "It's no good," he said to himself. "When Chance has once started things, a sort of fate sets in that a person *has* to accept!" He moved on again down Chequers Street, observing, as he did so, however, that a small single leaf still lay on the pavement. His consciousness of this leaf worried his mind after he had taken only a few steps. He endowed it—thinking to himself, "I believe it's a myrtle-leaf"—with nerves like his own. He thought of it as being separated from its companions and doomed to be trodden underfoot alone. "Damn my superstition!" he muttered, and forced himself to walk on. But then he thought, "They'll be treading on it just at the time I'm talking to Urquhart!" This brought him to a stand-still, while indecision took him by the throat. He slipped his fingers into his waistcoat-pocket. There was Urquhart's cheque! After that unthinkable scene with Gerda he *had* taken it from under the stomach of Mukalog.

"How can I expect the gods to give me luck," he said

to himself, "when I leave living things to be trodden underfoot?" He stood quite still now, paralyzed by as much hesitation over this leaf as if the leaf had been Gerda herself.

"If I go back and pick up that leaf," he said to himself, "I shall be picking up leaves from these Blacksod pavements till next autumn, when there'll be so many that it will be impossible!" He began to suffer serious misery from the struggle in his mind.

"If I force myself to leave it there . . . with the idea that I *ought* to conquer such superstitions . . . won't it really be that I'm getting out of rescuing it from mere laziness and making this 'ought' just my excuse to avoid trouble and bother? I'll pick it up now," he concluded, "and think out the principles of the affair later on!" Having made this decision, he hurried back, picked up the leaf, and flung it over the railings after its parent-twig.

But he had forgotten the east wind. That unsympathetic power caught up the leaf, and, whirling it high over Wolf's head, flung it down upon the rear of a butcher's cart that was dashing by.

"*That* wouldn't have happened," he thought, "if I'd left it where it was."

The sight of the butcher's cart made him think of Miss Gault. "I wonder what that woman feels," he said to himself, "now Mattie is to be married instead of going to a Home in Taunton? Does she realize the amount of old bitterness that underlies her meddling? But she *does* think herself into the nerves of animals in slaugh-

ter-houses just as I do into the nerves of leaves on pavements."

As he moved on he seemed to see the whole universe crowded with quivering sentiences suffering from untimely mishaps, and nothing done to help. "I don't care if she *is* a bad woman," he thought. "I don't care if she *is* revengeful without knowing it. The more people become *aware* of what goes on, the fewer living things will be tortured. I hope she'll never stop putting her nerves into animals. I love her for it; even if she *does* want Lorna's child to go to a Home in Taunton, instead of being married to Darnley!"

He arrived now at the Torp yard. It seemed hard at that moment to hurry by, as he usually did when he came that way, for fear of a lengthy delay. He glanced across the yard at the covered shed where the work was done. In a second he met the eyes of Mr. Torp, who was resting from his labours with an air of "*Requiescat in pace.*"

His father-in-law beckoned him to come in.

"Well, how be?" was his greeting as they shook hands. "'Tis long since Mr. Solent has stepped into me yard. Though us have seen 'ee, traipsing by, coat-flying as you might say from hell to wold Horny!"

"Rather a sharp wind today, don't you think so?" said Wolf genially, stroking with his hand the surface of a large uninscribed tombstone hewn from a block of Ham Hill stone.

"May be. May be. But I be wondrous sheltered in yard from they cruel winds. 'Tis het I do fear more'n cold,

mister; though I have heard tell that wind be turble rough on pavement out yonder."

Mr. Torp smiled complacently and pulled at his pipe. He talked of "out there" with the superiority of a man who lived, sleek and snug, in the company of aristocratic tombstones. But this slyness and aplomb soon changed, as he led his son-in-law into the interior of his shed; and the two men sat down together on a bench covered with stone-dust.

"Say, mister," John Torp began, "'twere only yesterday that I thought deep about 'ee, dang me if I didn't! I were out, passing the sweet of the evening, wi' old man Round, to Farmer's Rest, and who should drop in for a game of draughts or summat but that there Monk from up at Squire's. They be a couple o' devil's own, when liquor's aboard, them two; and 'twere good I be the man I be, with a headpiece what no small beer, brewed by the likes o' they, can worrit, if 'ee knows my meaning?"

Wolf nodded sagaciously, resting his manuscript on his knees.

"'Twere along o' young Redfern them two sly badgers got to talking, and maybe them forgot I were thee's missus's Dad, or maybe they forgot I were there at all, for I sits quiet as stone, 'sknow, when I be out from home. Anyway, they was talking; and what must thik girt bugger from they Shires say but that since you've gone back to Squire, and have took young Redfern's place, that poor lad's sperrit have been quieted down wonderful. He were taunting the life out o' they, seems so, that boy's ghostie! But since you've gone back, Mister, like a dog

to's vomit, if you'll excuse the word, thik sperrit have let they three parties sleep soft as babes."

Mr. Torp paused and glanced nervously round him. He then took several long, meditative pulls at his pipe.

" 'Tweren't pretty," he said, looking sideways at Wolf with half-closed eyes; " 'tweren't pretty to hear what they did say about 'ee."

"What *did* they say, Mr. Torp? Come on! You *must* tell me now!"

The stone-cutter looked about for some imaginary spittoon and then spat with extraordinary clumsiness upon the face of the big unlettered headstone in front of him. Wolf watched the white spittle slowly trickling down the yellowish surface, and he thought: "What things there are in the world that have a definite place in Time and Space! There's Mr. Torp's 'gob,' as the Ramsgard boys would say . . . and there's that big round tear from Gerda's eyes that I saw this morning on the back of my hand as we quarrelled about the cheque . . . and then there's that leaf on the butcher's cart! Ailinon! Ailinon! What things there are in the world!"

"They said," the stone-cutter proceeded, "that 'twould be thee wone self what would go next. They said the thing what made thik poor lad's sperrit bide where 'a ought to bide were the comfort of another party going his way. 'Tweren't pretty to hear 'un say that, Mister; and 'twere well I *do* sit quiet, in the sweet of me cups, or they never would have spoke such words. But that's what they said; and so now I've told 'ee."

He paused and sighed heavily.

"You've always been what a gentleman *should* be to Gerda's mother and me! But that's what them chaps said." And Mr. Torp fixed a somewhat gloomy eye upon his own spittle as it descended the uninscribed headstone. "A scholar like what you be," resumed the monument-maker, "won't give no credit to the wambling words of plain men like they. But I bain't no scholar; and they notions taunt me mind. 'Tis all very well for gentlemen to put down their thumbs at Providence. Them whose brains be work-sodden have to guard theyselves from He. If 'twere only plagues and pestilences He showered down, it *might* be all one. 'Tis they lightnings, murders, and sudden deaths what send we to cover . . . same as the poor beasties in field!"

Wolf shifted the manuscript upon his knee into an easier position.

"I confess I *did* notice," he said gravely, "about New Year, I think, that when I went back to Mr. Urquhart both Round and Monk picked up their spirits. I had thought Round's wits had gone for good and all. And I had thought Monk was getting much more nervous. But, as I say, I did notice that my going back there seemed to cheer them all up quite astonishingly! So . . . you see, Mr. Torp, I'm not at all ungrateful for your warning." He got up as he spoke, and thrust his burden under his arm. "But the point remains," he concluded, with an hilarity that was a little forced, "the point remains, what ought I to do to propitiate Providence and escape those terrible occurences?"

Mr. Torp moved slowly to a mason's shelf at the back of the shed and returned with his chisel. Then,

armed with his professional weapon, the good man tapped the great slab of Ham Hill stone.

" 'Tis no comfort," he remarked, "though I be the man I be for cossetting they jealous dead, to think that 'in a time and half a time,' as Scripture says, I'll be chipping 'Rest in the Lord' on me wone son-in-law's moniment. But since us *be* talking smug and quiet, mister, on this sorrowful theme"—Mr. Torp's voice assumed his undertaker's-tone, which long usage had rendered totally different from his normal one—" 'twould be a mighty help, mister, to I, for a day to come, if ye'd gie us a tip as to what word—out of Book or out of plain speech—ye'd like best for I to put above 'ee?"

The plump rogue looked up so grave, as he said this, touching the stone with the point of the tool and staring at his interlocutor, that Wolf hadn't the heart to treat it as the man's form of humour.

"I'll leave it entirely to you, Mr. Torp," he pronounced with equal gravity, as he bade him good-bye. "I'm surprised Redfern hasn't been content with all you've done for him. I assure you *I* shall be! But we'll hope that empty stone will have to wait a long time yet . . . for Gerda's sake! Well, good-bye, Mr. Torp. I won't forget your warning, though. I'll fight shy of 'murders and sudden deaths'!"

He walked off along Chequers Street, chuckling rather grimly. Absurd though it all was, he was superstitious enough not to be able to treat that drunken chatter at Farmer's Rest with the contempt it deserved.

His mind began now to revert to that final scene with Gerda. She had actually used physical force against him

as he took the cheque from under Mukalog, a thing she had never done before. Her last words, from within the open door, as he went off, had been uttered from a countenance streaming with tears. "You'll be sorry for this, Wolf! You'll be sorry for this!"

What had she meant by that, he wondered. Bob Weevil again! But he had discounted Bob Weevil altogether. It was just unsatisfied lechery with that boy; and Gerda's own words, referring to her coldness to him, had had the very ring of truth. But one never knew, in these things! Perhaps at this very moment she was writing a letter summoning Weevil to their home.

He had reached the turn to Babylon Hill now, and for a moment he wondered whether he wouldn't take this road and turn off to King's Barton by those larches! But he decided against it and walked on. When he got to the place where the lane leading down to the book-shop was, he found himself stopping again. "What the devil's the matter with me?" he thought. "I feel as if a lot of invisible wires were pulling me back to this town! Don't the spirits want me to take Urquhart's manuscript to him? Am I like William of Deloraine, in Scott's poem, with the wizard's volume under my arm?"

He looked at his watch. It was already half-past eleven. It would be after twelve when he got to the Manor; and the squire would undoubtedly want to keep him for lunch. "He'd want to do that all the more if I gave him back his two hundred! He'd be in a royal good temper with me."

He stood hesitating at this familiar point, where he had so often hesitated before. This, however, was the

first time he had done so on *leaving* Blacksod. "I don't think it would seem absurd to Christie," he said to himself, "if I went in for half-an-hour before going out there? I don't suppose it would make her feel that anything was wrong in Preston Lane?" He put these questions to himself while he stood facing the east wind, turning up his collar with one hand, as he clutched stick and manuscript with the other; and as he did so he thought once more of William of Deloraine burdened with the magician's book.

It always gave Wolf a peculiar thrill thus to tighten his grip upon his stick, thus to wrap himself more closely in his faded overcoat. Objects of this kind played a queer part in his secret life-illusion. His stick was like a plough-handle, a ship's rudder, a gun, a spade, a sword, a spear. His threadbare overcoat was like a mediæval jerkin, like a monk's habit, like a classic toga! It gave him a primeval delight merely to move one foot in front of the other, merely to prod the ground with his stick, merely to feel the flapping of his coat about his knees, when this mood predominated. It always associated itself with his consciousness of the historic continuity—so incredibly charged with marvels of dreamy fancy—of human beings moving to and fro across the earth. It associated itself, too, with his deep, obstinate quarrel with modern inventions, with modern machinery, and his resolve, as far as his own life was concerned, to outwit this modernity—not merely to resist it, but to outwit it—by a cunning as subtle as its own!

Damn these indecisions! This accursed difficulty of deciding, of deciding anything at all, seemed to have

grown into an obsession with him. To *have* to decide . . . *that* was the worst misery on earth!

He felt a strong reluctance to see Christie just after he had quarrelled with Gerda. What hit him now most of all was not her streaming face at the end, nor that mysterious threat, which he supposed referred to Weevil, but the single big tear he had glimpsed on the back of his hand when he shut their dresser-drawer.

What he fooled himself now into believing to be his motive when he *did* tear himself from that fatal parting of the ways and hurried down towards the shop, was his unwillingness to be landed for lunch with Urquhart. "I'll catch him about two," he thought. "That's the lowest pulse of the day! And I'll get home to tea and make it up with Gerda at the highest pulse of the day!"

An instinctive desire to avoid setting eyes on Mr. Malakite led him to go straight to the side-door. What was his surprise when he found that little postern wide open! There was the narrow flight of stairs leading straight up to Christie's room!

This time he did not hesitate. Stick in one hand, manuscript in the other, he ran up those stairs. There was Christie's door, also wide open! He entered and called her name, softly and tenderly. No answer! He passed through the alcove into her bedroom. The cold grey light lay upon her counterpane like the first light of the morning upon a smoothed-out winding-sheet.

As he came out, he caught a glimpse of himself in that Merlinish mirror, and the expression upon his face gave him an unpleasant shock. Returning to her room, he softly closed the door. Then he went to the fire and stood

in front of it, warming his hands. There was a tiny bowl of white violets on the mantelpiece, with two primroses among them, one fully out, the other in bud.

He bent forward and smelt this fragile bunch of flowers, and it was as if he had inhaled the very fragrance of its owner's soul. Then, led on rather by a nervous restlessness than by curiosity, he began wandering about the room, turning over books and papers. Suddenly, as he ran the tips of his fingers along the familiar books on her shelves, he came upon a large, thin exercise-book wedged in between Spinoza and Hegel. This he pulled out and mechanically opened, his mind still thinking more of Gerda and the two hundred pounds than of what he was doing. But after glancing at a sentence or two in an idle fashion, all at once he began reading furtively and guiltily, standing motionless where he was, and turning the pages with the feverish excitement of a sacrilegious thief.

He had not failed to remark the word "Slate" written in large printed letters on the first page of the exercise-book; but what he was now reading was in the middle of the book, and it was one particular paragraph that caused him to draw in his breath with a faint rasping suction. It read more like notes for a book than anything else; but that might be her style.

"Shame? She felt nothing of the kind! Human tradition meant little to her. Sacred guilt. Forbidden thresholds. Just *custom!* Just old moss-covered milestones of *custom!* But the silence that followed when his footsteps died away? Drops; one, two, three, four . . . *four drops.* Drops of acid on the grooves of a waxed pattern. A girl's excited senses rousing desire in old age. What a curious thing! Filmy butterfly-wings waving and waving; and

old cold lust responding. Curious, not terrible. A chemical phenomenon. Interesting in a special way. The opposite of tedious routine! Something startling and primeval. But how curious that a girl's senses, excited from one direction, should wave signals in another! Unconscious. Totally unconscious. Butterfly-wings quivering. Do thoughts come and go in some strange 'substance' called mind . . . or are they all there is? Memory. What is memory if there's no 'substance'?. . . She slid down the old slippery groove into the old deep hole. Forgetting. A girl dissecting memory and forgetting her shame! Why shouldn't she forget? He was a very old man. In a few years, perhaps in less than a year, she would be looking at his dead face. A few years more and somebody else would be looking into *her* dead face. 'To live so as to regret nothing!' It must have been a young man who said that. A man, anyway. Remorse as man's prerogative! Nature. It was in Nature that girls hid themselves and covered their heads. Nature has no remorse. Nature has no 'substance' behind her thought. Thoughts without 'substance.' One . . . two . . . three . . . Three drops of acid in a grooved, waxed pattern? The girl smiled into her mother's mirror. Thoughts without 'substance.' Butterfly-wings quivering. Unconscious signals. Little fool: The old man meant nothing at all. It was all your——"

Wolf was interrupted in his reading by the sound of a door slamming below and by quick steps upon the stairs. He closed the exercise-book and thrust it back. In his haste, however, he put it a shelf higher. Not only so, but he left it lying on the top of books instead of among them. Then he went over to the fireplace. . . .

Christie came rushing in, her arms full of packages, her face glowing with the self-satisfaction of a girl who has done some adroit shopping.

"Wolf! . . . You frightened me!" She panted a little and laid down her parcels on the table. Then she snatched off her hat and dropped it on the top of the books.

"I'm so sorry, my dear!" he said lightly, taking her by the shoulders and kissing her hot forehead; "but I

found the door open and came up. You don't mind, Chris, do you?"

He was dismayed to see her eyes turn, like the needle of a compass, straight to the bookcase.

"You've been reading it!" she cried, breaking away from him and rushing to the shelf. Hurriedly she possessed herself of the exercise-book. Twisting the thing in her fingers till it became a veritable trumpet of judgement, she struck the table with the end of it. "Wolf!" she cried, "I'm ashamed of you! I knew I'd left it out! I always put it away because of Father; but I knew I'd left it out! Directly I saw the door was shut, I thought, 'Father's in there, and I've left it out!' And now it's you who've done it! Oh, Wolf, how could you, how could you?"

Perhaps never in his life—not even when he had to appear before that College Board in London to be reprimanded for his crazy malice-dance—had he felt so humiliated.

"I'm sorry, Christie!" he blurted out. "It was wrong of me. I did it somehow . . . I don't know! . . . without meaning to." He made a feeble movement towards her, where she stood by the edge of the table, her chin raised high, her eyes literally flashing, the curved lines of her lips much redder than usual! He had never seen her look so beautiful. But her anger frightened and paralyzed him.

"I only read a word or two, Chris . . . just one sentence . . . that's all."

She swept the table with her doomsday-trumpet. Backwards and forwards she swung it, as if drawing a furrow

in windy sand; and under its stroke the little volume of "Hydriotaphia" went whirling to the floor, where it lay face-downwards at Wolf's feet.

Wolf shuffled backwards, expecting at any moment to see his own manuscript follow "Urn-Burial." The thought of the heron's feather rushed through his mind; but he didn't dare to move lest he should vex her further. Foolishly he clenched and unclenched his fingers and stared at the band round her waist.

"I'd like to go away from you both!" she cried passionately. "I'd like to go away, far from everyone, where no one could find me!"

"I'm very sorry, Christie," he repeated helplessly.

"To read it," she began again, "when I wasn't there and when you knew what I felt!" Her voice grew husky now and choked in the utterance. Then a shiver went through her and her slight frame stiffened. With a long, scrutinizing look she seemed to stare right through his fumbling, bewildered consciousness.

"I'll go, Christie," he murmured. "Don't be too angry. I say I was wrong to do that. I'll go now. I only came in for a minute."

She dropped the exercise-book upon the table; and pressing both hands upon her face, she drew them apart, against her cheeks and eyebrows, stretching the soft skin tight in a grotesque distortion. When her hands fell, after this, he noticed that the anger had gone out of her. Her expression had become gentle and sad.

"What's that?" she said, in a low voice, pointing to Mr. Urquhart's manuscript. Wolf hurriedly stooped down and picked up "Hydriotaphia." He caught sight

of the feather, lying safe between the leaves, as he put it on the table.

"The 'History of Dorset,'" he said eagerly. "That awful book, you know."

He tried to speak facetiously.

"I gave the old chap's lechery a twist in my own direction. It's still pretty awful, but it's not just pure bawdiness any more. In fact, I'd like some people I know to read it. It's ferocious. It's like Swift."

Over Christie's expressive face, its whiteness blotched by faint red marks from the violent usage she had given it, flitted a tender, ironical smile.

"*You're* like Swift, Wolf," she murmured, "coming into people's rooms and poking among their things."

"There, Chris! See what you think of it," he cried, pushing the great parchment-bound book towards her.

But she only mechanically turned over its pages.

"It's nearly a year since I began it, Chris. It'll be a year ago next Friday, when I arrived . . . going by the *date*, that's to say."

She bent her head above the white parchment-covered book—it was really a form of ledger-book, that he had bought at the stationer's in High Street, but he preferred it to a pile of loose sheets—and when she lifted her face again, she had an expression exactly like a young archaic priestess.

"Next Saturday, then," she said, "isn't only your sister's wedding-day! It's the anniversary of your first coming to this room . . . of our first meeting."

He made a second rather nervous movement towards

her. But she repelled him by taking up the parchment-book again.

"I'm glad you went back to this," she said thoughtfully. "I always had an instinct that Urquhart would do you some harm if you didn't do what he wanted."

Wolf laughed a forced laugh. "You unscrupulous little thing! What if Urquhart *were* the Devil . . . ought I to go back to him just the same?"

Christie shrugged her thin shoulders. "My mother used to tell me," she said, "that all angels could turn into demons, and all demons could turn into angels."

"Merlin and *his* mother!" he threw out; but his face was as grave as her own. "Christie!" he cried suddenly, after a pause, "why couldn't you and I have a day off together, away from here somewhere? Couldn't we go down to Weymouth, for instance? Say next Sunday, when the wedding's over? Gerda's mother always likes to have her come round sometime on Sunday; so we shouldn't feel she was——"

He was interrupted by a querulous voice calling Christie's name from the bottom of the stairs.

After what he had read in that exercise-book he had a funny shyness about catching the girl's eye. But she swept this aside with sublime unconsciousness. He couldn't tell whether she even *felt* his embarrassment.

"Good-bye, my dear!" she said with a perfectly candid and affectionate smile. "Father's getting impatient for his dinner. Poor Father! He'll have to wait three-quarters of an hour . . . well, perhaps forty minutes!" Thus speaking, she drew Wolf by the hand to the door. He had already snatched up all his belongings. "Off

with you!" she whispered. "Quick! Quick! Quick! Father would want you to stay; and I don't like dinners *à trois!*"

He could hear her moving the saucepan over her stove in the alcove, as he ran down the shaky back-stairs. His desire to escape from her room without seeing Mr. Malakite was stronger now than it had been to reach her room without seeing him.

Little did he notice of the people or of the things he passed, as he walked away from the book-shop! Once out of Evershot Road, however, his feet dragged slowly. What he had read in "Slate"—those short, compact sentences —passed through his mind like depraved choir-boys in white surplices. "Have I done what she hinted?" he said to himself. "Have I troubled her senses by my advances and retreats, until she's lost something that it's essential for a girl to have?"

He groaned aloud as he walked, and trailed his stick along the ground. "What will the upshot be if that old man *has* begun persecuting her *like that?*"

Bitterly now he reverted to his childish fancy, that his stick was like William of Deloraine's spear. As he shuffled along, he began a deadly interior survey of his mental state. Like a black fly crawling upon walls and ceiling, his consciousness set off to explore its own boundaries. "I have no certainty," he thought. "I don't believe in any reality. I don't believe that this road and sky are real. I don't believe that the invisible worlds behind this road and sky are any more real than they are! Dreams within dreams! Everything *is* as I myself create it. I am the wretched demiurge of the whole spectacle. . . .

Alone . . . alone . . . alone! If I create loveliness, there *is* loveliness. If I create monstrosity, there *is* monstrosity! I've got to move this creaking machinery of my mind into the right position; and then all follows. Then I can stop that old man from persecuting Christie. *Then* I can make Gerda happy without the two hundred!"

A bleak, saturnine disgust with the primary conditions of all human life took possession of him. The insane fancy took possession of him that he knew something at this moment of what the guilty, lonely Power behind Life knew, as it drove towards its purpose. Was he himself, then, in league with this merciless thing, that from his deepest heart he cursed? Did he know what It felt, confronted by all these shadow-worlds, dream within dream, each of them unstable as smoke and reflecting only *thought* . . . nothing but circles of *thought?*

Just as when his "mythology" was upon him he felt life surging with magical streams of sweet green sap, so now it seemed as if he could sink through world after world and find them all blighted, all poisoned, all corroded by some perverse defect. The only comfort was that they were all equally phantasmal! Nothing was real except thoughts in conscious minds; and all thoughts were corrupted.

Had Gerda really meant by those final words that she would renew her relation with Bob Weevil? His mind visualized Bob Weevil now with an obsessed intensity. He saw his face, his clothes, his yellow boots. He saw his heavy gold watch-chain. Did the saints teach that one ought to *love,* as well as pity, every living soul? He could pity Bob Weevil. Bob Weevil had not asked

to be born any more than he himself had. But to love the Bob Weevils of the world? Well! The great saints could do that. *They* could see the tragic necessity of birth branding the forehead of each child of Adam with a ghastly uniqueness! But it was too much to ask of *him* . . . too much. . . .

It was at this moment in his abstracted progress that Wolf was confronted by nothing less than the entrance to the little driveway—pompously entitled "private lane" —that led to the villa of Bob Weevil's father.

"It must have been *this*," he thought to himself, "that, like a letter at the door, brought the water-rat to my mind!"

Led by a sudden impulse that he made no attempt to explain to himself, he proceeded to walk up this "private lane." The east wind moaned forlornly through the laurel-bushes on either side of the path. "He's invaded my privacy often enough," he thought. "Why shouldn't I invade his for once?"

"Is Mr. Weevil . . . Mr. *Bob* Weevil . . . at home?" he enquired of the maid who opened the door. She had friendly blue eyes, this maid, but she looked amused and astonished to see him.

"I'll go and see if Mr. Bob has come in," she said. "Will you take a chair, sir?"

She went off, and Wolf sat down obediently. The place was certainly the coldest, the most cheerless, the most forbidding entrance-hall he had ever waited in. "I prefer the Mrs. Torp kind of house to this!" he thought, as he fidgeted upon his glacial chair and shifted his shoulders to avoid its pseudo-antique mouldings.

Wearily he fixed a lack-lustre eye upon a heavy marble slab that stood opposite him, supported by carved alabaster columns. "I suppose," he thought savagely, as he struggled against a wave of overpowering gloom, "I suppose Bob Weevil hardly extends his interest in ladies' legs to alabaster sphinxes!"

Not a single object in this entrance-hall pleased him. As for the gryphon-clawed feet upon which those alabaster ankles rested, he could feel them raking and combing at his very bowels! He hugged his parchment-book; he clutched his stick; but he no longer felt like William of Deloraine. He felt more like the knight's dwarf, who vanished from sight altogether at last, calling out, "Lost! lost! lost!"

Nothing mellow or friendly, nothing either rustic or urbane, seemed to have touched, even remotely, the devastating pomposity of this furniture. There was a tiny, shapeless curl of dust at the side of one of those gryphon-claws; and he looked at it with positive relief! There was something reassuring about it. It might have been in a cottage, in a shed, in his own parlour! It was a sign that he had not been transported into a place from which there was no outlet.

But even this bit of dust—*dust* being something that at least had an authentic place in human history!—failed to support him just then in what threatened to become a veritable dissolution of his being! The spiritual "aura" emanating from the Weevil mansion attacked him like a miasma of desolation, blending itself with Gerda's anger, with what he had read in Christie's exercise-book, and with the thought of having to face Mr.

Urquhart. The strength seemed to ebb out of him. Slowly he rose to his feet; and turning his eyes from the marble slab, he stared now at a gilded table, with a fringed mat upon it, supporting a bronze tray containing a solitary black-edged calling-card.

He leaned upon his stick and contemplated that card in an hypnosis of misery. Life seemed entirely composed of weeping faces, old men sneaking up bedroom-stairs, tombstones with spittle trickling down, and black-edged calling-cards. He felt as if the First Cause of the Universe were a small, malignant grub, radiating a deadly blight in withering, centrifugal air-waves!

He shifted the weight of the book a little. He shifted the balance of his stick. He felt as if, with stick and book, he were journeying through space; while the malicious grub, out of whose ill-humour time and space were born, aimed a sour-smelling squirt at him.

At this moment Bob Weevil himself came hurrying down the staircase. Wolf moved across the hall to meet him, thinking in his heart, "The simpleton must have been tricking himself out all this while!" for certainly the suit, the tie, the collar, the socks, the shoes, worn by the "water-rat" this Saturday afternoon, were at the very top of Blacksod fashion!

The young man hurriedly apologized for keeping his visitor waiting. Mr. Weevil Senior, it appeared, was already eating his midday meal, but Bob had ordered an extra place to be set, and would Mr. Solent honour them with his company?

The lunch or dinner that followed was something that fixed itself indelibly in Wolf's memory. He decided aft-

erwards that it was only his preceding struggle with the inert malice of the inanimate in that appalling hall, that gave him the power to carry the thing through! Carry it through, however, he certainly did, and with an adroitness that amazed himself. For he received a startling shock at the very beginning. The presence of the old dotard at the head of the table, mumbling and spluttering over his food with imbecile gluttony, did not prevent Bob Weevil from laying every one of his "cards," if so they could be called, flat down before his successful rival! It appeared that Lobbie Torp had turned up half-an-hour ago—"when I was with Christie!" thought the visitor—with a note from Gerda inviting Bob to go for a walk with her that afternoon, "as Mr. Solent was away and she felt lonely." Bob Weevil communicated this occurrence shamelessly, as if it were all natural enough. "I suppose," thought Wolf, "it's perfectly natural to him. It's probably not the first time she's sent for him like this!" It also struck him that Bob Weevil was propitiating him by introducing a note of humorous, masculine camaraderie, while at the same time he was letting it be clearly seen that he regarded this unexpected event as a personal triumph.

"Can it have been, after all," Wolf thought, "just a piece of incredibly subtle cunning, worthy of the father of all water-rats, that chat about the maddeningness of girls' legs? And had Gerda too, after her fashion, fooled him, as men have been fooled since the beginning of the world?"

Following Bob Weevil presently into his own "den," Wolf thought he had never seen so many actresses' photo-

graphs as he now beheld; and it gave him a reaction in favour of Mr. Urquhart's vice, as he tried to avoid this concentrated feminine ogling from every wall! . . . However! He was soon stretching himself out in a low deck-chair comfortably enough, while his mind, as he listened to his host's excited volubility, took its soundings of the situation.

Things were always returning upon him, he thought, in great irrevocable curves. A year ago he had found Gerda and Weevil in close association. A year ago he had been introduced by that old man to his daughter; and now, after all the intervening changes and chances, Mr. Malakite was there still, at Christie's side, and Mr. Weevil was here still, tricked out in his best, ready for a walk with Gerda! It gave him a disconcerting feeling, all this, as if he had been wasting his time in a maze, that perpetually led him round and round to the same point!

He wondered that it didn't strike Mr. Weevil as somewhat odd, that Gerda should be talking of "loneliness" and "Mr. Solent being away," when here was Mr. Solent, drifting casually round, up "private drives," within half-a-mile of her! But apparently Mr. Weevil felt that Saturday was a day dedicated to the erratic wanderings of desire-driven humanity! At any rate he took it all for granted, with the easiest facetiousness, when Wolf finally shook hands with him in the "private road" and made off towards King's Barton.

It was with many queer sensations that he stood at last under that well-known historic porch, waiting for the answer to his ring. A year ago next Friday he had

come to this place! How hard it was to think of it all as only a year! It seemed to him as if something in this Dorset air had the power to elongate the very substance of Time.

Roger Monk opened the door to him. Wolf could see at once that something unusual was in the wind. The eye of the man "from the Shires" was hunted and startled.

"What's wrong, Roger? Has anything happened?" He put all the nonchalance he could muster into this question, but in his heart he felt discomfortable misgivings. Roger Monk carefully and gravely bolted the great door. He had the air of a man who bars out an army of enemies.

"He's up there with him. He's been giving him a bottle of that Malmsey, same as he gave you, Sir, but I don't like it when he drinks with any strange party, saving of course yourself and his lordship."

"Who's with him? Who are you talking about?" enquired Wolf.

Mr. Monk bent his head down a little, so as to bring his face nearer to his interlocutor.

"I don't like the way he's talking to Squire," he whispered. "I'm glad you've a-come, Sir. Maybe you'll be able to do something to stop him."

"Who *is* he?" asked Wolf again.

"Mr. Otter, Sir," said the servant, straightening his back. "Not *your* Mr. Otter, if I may say so . . . the other gentleman, Sir."

"Jason, you mean?"

The man nodded.

"He's been using words to Squire such as I never thought to hear spoke to he by a human lip."

"What's Jason been saying, Monk? I don't see that it's any good my going up there, if they're both drunk? I know how strong that wine is."

The man's face showed consternation.

"Oh, Mr. Solent, you wouldn't desert us when you've come back to us? . . . come back at the moment we need you as never was! Let me have your coat, sir. I'll take your parcel, Sir." And he laid an almost compulsory hand upon the manuscript-book, which Wolf was still clutching.

"I've brought this book for Mr. Urquhart," said Wolf, submitting to have his coat and stick taken away; "but what's the use, if he's——"

"His book, sir? His book? Is *that* his book?" cried the agitated giant, throwing Wolf's coat down on an oaken chest and approaching him as if he held a precious animal in his arms. "Ghost of Jesus! What a day is this day! Writ and copied by handiwork! Ghost of Jesus! But I'm glad to see this day!"

His excitement was so great that he ran his fingers along the surface of the great ledger, stroking it as if it had a head and a tail!

"Come along upstairs, Mr. Solent! This is what my master has need of. Come along upstairs, Mr. Solent!"

Wolf followed his enormous figure as he strode up the stately Jacobean ascent, his hand on the carved balustrade. When they were outside the library-door, the man paused and whispered in an inaudible voice.

"I beg your pardon?" repeated Wolf; for behind

that closed door he began to catch the murmured sound of voices. "I can't hear what you say, Roger!"

The man raised his voice a little with a nervous sideways glance at the closed door.

"I took the liberty of asking you, Sir, whether you'd step into the kitchen before you leave us. Old Man Round's down there with Miss Elizabeth. They caught some lad or other fishing out o' season in Lenty Pond, and they've come to show Squire a monstrous large perch this lad hooked up. I dursn't say nothing, because of *he* in there"—and the man jerked his thumb towards the door—"but maybe they'd like for you to see the fish. I only mention it, as Miss Martin and our maid be gone to Weymouth for the day . . . so if you'd walk straight in on us, Sir, afore you leave, 'twould be a kindness!"

"Certainly I will, Roger. I'll be very glad to . . . as long as I don't have to eat that fish!"

Monk displayed a more earnest gratitude in his gipsy-eyes than the occasion seemed to warrant; and then, opening the door wide with a sudden jerk, he announced in a louder voice than usual, "Mr. Solent to see you, Sir!"

As the door shut behind him Wolf had a momentary feeling that the man was there still, holding fast to the handle, to bar any panic-stricken retreat. But what he saw now swept Monk and his movements completely out of his consciousness.

Hurriedly he moved forward towards the two figures at the fireplace.

They were in the same position as he himself and the squire had been on that memorable day of the contract; but now, with this finished book under his left arm and

the two-months-old cheque in his right pocket, the curve of recurrence leered at him with a sly difference.

Between the two men was the same table, with the same empty decanter upon it; and the logs upon the hearth seemed to glow with the same light. But Jason, instead of being seated, was standing erect, his fingers tapping the table's edge and his eyes burning with a black intensity.

"The Malmsey," thought Wolf, "has loosened his tongue. He looks like an avenging demon."

What gave Wolf an especial shock was the way Mr. Urquhart himself was sitting. He sat, indeed, bolt-upright, but he had twisted himself in some odd fashion to the side of his chair, against the arm of which his back was pressed hard. His thin legs were at an acute angle to his Napoleonic paunch, a distortion that endowed both stomach and legs with a disturbing separate identity.

The final token of abnormality in the man's appearance was not connected with his body, however, but with his head; for to Wolf's consternation the glossy black hair upon his scalp had *moved*, moved about an eighth of an inch, pushing the parting over to the wrong place.

Mr. Urquhart's mouth was open; but this was not all, for his thin lips were inward-drawn over the rims of his gums, and there was a staring intensity of outrage in his face, worthy to be compared with that peculiar expression which the sculptor Scopas used to lay upon the hollow eye-sockets of his figures!

Both men were far too engrossed with what was occurring to do more than turn their eyes towards Wolf as he approached. Mr. Urquhart gave a perceptible

shrug with his left shoulder. Jason's cheek flushed duskily. But not another sign did either make to greet him.

"You think you are different from other people," Jason was saying, as Wolf came and stood by Mr. Urquhart's side. "You think you have deeper feelings, because you own this big house and keep these servants! You think your ideas are wonderful, because you've got a great library. You think you have more respect than other people, because you've got money to buy it. You only asked me here and gave me this wine because those London newspapers praised me. You've always hated me. You've paid your man to spy on me. You're not a bit different from your friend Round. You like good meals. You like watching boys bathe. You like warming your feet by your fire and thinking how great you are because your father left you some foreign wine! You're exactly the same as everyone else, except that you've got an uglier face. You make a mystery of your life, when there's nothing in it to boast about except worrying people with your nasty fancies! You think your life is grand and devilish, when all you are is a silly old man with a boy's death on your conscience. Yes, on your conscience; but no more on *your* conscience than on anyone else's! *He* wasn't upset by you. He hardly gave you a thought. *You* weren't his friend. He used to laugh at you with his real friends! He only thought of you as a silly old man who liked his meals and his glass, just as everyone does. That's all you are. You're no wonderful, mysterious man of evil. You're an ugly-faced pantaloon . . . just greedy and stupid. That's what *he* thought of you, when he gave you any thought at all! Why did you

ask me to come here today? Only because you heard that Lady Lovelace had been to see me, and that there was an essay about me and my art in the Illustrated London News! You think it's grand to have a head-gardener as a servant, so that you can say, 'Ring the bell, if you please! Get me a bottle of foreign wine, if you please!' Everyone knows the real reason you pay that man to hang around. Only because you like to feel gentlemanly and refined in comparison with a great bully like that! Here's your new assistant come to ask for his pay, for copying out your liquorish tales! Do you think he takes any interest in you really, or cares a farthing for your writing? Not a jot; not a jot . . . not any more than——"

Wolf interrupted him at this point by flinging down the great white ledger-book on the table. The two glasses tinkled. One of them hit the side of the decanter with a silvery reverberation. Jason turned a stony face towards him. Mr. Urquhart blinked his eyes, moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue, closed his mouth, and shot at him a look like that which an experienced trapper, his right arm in the jaws of an infuriated bear, might cast towards a faithful dog!

"There's your book, Sir!" cried Wolf, completely disregarding Jason. "I finished it last night and brought it straight up to you. It's really something . . . *this* . . . that we've done together! If we can get it printed I believe it'll make an impression . . . even on Otter's attention."

"Otter's attention" seemed, certainly at that moment, paralyzed by the great parchment-covered volume, lying on the Malmsey-stained table.

Very slowly he bent down and opened it at random, letting half the pages lean against the decanter. "You write like a person who knows Greek," he said gravely to Wolf. Wolf bowed.

"I know Greek too well," he replied significantly.

"He means he knows what's made you abuse me like this, eh? what, Solent?" And the squire jerked himself into a normal position, straightening out his legs under the table and leaning back with a deep sigh of relief.

Wolf felt an absurd, an almost sentimental desire to lay his hand on his employer's head and adjust that unnatural parting. So it was a wig he wore, after all; at least *some* of it was a wig!

Jason bent down still lower over the book, holding the pages back with two of his fingers while his lips mutely repeated the paragraph he had chanced upon.

"I hope you haven't brought *me* into this history of yours," he remarked, after a pause. "I don't like to be abused any better than Mr. Urquhart does." He straightened himself and placed his hands behind his back. "I expect," he went on, "I wouldn't have talked to you like that, Mr. Urquhart, if you hadn't given me your best wine. For your second-best wine I'd probably have flattered you as much as Solent does!"

The Squire disregarded this completely. With a caressing and rapturous hand he began himself turning the pages, running his forefinger along certain sentences, as if he were blind and the letters stood out in relief.

"Are you tired with your walk?" Jason remarked, addressing Wolf, and politely offering him his chair.

"I ought not to have abused anyone like that; especially anyone who has such good wine," he added, in a low meditative voice.

"You'll see how I've managed, Sir, about the way it ends," said Wolf, still itching to play barber to Mr. Urquhart's disorganized poll. "It ends with the Puddletown incident; but I've added a sort of conclusion . . . rather a bitter one, I fear, but I thought you wouldn't mind?"

"Wanted the last word, eh, me boy? It ain't the first time you've wanted that! No, no, no, no . . . Gad! *I* have no objection!" As he spoke, the Squire lifted his head and stared haughtily at Jason.

"Otter," he said. And his tone caused dismay to Wolf; for he thought, "They'll burst out again in a moment!" "Otter," he said, "I wish you'd do me the favour of opening that window over there."

To Wolf's surprise Jason made no bones at all about obeying this request. He went off at once with firm, steady steps to one of the great mullioned windows. He went to the nearest one, not the one above Wolf's old place of work, but one much nearer; and when he got to it he turned round, and, with something almost resembling a friendly chuckle, he called out: "I can't work the machinery of these grand windows of yours! Shall I just unfasten it and let it swing out?"

Mr. Urquhart threw a most whimsical look at Wolf . . . he seemed to have recovered from Jason's tirade very much as a piece of elastic that has been stretched to the breaking-point but has been released in time sinks back comfortably to its former state.

"Unfasten it, my good man!" he cried. "Never mind what happens! Unhook it and let it go!"

Jason shrugged his shoulders, and, seizing the window-catch, did exactly as he was bid. The leaded casement swung heavily on its hinges, was caught by the wind, and was blown wide open.

Into the room rushed such a blast of cutting east wind, that Jason came hurrying back to the fire, chuckling, hunching his back, and making a grimace as if pursued by demons. The pages of the open book upon the table fluttered like burdock-leaves in a storm. Wolf closed the volume and placed the empty decanter on top of it.

"Now's the moment," he thought, "to give him back the cheque."

Jason pulled a third chair towards the fire. Mr. Urquhart settled himself deep in his seat, complacent and imperturbable, crossing his legs and swinging one of his slippered feet up and down in a manner that indicated complete self-assurance.

Wolf looked across the table at him. "Yes, now's the moment to do it," he repeated to himself. As he made this decision, he thought of Bob Weevil, dressed in his smart suit, sitting with Gerda in their parlour. "They'll never go for a walk," he thought, "in this bitter wind."

The whole library seemed full just then of a nipping air; and he noticed that both Jason and his host began turning up their coat-collars. But the cold was rapidly sobering them. That was one good thing! It *was* certainly the moment to do it now; for the Squire's expression had an ironical aplomb that indicated the return

of sobriety, and Jason had poured out apparently all his reservoir of black bile.

But, oh, how hard it was to do it! He thought of Gerda's longing for the pots and pans, the silver spoons, the carpet, the kitchen-clock. He thought intensely of his own desire for a dozen bottles of Three Peewits gin. Damn it all! The whole idea of giving it back was fantastic and superstitious. Yes, that's what it was—superstitious. And it was pure selfishness too. Gerda was doing everything for him—what right had he to rob her of their earnings? Those quiet evenings she'd given him for the last two months were what had finished the job.

"They've asked me to send them another volume of my writings," remarked Jason suddenly. "What do you two advise me to say I've got to have, before I send it? Darnley thinks a hundred pounds wouldn't be too much."

"Two hundred," murmured the Squire, with a sly glance at Wolf.

"Let's have your opinion, Solent," continued Jason. "You're one of these cunning dogs who know what's what!"

In a flash Wolf had jumped to his feet.

"Mr. Urquhart," he cried, pulling the bit of paper from his pocket and spreading it out before the squire, "here's that cheque you gave me! I haven't cashed it and I'm not going to cash it. I've done your work for my own pleasure. I don't want a penny for doing it! You see it's the same cheque, don't you? Well . . . here goes!"

As he spoke he crumpled up the precious slip in

his fingers; and, just as if he were retreating to make some tremendous leap, he stepped back a pace or two from the table.

The east wind was whirling round and round the room; and both of the men, sitting huddled by the fire, lifted their heads to look at him over their turned-up collars.

But as Wolf jumped back, crumpling the cheque, what *he* looked at was not the face of the Squire, but the face of Jason.

As he lifted his hand, something at the very bottom of his soul fought for release. Jason's face at that moment was a thing he had to challenge, to defy, to surmount. The man's eternal derision of him had suddenly swollen up, towering, toppling, tremendous . . . like an ice-wall. It had been gathering weight, this wall, for months and months; and here it was! His impressions moved more rapidly at that moment than light-waves travelling from Betelgeuse or from Algol; and one of these vibrations, flashing through his mind, hinted to him that the menace to his "mythology" which Dorsetshire had brought, came through Jason and not through Mr. Urquhart. . . .

"Well . . . here goes!" And he flung the crumpled-up bit of paper over the table, between the two men's heads, straight at the blazing logs!

His action would have fulfilled his intention to a nicety, if he had not neglected, for the second time that day, to take into account the power of that east wind.

The little ball of paper was caught midway, whirled in an ellipse, and neatly and accurately—with what

might have seemed demonic intent—deposited in the centre of the squire's stomach! Mr. Urquhart secured this unintended missile as it rolled down between his legs, and laid it with a careless gesture upon the table in front of him.

Wolf made a dash forward, but stopped abruptly; and very deliberately the squire unfolded the cheque and smoothed it out before him.

"That's just silly, me boy," he remarked calmly. "No need to insult a person, when you've picked him out of the ditch! That's just rude and uncivil. That's unkind. There you are!" And with a gesture as grandiose and princely as if he were returning a rapier to a disarmed antagonist, he raised his arm and stretched out the thing for Wolf to take back.

Without a word Wolf submitted—received the slip of paper from that outstretched hand and replaced it in the identical pocket where it had lain since morning.

As he did so, he was conscious of two dominant feelings, a sensation of sickening shame, as if he had been caught stealing a piece of silver from the communion-plate, and a puerile thrill of delight to think of Gerda's pleasure over the carpet, the clock, and the new spoons!

As this event occurred, the countenance of Jason Otter relaxed into a thousand wrinkles. Up went his hand to his mouth, to hide a chuckle worthy of Mukalog himself. But the only comment he uttered was a murmured "Boss-eye!" . . . a preparatory-school expression that had not entered Wolf's ears since his childhood in Ramsgard.

"May I ask you to close that window again, Otter?"

said Mr. Urquhart in his silkiest tone, removing, as he did so, with the tip of his finger, a drop of wine that had trickled down from the outside of the decanter upon the cover of the manuscript.

While Jason was fumbling with the window, Wolf had begun a series of preoccupied pacings, up and down, across and back, over the expanse of the room.

When the window was closed he stopped and spoke.

"Monk tells me that Mr. Round is in the kitchen and has brought a fish to show you—a large perch—caught out of season. Do you mind if I run in and see it before I go? I'm afraid I must be off now. I'm glad you're pleased with the look of our book, Sir! And I thank you for this money. It was ridiculous of me to——" He broke off. "I shall change it at Stuckey's on Monday. It'll keep the pot boiling splendidly, Sir." . . .

The time that passed between his utterance of that final word "splendidly" and the entrance of all three of them into Mr. Urquhart's kitchen did not present itself to him in the form of the passing of so many minutes. It presented itself as one shattering question, addressed by Wolf Solent *to* Wolf Solent, as to whether this crowning defeat over the cheque had really done at last the thing he dreaded! Would he find, when he took up his life again, that his "mythology" was stone-dead . . . dead as Jimmy Redfern?

Beautiful in their blue-black intensity, the great dark stripes over the metallic scales of the perch—caught out of season—brought back to Wolf's mind a certain inland pool, near Weymouth backwater, where he had once hooked a small specimen of this particular fish, which his

father had made him throw back again. As it had swum away through the aqueous dimness, between two great branching pickerel-weed stalks, he had had an ecstasy in thinking of that lovely, translucent under-world, completely different from his, in which, however, the pale-blooded inhabitants knew every hill and hollow, just as intimately—nor with such very different associations either—as he knew his own world.

Spacious and noble was the kitchen at Barton Manor; but somehow, as Wolf took that fish into his hands and entered into the overpowering emanation of its dead identity—its pale blood-drops, its sticky iridescent scales, its mud-pungent smell—he was seized with a sudden shock of intense craving for that barren, brackish country around Weymouth where his "mythology" had first been revealed to him. "Which of us five men," he thought, "is most like a fish? It's the best symbol of the Unutterable that there is!"

Laying the fish down, while Mr. Round explained to the squire and Jason how his niece had caught the poacher—and it turned out, as the innkeeper went on, that this poacher was none other than Lobbie Torp, who had been over there soon after dawn—Wolf stood aside, conversing with Miss Elizabeth.

"I congratulate you on your uncle's recovery," he said. "I often felt so sorry for you after that day we met at the pond."

The "automatic young lady" wetted her lips with the tip of a little snake-like tongue and whispered something almost inaudibly. Wolf drew back further with her till they were out of hearing of the rest.

"I don't know why I should tell you this, Mr. Solent," she said, with an air of sentimental hesitation.

"I'm afraid I didn't hear," he replied rather coldly.

"I don't often tell strangers anything," she went on. "But seeing your lady's brother, at *that* time in the morning, and finding him with this fish and everything, put it in my head to tell you . . . and then I heard you were here."

"I am sure I'm much obliged to you, Miss Round," he said, with a lack of curiosity that verged on impoliteness. "It's . . . very kind of you . . . to . . . remember me."

But as he lifted his fingers to brush away a fly from his face, Miss Round, Mr. Urquhart, Jason, Monk—all receded and faded before him, till they became small, insignificant, wavering shadows! The smell of the dead fish, as he caught it from his raised hand, touched that spacious kitchen and turned it into thin air. In its place there appeared the hot, powdery sands by the King's statue at Weymouth, the tethered donkeys, the goat-carriages, the peaked bathing-machines. In its place appeared the grass-green seaweed clinging to the black posts of half-obliterated breakwaters. In its place appeared the bow-window of the drawing-room in Brunswick Terrace, where, in those early mornings, as he watched his grandmother's maid shake the duster over the sill, there always hung a peculiar odour of sun-dried woodwork, mingled with the salt of the open sea!

"Your wife's father was there, Sir," was what he heard now, with at least a quarter of his mind. "But he had been drinking and was all so mazed-like that he couldn't

hear what uncle and Monk were saying. But *I* heard them, though they didn't know I heard them. And oh, Mr. Solent, they're all after you; they're all watching you like dogs at a rabbit-hole! They're just pushing you on to it . . . and that's God's truth!"

She had been whispering all this with flushed cheeks and an intense gaze fixed upon him.

Wolf's attention began to return.

"Pushing me on to what?" he replied, in equally low tones.

"I were born in Barton," the girl whispered. "I know every stick and stone of the place; but I didn't know 'twere as bad as I learned it that day."

"What do you mean?" he murmured.

"They said," she continued rapidly, "that every Urquhart what's lived at House since Noll Cromwell's reign has drove some young man into Lenty Pond! They said 'twere only the Reverend Valley's league with Jesus what made young Redfern die in's bed, stead of drowning hisself! They said for certain *sure* you'd be the one to go next. All the aged folk in village do be watching for it, they said—them as is wise in what was and must be! They said 'twere a good day for King's Barton when you came here, foreign as you be! Uncle said there were Scripture for it. He first knew there were Scripture for it, he said, when Mr. Valley drove his voices away from his poor ears and he stopped worrying. 'Some *must* go that way,' he said, 'while pond be pond. And if it ain't I, 'twill be he,' he said. I knew who 'twere they were talking of by their fleering nods."

The girl paused. Wolf noticed that her eyes had grown

liquid and soft. A feeling of undeniable discomfort rose up within him. "What a superstitious idiot I am!" he thought. "The automatic young lady has taken a fancy to me, that's all it is! This is her way of starting an intimacy. Well, Miss Round," he said gravely, "I think it's very nice of you to be so concerned about me. But you can set your mind at rest. All villages have these legends. Besides . . . who knows? . . . I may be such a crafty scapegoat that I'll bear the burden without turning a hair!"

She opened her mouth; she opened her blue eyes wide; she distended her little round nostrils.

"Go back where you came from, Mr. Solent dear!" she whispered. "Go back to London afore anyone can push you to it! I shivered in my breasts, for fear for 'ee, when I saw how bitter-cold that pond were in the horns of dawn! 'Tweren't only the sight of Lobbie Torp fishing against the law what made me shake. I've thought of you and dreamed of you, Mr. Solent, yes I have; and I'm not ashamed of it, ever since I first set eyes on you!"

Wolf glanced nervously across the kitchen; but what he heard and saw reassured him. His singular interview with Miss Bess seemed totally disregarded by the others. Jason was evidently propitiating Roger Monk with the most fawning civility; while the Squire and the innkeeper were occupied in weighing the perch.

Wolf was impressed more than he could have foreseen by the girl's manner; nor had he missed that poetical expression of hers—"the horns of dawn." He began a humble and equivocal answer to her startling outburst, trying to explain to her the subtle manner in which these

wild rumours, drawing their sap from the human passion for the supernatural, gathered weight in the countryside. He was a little dismayed, however, by the reckless response in his own fingers, which seemed to be reciprocating the ardent pressure of hers, as he bade her good-bye! Had he lost *all* integrity of emotion, he asked himself, as he went across to take leave of the others? Had his retention of that cheque undermined the whole dignity and self-control of his nature? Or was it that what he had accidentally discovered as to the Lesbianism of this strange girl appealed to something perverse in his imagination?

Once out of the house, however—once clear of the bare raked-over flower-beds, beds whose patches of yellow crocuses and jonquil-buds seemed shrinking back into the earth under that biting wind—he threw those feelings from him and took the shortest way to the Blacksod road! This led him past the churchyard and the vicarage-gate; and he scarcely knew whether his jarred nerves sympathized more vibrantly with the frost-bitten population under the grass, or with the obsessed little priest drinking his brandy amid all the trash in that desolate study!

When he got clear of the village, he struck westward across the fields, so as to hit the upper road; and it was not till he reached Babylon Hill that he paused to take breath. There he decided to skirt the edge of Poll's Camp and avoid the more familiar descent into the town.

"You two down there," the demon within him began muttering, as his glance swept over Blacksod, from Preston Lane to the Malakite shop, "you two down there

. . . when are you going to stop rending me and tearing my vitals?" This was not the first time lately that he caught himself coupling Gerda and Christie together. "These Bess Rounds," he thought, "are a lot easier to manage than *my two!*" Repeating the syllables "my two" with all the more bitter relish because of his realization of their outrageousness, Wolf began descending the westerly slope of Poll's Camp, with the intention of discovering some unorthodox way of striking Preston Lane without having to walk the whole length of the High Street.

When he reached level ground he found he had to cross several enclosed orchards, which he did by scrambling through three successive hedges. Pricked by thorns, stung by nettles, his hands smelling of the bitter sap of elder-twigs, he made his way through those ancient enclosures, noting how their lichen-covered branches reproduced almost exactly the colour of the grey sky. In spite of the bitter wind, he stopped in the middle of one of those orchards to crouch down over a patch of shining celandines. The valiant lustre of those starry petals in the dark-green grass gave him a confused hope. No scent had they in themselves; but, as he pressed his forehead into the cold roots of the grass around them, the smell of the earth, sucked up through mouth and nostrils, entered into the very nerves of his soul with a long, shivering, restorative poignance.

"Is it dead?" he said to himself. "Well, even if it *is*, I've still got *some* sensations left!" When he thought in this way about his "mythology," it was queer how he always endowed it with a visible shape. He thought of it as "it," and this "it" was always compelled to take the

shape of large, succulent leaves, the leaves of a water-plant whose roots were hidden beneath fathoms of greenish-coloured water.

"*Some* sensations left, even if it *is* dead!" And he rose heavily to his feet and moved on.

He emerged into a narrow, unused cart-track between overgrown, neglected hedges. As he made his way down this path, treading on young nettles and upon old burdocks, he couldn't help thinking how charged with a secret life of its own, different from all other places, a deserted lane like this was. "What a world it is in itself," he muttered, "any little overgrown path!"

The curious satisfaction which this secluded cart-track gave him caused him to stand still in the middle of the path. The hedges sheltered him from the wind. The spirit of the earth called out to him from the green shoots beneath his feet. Faint bird-notes kept sounding from unseen places. The cold sky prevented them from completing their songs; but the stoicism of life in those feathered hearts refused to be silenced.

His consciousness, as he stood there, seemed to stretch out to all the reborn life in the whole countryside. "Good *is* stronger than Evil," he thought, "if you take it on its simplest terms and set yourself to forget the horror! It's mad to refuse to be happy because there's a poison in the world that bites into every nerve. After all, it's short enough! I know very well that Chance could set me screaming like a wounded baboon—every jot of philosophy gone! Well, until that happens, I must endure what I have to endure."

His mind returned again to the scene about him.

"What a world it is, a little overgrown path, especially in the spring, when it isn't choked up!" He tried to imagine what such a place must be to the rabbits, field-mice, hedgehogs, slow-worms, who doubtless inhabited it. "Very much what Lenty Pond is to its frogs and minnows!" he thought. And then his mind, from visualizing those remote backwater-worlds, turned once more to Redfern.

"I'm Redfern Number Two," he thought. "There's no getting over *that.*"

The path he followed soon emerged into the back-premises of a small dairy-barton; and these in their turn opened out into one of the outlying streets of the town.

"Redfern must have been an idiot," he thought, as he made his way towards Preston Lane, "to contemplate drowning himself over Urquhart's manias. King's Barton isn't everything. King's Barton isn't a shut-off world, like that deserted path!"

He looked at his watch as he approached the door of his house. Just five o'clock! "Will she have got rid of him? Will she be away and the place empty? She knew I was coming back to tea. It will be the first time she's ever done it, if she *is* away."

As he fumbled with the latch of the gate, he found that once more he was associating Gerda and Christie together.

There were four purple crocuses and two yellow ones in the flower-bed on his left; and on his right, three impoverished hyacinth-buds, of a pinkish colour; and they all seemed to be doing their best to sink back into the earth out of a world that contained, among its possibilities, such a thing as this wind!

"Is Bob Weevil in there with her?" he thought, staring at the crocuses till they ceased to be crocuses. "He may not be . . . but one thing is absolutely certain, and that is that Christie and the old man are having tea together! If not now, they will be, soon. What more natural? 'The dear father would with his daughter speak.' "

He did his best to peer into the parlour-window, but the afternoon was so dark that all he could make out was a faint glow from the firelight.

He looked at the closed door and made a step towards it; but a leaden weight seemed to oppress the muscles of his arm. He glanced down now at those wretched hyacinth-buds. How miserable they looked! The strange thing was that he had the feeling now that to open *this* door would be opening the *other* door too!

He stood hesitating, listening to the wind whistling along the rain-gutter upon the roof above him. At last, with a violent effort of his will, he lurched forward, opened the door with a jerk, and walked into the house.

The kitchen-door was open, and from the middle of the hallway he could see the kettle steaming upon the stove. The parlour-door, however, was shut. He hung up his coat and hat, and with a beating heart he opened the parlour-door. There, by a low red fire, with the tea-tray between them on the little card-table, sat Gerda and Bob Weevil, drinking their tea.

He was conscious, as he entered, of an atmospheric density in the room—a density that seemed both material and psychic.

"The place smells of Bob Weevil's new clothes," he thought, moving forward towards them.

The young tradesman rose to greet him, but Gerda retained her seat.

"You were so late that I thought I wouldn't keep Bob waiting for his tea," she said; "but I've got your cup here, and it's only just made."

"Bob was good enough to give me lunch," he remarked; "so you are right to treat him nicely. Sit down, Bob." And pulling a third chair towards the table for himself, he held out his cup for Gerda to fill.

"Well," he said, after he had tasted his tea, "I found Urquhart at home, and I met Jason there too . . . oh, and a friend of yours, too, Bob! Guess who that was!"

As he spoke, he tried to catch Gerda's eye, but she successfully evaded the attempt.

"I don't mix with any such swells," remarked Weevil, with a facetious grimace. "I'll try another piece of that cake, Mrs. Solent, if you don't mind."

The emphasis he laid on the words "Mrs. Solent" was jeering and impudent.

"It was Bess Round," Wolf brought out grimly; "and the joke of it is she'd come with a great perch that she'd found our Lobbie catching out of season."

Gerda flashed a glance at him that even in that dim light was like the blade of a knife.

"Bess is no friend of mine," said Weevil. "She caught that fish herself, I've no doubt, and palmed it off on Lob. Lob don't need to go as far as Barton for his fish . . . season or no season . . . does he, Gerdie?"

"*I* don't know, and none of us here know either," the girl rapped out. "Lob does what he likes these days when

he's out of school. He's got to fish early, if he's to fish at all."

What came suddenly into Wolf's head at that moment was an excited wondering why it was that a fish had once been a symbol for Christ. This thought, however, vanished as quickly as it arrived; and he soon found himself trying in vain to exchange an intimate look with Gerda. More and more strongly, as he sat there sipping his one bitter cup of tea—he had no spirit to ask for a second, no spirit to ask for more hot water—was the conviction growing upon him that something really serious had happened. Gerda had a look on her face utterly different from any he had ever seen there. It was a hard, reckless, unhappy look, resolute, reserved, indrawn. She looked five years older than when he had seen her asleep in her bed that morning.

He furtively felt in his pocket, to make sure that the cheque was there still. He had an uneasy feeling, after all those agitating occurrences, that he might have lost it. He longed for the moment of Weevil's departure, that he might throw it into her lap!

"What did you think of my poor old Dad, Mr. Solent?" enquired the visitor, munching his cake with relish. Wolf was conscious of a ridiculously insistent wonder as to when it was that Gerda had run over to Pimpernel's for this luxury. "He's not much to look at when he's at meals, or to hear from either," went on this pious offspring; "but he takes notice after supper. Last night, for instance, if you'll excuse my mentioning it, he began jawing away like a dissenting minister about

my having no purpose in life. What's *your* purpose in life, Gerdie?"

"Don't talk nonsense, Bob," replied the girl.

"What's *yours*, Mr. Solent?" pursued the incorrigible young man, while Gerda was bending over the lamp.

Wolf had by this time become so certain that something fatal *had* happened, that in his nervousness it was very hard to restrain himself from a violent outburst.

"Purpose?" he repeated; and the word sounded pure nonsense. "She must have given herself to him," he thought, "out of blind anger, just to spite me! If it isn't that, what is it? Something's happened. She's either given herself to him or promised to!"

"Purpose?" he repeated aloud, turning the word over in his mind as if it were a stone or a shell. "I suppose, to get at reality through experience? . . . No! How shall I put it? . . . To enjoy reality through sensation? I expect that's it. Through certain kinds of sensation."

The illuminated lamp threw its light upon Gerda's face as she resumed her seat.

"What would you describe as your purpose, Bob?" he went on, thinking to himself: "She's gone through something that's startled and shocked her . . . or she's made up her mind to go through it. She's not the same Gerda that I left this morning with her face drenched with crying."

Bob Weevil rose to his feet. "My purpose is to get home to supper," he said. "I told Dad last night that it was to serve my God, and he told me not to be so cheeky . . . so you see he's not such a fool after all, the funny old chap!"

Gerda displayed no emotion of any kind on Weevil's departure. As soon as the door was shut upon him, Wolf produced Mr. Urquhart's cheque and pressed it into her fingers. "You shall have your clock and your carpet and your spoons; and everything else, honey," he whispered, clutching her by the wrist.

They were back in the parlour now, and she smoothed out the crumpled piece of paper upon the tea-tray. Then she folded it up, as mechanically as if it had been a napkin, and handed it back to him, looking at his fingers, but not at his face.

"Do you want to wash up these things for me, Wolf?" she remarked coldly to him over her shoulder, as she took up the tray and carried it into the kitchen.

As she passed him again in a couple of seconds, moving with a candle in her hand, he made a tentative caressing gesture. "Don't, Wolf!" she murmured, pushing his hand away. "I'm tired. I'm going to bed."

He followed her to the foot of the staircase and looked up at her as she walked upstairs. "You'll be able to get all those things now, Gerda!" he cried.

Her face, as she held the candle level with her breast and turned to look at him, was white and set. For the first time that evening she stared straight into his eyes.

"It's too late now," she said quietly, and passed on into their bedroom.

GERDA WAS ASLEEP, OR PRETENDING TO BE ASLEEP, when Wolf got into bed beside her that night on February the twenty-fifth. He was physically so exhausted with walking and so drowned by exposure to the wind, that he soon sank into oblivion himself; and all night the two lay side by side, their heads, their hips, their knees frequently touching, but their souls restlessly wandering far apart.

The first feeling he had when he awoke was a faint impression of moss and earth-mould. Then he realized that the sky between the curtains was of a deep blue. He had opened the window wide before getting into bed; and the room was full of a delicious relaxed air that must have blown over leagues of Somersetshire pastures.

"It's impossible," he thought, "that I shouldn't be able to deal with everything, when Nature can produce mornings like this!" He propped himself up on his arm and gazed down upon the figure by his side, struck once again, as he always was, by the freshness of her beauty. She stirred in her sleep and turned her head.

"Her profile is flawless," he thought. "How do these classic faces come to exist in these parts at all?"

He bent down over the sleeping girl as tenderly as he might have done over the first cuckoo-flower of the season. "It's happened at last," he said to himself. "She's let him have her . . . just to revenge herself about the cheque and about everything else she endures in her life

with me! I'm a cuckold at last. I've always wondered what it would feel like; and now I know. I don't feel anything! I'm just a mirror for *her* feelings. It's been so bad for her that it's of *her* I think . . . entirely . . . absolutely!"

The girl stirred again, more uneasily than before. There came a frown between her eyebrows, and her nostrils quivered. She turned her head from side to side, like a person in a fever or a person whose limbs and arms are paralyzed. Deep in Wolf's heart, as he stared at her, there gathered a fundamental decision. Formless at first, it rolled together in the recesses of his nature like a rack of clouds on a misty horizon. Then suddenly it tossed forth a coherent resolution. "I won't let the water-rat keep her. Cuckold or no cuckold, I love her. She's been miserable about it. I won't give her up!"

At that moment, disturbed by the magnetism of his look, Gerda opened her eyes. He bent and kissed her; and as he lifted his head again, he saw a lovely smile flicker across her face. "She'd forgotten the whole thing!" he thought, as he watched this smile vanish away and the same rigid, unhappy look come back. She made a movement to extricate her arm from the bedclothes, but the look upon her face was sufficient. He scrambled to his knees and slipped out of bed.

The day being Sunday, there was no need for them to have their breakfast as early as this; but the bright sunshine and the warm, spring-scented air made the hour seem later than it really was.

All that morning they were both like persons on the deck of a becalmed ship, who move restlessly, hurriedly,

through familiar tasks, in preparation for some drastic event. Over and over again Wolf was on the point of launching forth into a passionate declaration that what had occurred made no difference . . . that he loved her just the same . . . that he blamed himself over the matter of the cheque. But every time he formulated such words and was on the verge of expressing them, that look of hers froze them in the utterance. She held him helpless and mute by that look. It was like a ceremonial death-cloth wrapped round a living head.

When the housework was quite done—and he noticed that she did it much more conscientiously than usual, as though making excuses to prolong it—she announced her intention of going over to Chequers Street. "If Lobbie hasn't gone out yet," she said, "and I'm pretty sure he won't have, I'll get him to go down by the river with me."

"You'll be back for lunch, won't you, honey?" He threw into these words all the supplication he could.

"No, Wolf, I don't think so," she replied slowly. "I think I'll get mother to make up some sandwiches, like she used to in the old days, when Lob and I went down to the Lunt. I'll be back for tea, though. You can put on the kettle at five, if I've not come then. I won't be much later than that."

Wolf's memory rushed away to that March evening by the banks of the river . . . to the shed in the middle of the wet grass . . . to the yellow bracken. It struck his mind as ominous, if not tragic, that at this juncture she should instinctively revert to Lobbie and the Lunt. But he made no attempt to dissuade her. "She thinks it's

pride in me that I don't," he said to himself. "It isn't that! It's respect for her. It's respect for her life. It's respect for her identity."

"Where will you get *your* dinner?" she said at last, standing between the crocuses and the pink hyacinths, while Wolf still held their front-door open. His heart leaped up at this word. Was it an overture, a motion towards him?

"Oh, I expect I'll find enough in the cupboard, sweetheart," he said lightly; but into these words also he threw a caressing supplication. "If not, I'll see if my mother's in . . . or Christie," he added.

At the sound of Christie's name she did fumble for a second with her gloved fingers upon the top of the iron gate, while her head sank down in intense thought.

"Wait a minute, Gerda!" he cried, noting this hesitation. He ran back into the hall and returned with his hat and stick. "I'll come with you as far as their house."

She made no objection to this; and as he shut the gate behind them, the particular feel of the ironwork and the noise of the latch brought back to his mind some occasion in the past when they had embraced each other, just there, in a rush of happy reconciliation. He glanced at the pigsty across the road. There wasn't a hint upon the air today of anything but the spring.

"Gerda," he said, when they were well past the street-corner, a vantage-ground that served the idlers of their quarter in lieu of a tavern-bar, "I don't want you to think I'm a bit jealous of poor old Bob. It's only fair you should have a friend you're fond of, in the sort of way I'm fond of Christie."

She was silent for a couple of seconds; and his words seemed to make the lines between the paving-stones, as he stared at the ground, turn into the rungs of a ladder upon which it was necessary to place his feet very carefully, because the space between gaped and yawned.

Then she said slowly: "There . . . would . . . have . . . been . . . a time . . . for telling me . . . that, Wolf. Better say no more about it today."

He held his peace after that, and they reached the monument-maker's house just as the "five-minutes" bell of the parish-church began to ring, indicating that it was service-time.

The warmth of the day was phenomenal. A light, vaporous mist, balmy and fragrant, as though millions of primrose-buds had opened beneath it and millions of jonquils had poured their sweetness into it, hung over the lintels of the houses and floated in and out of the doorways. Filmy white clouds, so feathery that they faded into the air at their outer edges, swept northwards over the roofs of the town; while the liquid blue of the sky, visible in fluctuating pools and estuaries between those fleecy vapours, seemed to obliterate everything that was hard and opaque from the whole terrestrial globe. So flowing and so diffused was the heaven above, that it seemed to spill and brim over, making the pavements underfoot appear like clouds too, and the patches of grass in that or this little garden like interstices of another, a second sky, whose receding depths were green instead of blue!

Groups of church-goers were moving languidly past the gate of the Torp yard under the urge of their various

pious purposes; and in his growing distress at the set, indrawn look on his girl's face, Wolf felt mocked and taunted by the somnolent leisureliness of those people's voices and by the fresh neatness of their clothes.

Not another interchange of real feeling could he obtain with her until they knocked at her father's door; and it was a sharp stab to him to think that this was actually the first time since their marriage that they had presented themselves together at this threshold.

Lobbie himself opened the door to them, and they found the whole family collected in the front-room. Mrs. Torp, having obviously finished making the beds and tidying up the kitchen, for she wore a dirty apron over her Sunday dress, had recently dropped into a chair opposite her husband, from which island of peace she had clearly been flinging abroad volleys of belligerent cloquence; for the plump shirt-sleeved monument-maker had a fixed expression upon his face, at once crushed and protesting—an expression that remained visible even after the stir of their arrival.

"I've only come in for a moment," said Wolf, taking Mrs. Torp's vacated chair, as the lady led her daughter away to pour her troubles into a feminine ear; "but I think Gerda intends to stay. Well, Lobbie, you certainly caught a big fish yesterday! I must congratulate you. Season or no season, it's the biggest perch I've ever seen!"

"My old woman have been skinnin' the poor lad like a fish 'isself, just as you were coming in," said Mr. Torp. "She says I encourage he in they scallywag larks. I don't encourage yer, do I, Lob Torp?"

The boy glanced uneasily at the kitchen-door, from behind which his mother's voice was still audible.

"She were out for mischief, Mister," he whispered solemnly, "else she would never have meddled wi' I! What did she reckon she wanted, walking in they wet fields afore 'twas light? And she spoke to I twice afore I hooked thik girt fish. Be I'd been little, like I were wunst, she'd have made I run home quaking and shaking! Do 'ee know what she said to I, Mister? Her came 'long o' thik hedge-side path what leads from Farmer's Rest to Pond Lane. I saw she coming and I wished myself anywhere; for I reckoned the wold chap had gone and hid 'isself; and her were after he; both on 'em nigh crazy, as you might say! Her came walking straight to where I were, stepping silent, like any wold cow, and when she'd looked at that cold water awhile her kind o' shook. 'Have 'ee seen it?' she said. 'Seen what, Miss Bess?' I said. 'The face under the water,' said she, 'what they all talk of up at Rest.' 'I bain't looking for no faces,' said I. 'I be fishing for perch.' ' 'Twill be seen,' she said, ' 'Twill be seen, till one that be living now be where *it* be . . . then 'twill fade out.' It were when she were saying 'fade out,' just like that, that I saw me float bob down. You can believe, Mister, that a fellow had no time then for a woman's foolishness! But 'twere naught to she what my float were doing. ' 'Twas thik face in this here water,' said she, 'what worrited uncle. Thik face will be seen by all and sundry,' said she, 'till the time come when——' "

Lobbie's discourse was interrupted by a sudden movement by his father. Mr. Torp got up from his chair. "You

stop that now!" he roared. "You stop that or I'll call you mother to 'ee! Sunday be Sunday, I say, and Mr. Solent be our visitor. If Providence have on's mind to afflict such a gentleman, 'tis his wone concern! This house be my house, Lob Torp; and this morning be Sunday morning. So shut thy mouth about faces in ponds!"

So loud was the voice of Mr. Torp, that no sooner had he resumed his seat than his wife and Gerda burst in.

"What's this about Sunday, John?" said the lady sharply. "Can't you leave that boy in peace for a moment when my back's turned? If it *be* Sunday, what of it? Here's our Gerdie asking for nice meat-sandwiches for to take the lad picnicking. Mr. Solent says he can't stay, so me and you can do what I was telling 'ee just now . . . go quiet and natural to Nevilton meeting. What do 'ee think I went to the trouble of putting my best dress on for? To hot up yesterday's Yorkshire pudding? If some can eat cold meat, *others* can eat cold meat. There'll never be, all Spring I tell 'ee, such a day for me and you to cover them quiet miles."

Mr. Torp permitted himself a swift, humorous leer at his preoccupied son-in-law.

"What *is* Nevilton meeting, Mrs. Torp?" enquired Wolf, with forced vivacity.

" 'Tis Mother's favourite preacher," interposed Lobbie. "Old Farmer Beard, Mr. Manley's friend, fetches he in dog-cart, from Ilchester. 'A be a Baptist, mister, the kind that washes grown folk all over like babies. Mother goes to hear he, because 'a says all drinking-men, like our Dad, will be burnt cruel, come Judgement. Mother likes for Dad to hear they things; but Dad be a church-

man, same as I be, what don't hold with such conclusions. Dad and me be High-Church. Mother be Evangelic."

Mrs. Torp untied her apron and began folding it up. It was clear from her expression that wrath at her offspring's impudence was qualified by pride in his capacity for fine theological distinctions. She began a rambling eulogy upon the preacher from Ilchester, punctuated by irritable exclamations, as she hunted in vain about the room for some tract or hymn-book connected with this celebrity.

But Wolf had no attention just then for anybody but Gerda, whose abstracted look of settled misery, as she sat upright upon a straight-backed chair against the wall, pierced him to the heart.

"She's given herself to that little ass," he thought, "out of pure spite; and it's broken up all her self-respect."

Mrs. Torp's project of making Mr. Torp walk five miles that afternoon to hear himself damned became a desolate background now—like that marble table in the Weevil villa—to this wretched crisis in his life. The idea of some stuffy little room in Nevilton—a village he particularly admired—resounding to the voice of this protégé of Mr. Beard, on a day like this, seemed to paint the whole Dorset landscape with a mud-coloured pigment. A bitter, masculine anger stirred within him at the destructive emotionalism of these women, unable, as they always were, to "leave well alone."

And it did not lessen his agitation to think of Gerda's blind, desperate instinct to take refuge with Lobbie, her

old childish companion, down there in those Lunt meadows! Just exactly a year ago since the three of them had come home through the spring twilight . . . and now she was to carry her sandwiches to the very spot, eat them with Lob on the trunk of that very tree, set eyes, perhaps, on that very shed, and nothing to persuade her to let him join them.

A pitiful craving came upon him to take her in his arms and purge her bedevilled memory of every trace of that lecherous water-rat. And Christie too—why must Christie, in some crazy psychic mood, go and stir up the villainous fires of that old man's smouldering lust? The words that he had read in that fatal exercise-book wrote themselves on the Torp wall as he stared at it. If he hadn't made love to her and then drawn back in the way he did, she'd be still just as she used to be, immune as the flowers on her mantelpiece to that old satyr's approaches.

Gerda's abstraction had by this time become so extreme, her face so sad, that he couldn't bear it any longer. He walked across to her; and in a low, emphatic voice, under cover of Mrs. Torp's voluble hunt for her lost pamphlet, he begged for leave to accompany them on their excursion.

"It's too late, Wolf!" she repeated, looking at him with eyes that seemed five years older than they'd been yesterday. "Haven't I told you it is? Why do you keep teasing me so?"

He bent down above her now and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"It *isn't* too late, Gerda. You're taking everything much

too hard! I love you far too much for anything to be too late!"

But the tenderness in his voice only seemed to irritate her. She flashed a look at him of aversion, of contempt. "You are a fool, Wolf," she whispered. "I never supposed you were quite such a fool!"

Then she jumped to her feet. "Come on, Mother! Never mind those Nevilton hymns. Lobbie and I want to start in a minute. Come, both of you, and let's make the sandwiches!"

Her mother and brother followed her into the kitchen, and Wolf was left alone with Mr. Torp.

"Cold meat for me dinner, and hot damnation for me pudding, seems so!" remarked that good man. "Well, if I've got to walk to Nevilton this afternoon, I shall traipsy round to ostler Jim's this morning. He'll be finished cleaning up in Peewits back-yard by now; and him and me can sit snug for a while . . . 'doors all locked and maids all mum,' as the saying is."

Even while he was still speaking, Mr. Torp was shuffling into his Sunday coat and straightening his Sunday tie. Wolf picked up his hat and stick.

"Well, I'll be moving on too, I think." He spoke louder than was necessary, in order to let Gerda know he was going. But there was no voice or sign from the kitchen.

"Good-bye, Mr. Torp," he said, shaking his father-in-law's hand warmly. "Be careful of that ostler's back-room, or your preacher will catch you on the hop."

"Don't 'ee worry, Mr. Solent," returned the other; "and do 'ee bear in mind thee own self what I told 'ee yesterday. Not a man of us, these shifty times, nor a

gentleman neither, can see what bides for'n. 'Tisn't as 'twere when I were young. Life be a wink of the eyelid, these times; and only them as jumps the ditches goes dry to bed!"

Once back again in the sun-warmed quietness of Chequers Street, Wolf, after walking a step or two, paused to take counsel with himself.

"She'll be back for tea," he thought, "and then I'll talk to her. I'll make her take this affair lightly. But no more of Weevil. She must be quit of Weevil. Cuckold I am. Wittold I refuse to be!"

He drew pensive patterns on the sunlit pavement with the end of his stick. All manner of contradictory projects floated through his brain as to how to spend the long, tantalizing hours between this and five o'clock. Of these notions one lodged itself finally in his mind as the very thing indicated by the occasion. He would consult the most cynical of all his oracles! How many months was it since he had last been over there . . . since he had gazed straight down through the clay to where the skull grinned back at him? Too long . . . too long! Yes, that is what he would do. He would visit "old Truepenny." Nothing would make the hours pass quicker than that!

He looked at his watch. It was a quarter to twelve; and he knew there was a Sunday train to Ramsgard at twelve-fifteen.

"I'll have hours for walking back . . . hours and hours," he said to himself. "I'll come by the highroad. I'd like to find a way through the Gwent Lanes, if there be time."

Then suddenly an idea came into his head that brought

a rush of blood and a faint, pricking sensation to the flesh that covered his cheek-bones. Why not run in to Christie's for a second, and see if she'd go with him? Damn!—but there might be somebody he knew on the platform or in the train. They'd probably—just because it was such a heavenly day—find Miss Gault at the cemetery!

No, it was too risky. "But I'll run in a second, anyway," he thought, "and see what she says."

A few minutes later he found himself ringing the bell at the Malakite side-door.

All was silent in the little alley. He could see some brilliant patches of green, swimming in pools of sunlight, in the small garden. Then a faint shuffling of feet came along the pavement, outside in the road. That shuffling and the beating of his heart were the only sounds. All Blacksod lay immersed in a golden mist of quiet. He rang the bell again. "In a minute," he thought, "I shall hear her coming down! The old man may sleep late o' Sundays; but she'll be up."

The shuffling steps in the road came to a pause.

"Mister!"

He turned towards the voice. It was a little, old-fashioned maid carrying a prayer-book.

"If it's the Malakites you want, mister, I saw them pass my house, down-street, an hour agone. They were dressed for travel; so it did look to me! I reckon they were minded to catch the eleven-three to Weymouth."

Wolf left the door and advanced to meet the speaker. He knew her now as one of the shop-girls in Pimpernel's.

He had often bought cakes of her for Gerda. She was reputed to be a Roman Catholic.

"Dressed for an excursion, eh, miss?" he said lightly. "That eleven-three goes straight through to Weymouth, doesn't it? Well, they certainly have a lovely day!"

The little Catholic walked hurriedly on. "She'll miss her great miracle if she's not quick," he thought. "Don't they say the words exactly at noon?"

All the way to the station he tried to concentrate his mind on the mystery of the Mass. "The Christ of these priests," he thought, "is a totally different god from the Jesus of Mr. Beard's preacher. Which of 'em would help me most at this juncture, ha? Which of them?"

It was only when he was sitting alone in a third-class smoking-carriage, staring out of the window at Melbury Bub, that the full bitterness of this last piece of news grew ripe for tasting.

"She ought to have known I'd look in today," he thought. "She ought to have known it." And then he thought: "Natural enough to go to Weymouth on a sunshiny March day! Mr. Malakite . . . and his daughter . . . at Weymouth. I expect they'll lie down on those dry sands where the donkeys are. They'll probably have lunch at the 'Dorothy' and then go for a row, or cross over the ferry to the Nothe and walk to Sandsfoot Castle. Perhaps they'll go past Brunswick Terrace and walk across Lodmore."

Oh, it was all natural enough! If only he hadn't come across that exercise-book. But an imaginative girl like Christie might exaggerate a thousand little nothings. Be-

sides, "Slate" was a story. It wasn't a diary. It revealed nothing . . . nothing at all . . . except her thoughts!

Gerda too. . . . He hadn't seen anything. He hadn't caught them at anything . . . except sitting in the dark. What if *that* also were a fancy of his own? He leaned forward and clasped his hands over his knees. Oh, this was the worst state of all! Not to be quite sure. The train was passing close to King's Barton now. There was the great perpendicular tower . . . there was the churchyard! He unclasped his hands and sat sideways against the window, trying to make out Redfern's headstone; but the train moved too fast. He thought he caught a glimpse of it, but he wasn't sure. He wasn't sure of anything!

Hardly anyone else got out when he reached Ramsgard. "If I meet Miss Gault," he thought, "I shall be rude to her."

He skirted the Public Gardens and hurried past the Lovelace. "Is that old waiter there still?" he wondered. At the sight of the workhouse, the personality of his father seemed to beckon him, to welcome him; but it was still only as a skull. The skull knew he was coming, though; and it was glad! The skull of old "Truepenny" was the only brain in the world whose thoughts he *could* read! Eyeless sockets deceived no one.

He was passing the slaughter-house now. "I've only touched meat once," he thought, "since she talked to me that day. But if I see her at his grave I shall sheer off and not go near it!"

When he came to the hole in the fence that led to

that portion of the cemetery where the paupers were buried, he recalled how startled he'd been when he saw Miss Gault go down on her hands and knees to get through this aperture. So well did he remember that incident as he himself now went down on his hands and knees, that while a clump of dock-weeds struck cold against his face, he became suddenly certain that Miss Gault was there now.

Yes! If she wasn't there, her spirit was most certainly there. He scrambled to his feet, feeling sure that he would see her; and there she was! She was seated upon a grave over against William Solent's. On her lap was a paper of sandwiches, in her hands a book. She was munching and reading at the same time, her hat on the grave by her side, her large black boots emerging from beneath a voluminous skirt, whose stiff folds suggested the "Melancholia" of Albert Dürer.

He had vowed he would bolt if he saw her that day, but instead of that he pulled off his cloth-cap with effusive humility and stepped over the intervening mounds.

"Miss Gault!"

She must have marked him down while he was under the fence, and been merely gathering her wits; for all she did now was to raise her eyes and blink at him.

"So you've come at last, boy!"

He moved up to her, laid his hand upon one of hers, as it still clutched the paper of sandwiches, and sat down.

"Everyone seems eating sandwiches today," he threw out.

"Best thing to do, boy," she replied; "best thing to do! They're lettuce."

"What a day it is, isn't it, Miss Gault?" he murmured vaguely, glancing at the words "William Solent," upon which the sun was pouring its friendliest benediction.

She peered obliquely into his face. "What's the matter with you, boy?" she said earnestly; and then, with a nervous apology in her tone, "It's Emma's day out; so I thought I might as well have a picnic."

"Oh, I'm all right, Miss Gault! Tired of school, perhaps. But we've all got to feel the pinch somewhere."

"Take off your cap, Wolf, and let me look at you."

He threw his cap down on the grass and accepted a sandwich which she held out to him.

"Why, you've got grey hairs!" she cried. "You hadn't *one* when you came to me a year ago."

"Dorset air," he remarked grimly.

"And you've got lines there; and your mouth is different; and you're a lot thinner!"

"Hard work!" he threw out. "I've done Urquhart's book for him though . . . and I've been paid for it."

She turned round fully towards him now and laid both book and sandwiches on the ground. He noted that the volume was Palgrave's "Golden Treasury." He also noted an empty medicine-bottle beside her, blurred with the whiteness of milk, upon whose orifice three black flies had settled.

"You're thoroughly unhappy, my dear," said Miss Gault. "I can see it in everything about you. What is it, Wolf? It's ridiculous not to confide in an ugly old woman like me! What is it, Wolf?"

A sound of bells came to them at that moment, carried on a gust of soft air that was like dark, sweet rainwater.

"The Abbey," murmured Miss Gault. "They're out of church; but they always go on ringing those bells."

"I like to hear them," he responded; and then, with a sigh: "I suppose it's the same with everyone. Life doesn't get easier."

A kind of disintegrating softness had fallen upon him. The vaporous sunshine, the dreamy light-blowing air, the imponderable fragrance, seemed to combine to melt some basic resistance in his bones. He felt as if there were arising from that place of mortality a sweet, faint, relaxing breath, full of the deliciousness of luxurious dissolution.

The distant bells suggested the greenish fluidity, flowing and fluctuating, of the fan-tracery under the Abbey-roof. They suggested the centuries of calm, irresponsible repose that weighed on that royal coffin under the Abbey-floor! What did it matter that a girl called Gerda had abandoned her body to a youth called Weevil? What did it matter that a lecherous old bookseller was giving his daughter a day on Weymouth Beach?

So indifferent to all human fates did he feel just then, that, after swallowing the last morsel of his sandwich and wiping his fingers on the grass, he stretched out his feet in front of him, brushed the flies away from the empty bottle, and gave himself up to a physical sensation of being an integral portion of this wide, somnolent landscape!

"I am Poll's Camp," he would have said, if the sen-

sation had articulated itself. "I am Lovelace Park. I am the Gwent Lanes. I am Nevilton Hill. I am Melbury Bub. I am Blackmore Vale and High Stoy. It is over me that Gerda and Lob are now walking, down there by the Lunt."

"Why don't you tell me what's the matter, boy?" repeated Miss Gault. "Don't you care anything about me? Is my friendship of no value to you at all?"

Her words seemed as much a part of the balmy light-fluttering air above him as his own body was a part of the earth-mould below him.

Feebly, with less energy than he had used to brush away the flies from the bottle, he analyzed his inertia. "I have killed my life-illusion," he thought. "I am as dead as William Solent. I've got no pride, no will, no identity left." He fixed his eyes on his father's headstone, across which there kept fluttering the shadow of an unbudded branch from a little tree near the fence. He tried to visualize the skull under that mound. It was still of the skull, rather than of coffin or skeleton, that he thought! But this also seemed to have lost its identity. No cynical grin came back towards him from down there. No sardonic commentary upon his predicament rose to mock him or to reassure him.

Suddenly he was aware that Miss Gault was speaking rapidly, excitedly.

"But you needn't tell me, boy. I keep my eyes and my ears about me. I know where you're always going! It's those Malakites have got hold of you. It's that Malakite girl that's the trouble. You're being unfaithful to that

wife of yours. I knew it would end like this. I knew it was all a woeful mistake. These marriages out of one's class never do succeed and never will. The truth is, boy, that you don't know yourself, or what you really nced, any more than that stick of yours does! You're making yourself ill with remorse, when neither of those little Blacksod hussies cares a fig about your feelings . . . or about your faithfulness either. Why, they've been brought up to be as indiscriminate as flies! You don't know our Dorsetshire lower classes, boy. They haven't the same feelings, they're not human in the same way as we are. And what's more, Wolf, let me tell you this"—her voice deepened to a discordant harshness, and she seized the "Golden Treasury" and beat it against the ground—"you're not really in love with either of them! If you were, you'd choose between them. You're one of those men like Jason Otter, like Mr. Urquhart, who in their hearts hate women. It was sheer madness your ever picking up this Torp girl. If Ann hadn't been such a feather-headed fool she'd have stopped you! Ann is so full of her own pranks, that you're just a pet to her, a great baby-pet! If Ann had been a different sort of person, you'd never have got mixed up with these Malakites. I told her myself what would come of it! I told her in my own drawing-room, while Emma was spoiling the tea-cakes, that day she called on me. I said to her, 'If you can't keep your boy from that book-shop he'll go the way his father went!' That's what I said to her. I remember it because I was unkind to Emma afterwards about the tea-cakes! But Ann only laughed. That mother of yours

doesn't any more know the difference between good and evil than between——" The excited woman broke off in a half-humorous chuckle.

But before this diatribe had finished, Wolf had pulled in his legs and straightened his back. Something deeper in him than the grin of that skull down there, deeper than the drowsy deliciousness of the day, twitched, contracted, tightened. The ancient, unconscious tug of the navel-string, or what bound his flesh to the flesh that had conceived it, roused him from his torpor.

He saw that hard, ruddy, ironic face. He saw that gallant chin. He heard those light, reckless, defiant tones.

"I'm with you, Mother!" he thought, while his lip trembled. "I'm with you, whatever any of them say! Good or evil, I'm with you!"

Miss Gault paid no attention to this stiffening of the figure at her side. Her thoughts too, it seemed, had wandered to the roots of the past.

"William! William!" she groaned aloud. "I'd have held you. I'd have peaked and pined to hold you. I'd have slaved for you, watched for you, wasted for you, and always forgiven you!"

Completely unaware of the effect of her words upon her companion, she turned her great wild-horse eyes, the whites of which showed desperate in the sunshine, from Wolf to the grave and back again from the grave to Wolf.

"I only pray, boy," she went on, "that you'll never meet a woman who'll love you as I loved him down there. If you do, you'll kill her with the Ann Haggard in your brain. We're all of us flinty enough, boy—base and flinty; but I've never met a person who gloried in

it as your mother does! Oh, love him, boy! Love him, love him, as I've loved him for twenty-five years!"

Wolf lurched to his feet and stood erect. The struggle that had been going on so long within him between his father and his mother had reached a crisis. He had come here to range himself with that skull, to cry to it for a sign in his trouble; but this woman's desperation had wrought a change in him. His mother's words of yesterday rose up in his mind. His father must have lodged himself like an undying snake in Miss Gault's bosom! Would it be with his mother or with his father that he would range himself now, were this accusing creature with the pendulous lip and the vast black lap the very Judgement of God? With which of them? With which of them?

With his mother! Out of that hard, ironic flesh he had been torn. Good or bad, he was on her side. Good or bad, he would be judged with her!

"I've listened long enough," he said sternly. "I came to him alone. I came for my own reasons. I didn't come to side with you against her."

Miss Gault jumped up so impetuously that one of her feet tripped upon the empty bottle. Her intention was apparently to rush over the grave; but this misadventure sent her stumbling towards it, her great body bent forward and her arms outspread, till she fell on her knees against it. Crouched and hunched there like an immense black dog, she emitted a pitiful, hardly human groan. Then she twisted her head round so that one of her troubled eyes was just able to meet Wolf's indignant stare.

From the depths of this eye—as from a water-hole in the crust of nature—a look shot at him that he never forgot. But he moved forward until he faced her; and she sank then into an easier position, yet still remained upon her knees.

"He had you always in his mind," she gasped. "You've never thought about *that,* have you? He was too proud to say a word. Oh, he had a soul worth a dozen Anns!"

The challenge of Miss Gault's spirit, flung at him through that wild-horse look, was a challenge from his mother's enemy.

It was then that anger overcame pity in Wolf's heart. "Do you understand," he burst out, "I happen to care a good deal for my mother? We've lived together more closely than anyone knows. Do you understand? More closely than anyone knows."

The crouching woman jerked out two long, dark-sleeved arms.

"Go back to her, then!" she screamed, waving her hands as if she were driving off a jackal from a dead body. "Take her back to London! Don't let us see either of your faces again!"

Without a word or a gesture in response to this, Wolf wearily picked up his stick from the grass and strode over the graves to the gap in the fence.

"Back to London?" he muttered, as he went down on all fours and butted his way through the opening. "That's what Jason said. They'll get it lodged in my brain before they've done! But I *won't* go. 'There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis

not to come; if it be not now, yet it will come; the readiness is all.'"

Once outside in the road, there came to him a troublesome stab of remorse. He had always been so indulgent to what Miss Gault had to say about his mother. Why should he have turned on her like that just then?

He was half tempted to drop down on his knees again and crawl back. He stood still, listening attentively; but there was not the faintest sound from in there. The living woman was as quiet as the dead man. Ay! the god of human sorrow is a man; but Love crucifies women.

Grasping his stick below the handle, he hardened his heart and hurried off towards Ramsgard. When he reached the workhouse, he looked at his watch. It was only half-past two. He had two hours and a half before tea-time.

On the side of the road opposite the workhouse was a low stone wall. The garden of some tradesman's house was separated from the pavement by this wall, on the top of which grew thick green moss. The Ramsgard people being all at their noon-meal, he had the pavement to himself; and he stopped and stared at this coping of moss. Hooking his stick on his elbow, he laid both hands upon the top of this wall; and the life of the moss seemed to pass into his nerves. It was at this moment that he heard a boy's shrill scream from an unseen playground behind the house which appertained to this garden. The sound was not repeated; but Wolf clenched his teeth. "It's one of the Houses of the School. It's a bully," he thought. And then he found himself muttering a

deadly curse. "You brute! you brute!—— Never, till you die, shall you dare to do that again!"

Then it suddenly occurred to him that he had his back to the workhouse.

"I wonder if my father could see this wall from the room where he died? I expect he could." He walked on into the outskirts of the town. The lane which he followed emerged into a narrow road, where the chilly, newly-budded hedges alternated with small stone houses, standing back from the thoroughfare and approached by little stone paths. He caught sight of an old man, sitting on a trim bench in one of those little gardens, with a look of the most supreme contentment on his face as he smoked his pipe and watched the passers-by. There was a white cat at his feet and a clump of daffodils in the flower-bed beside him; and bathed as he was in the mellow afternoon light, his leathery, secretive, roguish countenance—he might have been the owner of some little shop or a retired gardener—seemed to gather to itself the whole long history of Ramsgard and its famous school, from the time when King Æthelwolf was buried in the Abbey to the time Miss Gault's father became headmaster!

This sly, sagacious, whimsical old man had nothing of the taciturnity of a remote village about him; still less had he the urbanity of a large town. He was as much a product of certain peculiar local traditions—in this case urbane gentility mingling with urbane obsequiousness—as if he had been a rare beetle in the hazel-copses of High Stoy or a specimen of the "Lulworth Skipper" butterfly on the Dorsetshire coast!

Wolf couldn't resist a spasm of envy as he paused for a second to peer up at this old rascal, sucking his pipe, cogitating upon his savings in Stuckey's Bank, leering at the lads and lasses who passed his gate. . . . Free from all remorse, all misgiving, how greatly did that old villain enjoy life! Ay, he was as selfish as his cat—as those yellow daffodils in that flower-bed! Before he left him Wolf had a queer hallucination. He saw this perfectly well-behaved old man in the shape of a plump, blunt-nosed maggot, peering out from a snug little crack in the wood-work of a blistering cross, on which hung, all in her long black skirt the form of Selena Gault!

Wolf walked on, but he couldn't help pondering on the kind of self-centredness that had enabled this old demon to last so long. What would *he* have made of it if, on some business-trip to London, he had encountered that Waterloo-steps face? Just thought: "That fellow ought to be in the workhouse. They oughtn't to allow such people here." Or he would have simply regarded him as part of the station, no more than a door, a post, an iron ornamentation, an advertisement-board!

Very likely this old man was the headmaster's gardener, and had worked in his day for Miss Gault's father. Well, which had got the most out of life, Miss Gault, hunched up over there in the pauper's plot, or this merry old man with his white cat?

Miss Gault loved cats too. Some who loved cats had to eat their sandwiches upon graves. This citizen of Ramsgard had a different destiny. . . .

Wolf moved on up the road, passing an increasing number of lively Sunday-afternoon strollers. What, he

wondered, were Gerda and Lobbie doing at that moment? Where were Christie and the old man? He came to a halt just then. Should he, after all, go to Ramsgard station and take the train, instead of walking? No sooner had this idea entered his head than he decided to follow it. He would have plenty of time to change his mind again if there were no train.

"I'll go into the Abbey for a minute," he thought. He turned northward and entered the town by way of a field-path past the massive wall of the Preparatory School. When he got close to the Abbey, he encountered several groups of straw-hatted boys, and the sight of them put him in mind of Mr. Smith. What would *he* have felt about the marriage of Lorna's daughter? From the straw-hats his mind slid to Mattie, like a loaded trunk down a ship's gangway. Would she make Darnley happy? Would she be happy herself?

He caught sight of a pair of immaculately handsome lads, arm in arm, each radiating delight in the touch of his companion. He saw them reject with mechanical indifference the appeal of a dilapidated tramp who had evidently singled them out from the rest, hoping that the happiness which surrounded them like an aura would redound to his advantage.

It was at this moment that he heard himself called by name.

"Wolf! It *is* you! I saw you first!"

He swung round, and there were Mattie and Olwen.

As he responded to the little girl's excited embrace, which was so emphatic that it attracted a glance of haughty disapproval from one of the straw-hatted pair,

he had time to note that this was the second time today that a person's presence had communicated itself to him before it appeared in the flesh.

He made no bones about kissing his half-sister very tenderly across Olwen's woollen cap; and the two straw-hatted ones drew away, evidently feeling that the emotions of the populace were a discordant note in that privileged place.

"We walked over, Wolf," the girl said. "That'll do, Olwen! Darnley wanted to have a walk with his mother. Jason's writing poetry in the back-garden. So I said I'd show her the King's tomb. She's been learning about King Æthelwolf—haven't you, Olwen?"

But Olwen displayed scant interest in royal dust. "I want to sit outside with Wolf," she remarked, clutching his fingers with an impatient hand. "I want to talk to Wolf while you go back to church." Mattie took not the least notice of this remark, and they all three moved slowly round the corner of the Abbey towards its front-entrance. The bride's eyes were brilliantly animated. And Wolf felt as if a warm globe of magnetic power were shooting out rays of exaltation from her strong, virginal body. There was that in her excitement that at once irritated Wolf and touched him to the heart.

"I was going to write to you, my dear," she said eagerly, "in case I shouldn't see you before Saturday. We're going to Weymouth, Wolf!"

He looked at her closely. The heavy, sulky face was gleaming. He commented, with shame in his secret heart, upon his lack of spontaneous sympathy. What did it mean, this cold, tightening sensation within him? Was it

that the figure of Darnley, urbane, melancholy, unattached, had become a sanctuary of refuge for him? He found himself responding to the clutch of Olwen's feverish fingers with a significant and treacherous pressure.

"I'm glad you're going to Weymouth. What a splendid idea!" he replied, as enthusiastically as he could. "Weymouth has always been——"

At that moment they reached the wide-open door of the church.

"You go in first, my dear," he said, in a tone of command. "I'll just smoke a cigarette, on that seat, with Olwen, and then we'll come. Don't sit too far in. But we'll find you. It won't be crowded. Oh, we'll easily find you! But Olwen and I have a very important secret we want to talk about."

He gave her a reassuring little push, half-playful, half-paternal, and watched her figure vanish in the cool dimness of the nave.

Olwen positively danced with glee as they moved across to a vacant seat under a yew-tree, not far from the grotesque little statue of the poet-courtier.

"She thought we were going to talk about her *presents*, didn't she?" said the little girl, as they sat down and he lit a cigarette. "But we're not, are we, Wolf?"

"Perhaps *I* am," he replied with a smile. "But how do you like all this marrying, Olwen?"

The child's eyes were fixed upon the hazy outline of "The Slopes," just visible in that shimmery air beyond the Public Gardens and the railway. "Oh, don't talk about it, Wolf! Jason and I never talk about it. Jason

says the only nice part of it will be the wine. They're going to have Sauterne."

Wolf began to realize that Mattie's nature was not one that a love-affair expands and widens. It dawned upon him that this little Malakite waif was being thrown more and more upon the indulgence of Jason.

The child's mood this afternoon was evidently wistful. She seemed to take Wolf's sympathy for granted; and now, with her hand in his, after uttering the word "Sauterne," she relapsed into silence.

He too was silent, repeating to himself an imaginary dialogue with Gerda, over their tea in the kitchen. The disagreeable thought came into his head, "Shall I feel any difference when I lie by her side tonight?"

"Wolf!" The little girl's voice had a solemn intensity, and she stared at him with grave eyes.

"Say on, Princess Olwen."

"Do you think people are always treated as they treat *other* people?"

The child's question, directed against the very heart of the universe, disturbed Wolf profoundly. It was the sort of remark that indicates something materially wrong in the person who utters it.

"I can't say I do, Olwen. Life is far more unjust than ever King Æthelwolf was."

"You like Miss Malakite very much, don't you, Wolf?"

He gave a palpable start and flung away his cigarette. What *was* coming now? This warm spring air seemed to be bringing all human troubles to the surface as the hot day brings forth the adders!

"Very much indeed, Olwen. Christie is very nice indeed. She's rather—she's rather like you."

"I want to see her, Wolf. I want to tell her that I'm *sorry* I wouldn't ever speak to her when I was a little girl."

"What made you so unkind, Olwen?"

"Shall I tell you, Wolf? You won't tell anyone, will you, if I tell you?"

He shook his head with all the solemnity he could muster.

"Don't look at me while I tell you!"

"All right. I'm not looking."

"Grand-dad Smith told me when I was very little"—the voice in which the child said this was low and restrained, and her words came slowly—"that . . . Miss Malakite . . . was . . . a . . . leper." Having overcome the difficulty of her confession, her expression became entirely different. She seemed as relieved to have brought this thing into the light as if she'd pulled a thorn from her hand.

"But, Olwen darling"—Wolf spoke with as much intensity as if he were addressing an intelligence equal to his own—"your grandfather didn't mean a *real* leper! He meant that people shunned Christie because of her father . . . because of her father's bad character."

The child's eyes opened wide. "Then Miss Malakite is not a leper at all? Not all white and horrid under her clothes?"

"Of course not! She's sweet and lovely under her clothes . . . just as you are!"

The child looked away again towards "The Slopes,"

her forehead puckered in concentrated thought. Then she turned to him with flushed cheeks. "Oh, Wolf, I want to see her! I want to see her soon . . . today . . . tomorrow! I want to tell her how glad I am she isn't a leper!"

It was Wolf's turn now to look at "The Slopes" with a pondering frown.

Suppose he *did* take Olwen to see Christie? What harm could come of that? He rose from the bench. "Come on, sweetheart," he cried, "Mattie will wonder where we are!"

They met Mattie coming out of the church; and at that same moment the tramp he had observed talking to the two boys drew near. Where had he seen this fellow before? The tramp approached them, and began begging. Good Lord! It was that old, courteous waiter at the Lovelace! Mattie was now pulling Olwen away. "No, no!" she murmured in reply to the man's supplication. But Wolf fumbled in his pocket. He could tell by the feel of the coins that he had half-a-crown and a few halfpence there. That was all he had. At that moment the great clock in the tower above their heads began striking. It must be four o'clock! He must hurry to the station. Like a flash he thought, "If I give him the half-crown I shan't be able to buy a ticket!" He put the few halfpence into the man's hand. As he did so he noticed that very scar which had struck his attention a year ago. The ex-waiter's eyes met his own, but without recognition. "It must be drink," Wolf said to himself, as he hurried away after the two girls.

Half-an-hour later and he was safely ensconced in a

crowded carriage, from the windows of which he could see only the blue sky.

"I *might* have given him that half-a-crown," he thought. "I could have done it."

The incident taunted and teased his mind so unmercifully that it was not till he had left the train and was nearly at his own door that he could harden his heart against it.

"It's just pure chance that I'm not in the same boat as that waiter," he thought. "He's got a look . . . it's a different expression, but he's got a look of that Waterloo-steps man!"

He rushed into the house, calling Gerda's name in a low, eager voice. There was no answer. He went into the parlour, the kitchen, the back-yard. He ran upstairs and looked into the bedroom. No one! The familiar furniture wore that peculiar air of desolation that of all things he especially disliked. The beauty of the day seemed to have completely passed it by. It looked cold and unhappy. It looked like a child that has been left indoors when all the world has been out at a festival.

And yet he had to admit there was something dignified, even *spiritual,* about those quaint, cheap objects, waiting there for their absent mistress. "They are the extreme opposite," he thought, "of that self-satisfied old rascal with the white cat."

He busied himself with careful preparations for tea, and grew peevishly puzzled at the unexpected difficulties he encountered. "Girls do things so mechanically," he said to himself, as for the tenth time he walked round

their kitchen-table, altering this and that. When all was ready he opened the dresser-drawer, took the cheque from beneath Mukalog, and placed it under Gerda's plate.

Then he sat down on a hard, high chair and waited, listening to the clock in the parlour. He felt too excited even to smoke a cigarette.

"What *is* it that worries me?" he thought. "Not fear lest she has some crazy love for the fellow. I know very well she hasn't. Damn! I suppose Carfax wouldn't believe it if I said I was thinking simply and solely about *her* feelings. But there it is! You can't sleep with a girl for twelve months and not feel what she feels! I don't believe his having gone to the limit will change her at all for me. I don't want to set eyes on the chap again . . . but that's another thing. How sleek he looked in that new brown suit! I suppose he hung that brown coat over the bottom of our bed. That's not a very nice thought!"

Suddenly the idea came to him that perhaps she would never come back—that he would have to eat this meal alone, and all other meals! He hurriedly looked round for something belonging to her wherewith to reassure himself. He saw no sign anywhere of a small work-basket that she was in the habit of using for her occasional young-girl struggles with needle and thread.

Restlessly he got up and began looking about for this. The little work-box became the most important of all objects in the world at that moment. If it were here, why, she would soon be safely home again! Where the devil

was it? He went into the parlour. He even went upstairs. Not a sign! "But I've seen the thing . . . I know I've seen it . . . since I came in!"

With a sudden inspiration he opened the dresser-drawer. There it was . . . and protruding from its edge a ragged glove! He left the drawer open, went to the front-door, and looked out. The light was waning. At the first approach of twilight that lovely day began yielding itself to its death with a precipitate eagerness!

He stood in the doorway listening. Ah, *there* was the sound of her footsteps coming along the pavement! No. It was the slouching form of their neighbour, the owner of the pigsty. Silence again! Then again footsteps! No. This time it was a pair of lovers, returning from their Sunday stroll, the boy's arm round the girl's waist.

He felt unwilling to close the door, and he went back to the kitchen, leaving it wide open.

She was with Lobbie anyway. Surely she would never do anything wild or rash with Lobbie at her side!

Such light wind as there had been during the afternoon had dropped completely now. How still everything was! He and the furniture sat waiting, while this perfect day sank willingly into oblivion.

"Gerda, my precious! Gerda, my darling!" He kept forming words of this kind in his mind, as he fidgeted on his hard chair, facing the hallway. "It was all my fault, Gerda, that you gave yourself to your water-rat!"

He began to long for her coming, as he had never before longed for any human step. He seemed to realize the helpless pathos of her beauty as he had never realized it before. He saw her bending naked over the stove, as

he had seen her once, when, for wantonness, he had undressed her downstairs. He saw the calves of her legs, the curves of her thighs. He saw the peculiar loveliness of the back of her neck and the way her eyelid drooped upon her cheek, giving her profile such evasive innocence.

"You *must* come, Gerda! I don't care for anything, except for you to come! If you come in now . . . safe and sound . . . you can sulk and scold and cry as much as you like!"

How late it was getting. The clock would be striking six soon! She had never been as late as this before. Something *must* have happened! He got up from his chair and looked round the kitchen. Mukalog lay on his back in the open drawer; and suddenly the sight of the idol's fleering face transported him with fury. The "god of rain" seemed the epitome of everything that was making him suffer. Jason's contempt, Gerda's absence—they were both gloated over in that little monster's abysmal leer!

Recklessly he seized the idol, as he might have seized a dead rat, rushed with it out of the kitchen, out of the house, across the road, and flung it with all the force of his arm high over the pigsty into the darkening field beyond.

The pigs, aroused by his approach, set up a hideous hullabaloo; and the foul smell of their enclosure followed the indrawn panting of his breath. He paused for a minute, with his hands on the fence of the shed, uttering a foolish malediction upon the screeching snouts raised towards him. Then he turned with a groan and shuffled back across the road.

Standing disconsolately by the table, he mechanically lifted up Gerda's plate and surveyed the cheque beneath it. He recalled how she had folded it up with cold, indifferent fingers. He pressed it with his clenched knuckles and re-covered it. Could he do nothing to make her come now, this very moment? "My 'mythology'!" he thought. Up went his hands to his eyes; and pressing his eyeballs tightly, so as to blot out everything, he concentrated his whole nature in one terrific effort to summon up that formidable magnetic mystery.

His will, thus strained to its uttermost, gave him a sensation as if an obstinate, taut rope were tugging at a water-lògged bucket. Not a stir, not a vibration, in those dark interior gulfs!

Removing his hands from his face, he swayed a little against the table, dizzy with his mental struggle. It was no use. His "mythology" would never help him again. That ecstasy, that escape from reality was gone. Dorsetshire had done for it!

He subsided into the same chair and waited, his hands outspread, palms-down, upon his knees, his heels together, his head bowed.

A kind of waking-trance took possession of him, in which he had the illusion that the smell of the pigsty and Gerda's absence were the same thing. "I shall have to go to the Torps' and ask about her," he said to himself; but the words only tapped against one another in his brain like dry peas in a sieve.

Then he heard the gate click.

He rushed to the door, out of the house, and, heedless

of everything but overwhelming relief, hugged her to his heart.

Her mouth was cold. Her cheek was cold. He pulled her into the hall and slammed the door with a jerk of his shoulder; but not for a second did he let go his tight hold of her. His relief was so great that, as he pressed her against him, he gave vent to several long-drawn breaths that had in them the catch of sobs.

He had felt from the very first touch that she would not resist him, that the barrier between them was broken. When at last he got her into the kitchen and she had taken off her things, he was hit to the heart by the haggardness of her face. Till now she herself had been tearless. Emotions must have done their worst with her all that day, and she had nothing left. But the sight of the carefully-laid tea-table stirred up too many old associations. She stood staring at him, her hands hanging down limply by her sides, her grey eyes fixed upon him. Then, without the least contortion of her face, a torrent of tears descended. . . .

It was after eight o'clock when they got up from their tea-table. Neither of them had said a word about Bob; but Wolf felt convinced that the girl, without using one single articulate syllable about the matter, indicated that henceforth she would close her door to Mr. Weevil.

It was with a strange sensation that he found his thoughts reverting to Christie and her trip to Weymouth —a strange and peculiar sensation. He felt as if Christie had grown thin and frail as a ghost—remote and far-off, too—like that day when he saw her crouched in the

Castle lane! She seemed to have become once more what she was in the beginning of their friendship . . . a disembodied entity, dwelling in his consciousness like a spirit in a cloud, immaterial, unreal . . . near to him as his own thought and yet far removed in body.

One by one, holding a blue-bordered napkin in his hands, he dried each cup, each saucer, each plate, each knife, each spoon, as Gerda handed them to him out of the wash-pan in the sink. Sometimes in light, sometimes in shadow, as his own figure came between her and the two candles on the table, her face still showed fluctuating signs of uneasiness. But these signs grew fewer and fewer as he told her about Miss Gault and her sandwiches, about the waiter at the Lovelace having become a beggar, about the extreme emptiness of the outgoing train and its crowded state returning, about the crafty old man with a white cat—he suppressed all mention of Mattie and Olwen—until at last an expression came into her face that he knew well, an expression of sleepy, infantile amusement.

He paused in his narration directly he caught sight of that look, and hung up the blue-bordered drying-cloth in its place and proceeded to wash his own hands at the tap.

He got into bed that night some while before she did; and he lay quietly watching her, while she brushed her hair at their chest of drawers between the two half-open windows. This little wooden-framed looking-glass, on this clumsy pine-wood object, had been Gerda's only toilet-table from the start. "She shall have more of these things," he thought, "when we've cashed that cheque!"

As he watched her candle-flame bend towards her in the faint airs that came wandering out of the night into the room—as he watched the careful gesture with which she pushed back the candlestick as she stood there in her long-sleeved night-gown—he pondered upon the death of his "mythology."

"Perhaps it was an escape from reality," he thought, "that I was *bound* to lose, if reality got hold of me! Dorsetshire, at any rate, seems to have got hold of me. No, no, I am *not* going back to London; and I am *not* going to drown myself in Lenty Pond!"

When Gerda had finished brushing her hair and had tied it with a thin blue ribbon—he had long since remarked that this was one of the few personal peculiarities she never deviated from—she seemed inclined to loiter awhile before coming to bed. She closed the window at the top, opened it at the bottom, and, drawing a chair close to the sill, sat down there, leaning one of her arms on the woodwork.

It was odd how one single gross image annoyed his mind to the exclusion of all others. This was the image of Weevil in his brown suit, with most of the buttons tightly buttoned, making love to her in that white, high-throated night-gown! Of course, it couldn't have been in the night-gown . . . but still he must have . . . and his brown suit had so many hard, impudent, shiny, cock-crowing buttons!

"Don't catch cold, sweetheart!" he cried suddenly, while a very disconcerting doubt shot through him. Was it revolting to her feminine life-illusion to slip into his arms, easily, naturally, after the shock of what she had

undergone? Did *she* feel Bob Weevil's brown suit, his impudent buttons, too nearly, too closely, to bear the thought of any love-making that night? He longed to call out to her bluntly and directly, "Come on, you sweet little fool, I won't touch you!" . . . or better still perhaps, "Come on, you beautiful distracted creature, I'll soon make you forget your water-rat!" Instead of uttering a sound, however, what he really did was to jump out of bed, snatch his own warm dressing-gown from the door, and wrap it about her shoulders.

He was very anxious not to bother her with either his sensuality or his sentimentality. His feeling for her at that moment was objective, almost impersonal. He returned to bed, lit a cigarette, propped himself up upon both pillows, and smoked meditatively.

"Christie must be safe back now," he thought; and there moved slowly across his innermost consciousness the evil suggestion that it was because of what he had read in that exercise-book that the girl's thin frame seemed to him so unearthly tonight, her shadowy personality so remote. "She's lodged in my mind, though, come what may," he said to himself. "I *will* take Olwen to see her," he thought. "She *shall* find out she's not a leper!"

From Christie his mind rushed away to that little house in Saint Aldhelm's Street. "I suppose Emma's come home by now and Miss Gault's in bed! I wish I'd gone back and kissed her, huddled up like that on his grave—kissed her right on her deformed lip!"

The night-air was stirring again now, and the flame of the candle upon the chest of drawers flickered up and

down, throwing queer shadows about the room. The air was sweet with vague earth-odours—not the least tincture of the pigsty perceptible—and as it blew in upon him, past the motionless figure by the window, it seemed like a host of air-spirits journeying on some errand that had no connection with human affairs.

Suddenly he drew in his breath with a startled, hissing sound, and sat bolt-upright, staring at Gerda in rapt attention.

The girl had fallen upon her knees at the window, and was making little, tentative, whistling sounds. She was trying to catch the notes of her blackbird-song! First one note she would try, and then another; and each one, as she tried it, broke off in mid-air, ineffectual and futile. . . . Her fingers were clutching the window-sill now, and her head was tossed back. The gown he had thrown over her had fallen away. Her shoulders looked cold and pitiful. Her body trembled and swayed. Her back being turned to him, he could not see that desperately pursed-up whistling mouth; but most vividly he imagined it, and imagined too the piteous contortion of that face against the warm, green-growing darkness outside.

"Gerda . . . my darling!" This was what he wanted to cry out; but he did not dare to utter a whisper. The room had become enchanted. It was a dedicated place—set apart . . . and there was he, foolishly propped up on their two pillows, mute, helpless, like a witness at the birth of a still-born child!

Again and again did the girl make desperate, discordant, whistling sounds; but it was all to no purpose!

"Don't mind, my darling!" murmured Wolf, when, in

a troubled pause after these attempts, he noticed her back shaken by weeping. "Come on to bed, honey—to bed, to bed! You're lucky not to have started a hoot-owl answering you. I fancied I heard one of those demons, when I woke up in the middle of the night last night. Come on, Gerda; there's a good girl!"

He had never heard a human sigh so deeply drawn as the one he heard now from that open window. But she got up slowly upon her feet and blew out the candle.

He threw back the bedclothes and smoothed out the pillow for her head. Tightly he held her when she stretched herself out by his side.

"Well, there it is!" he thought. "Life has scotched her just as it has me. Urquhart's cheque has brought me down. Weevil's brown suit has done the same for her. Well, we must get on somehow. Shall I say good-night to her before I let myself go to sleep? No; better not! Better just hold tight to her . . . and drift on in our barge—down, down the stream . . . drift on in our barge!"

"DON'T YOU EVER SAY 'IT'S TOO LATE' AGAIN, MISSY!" were his parting words, as he kissed Gerda, a few days later, across their iron gate.

It was Thursday now, only two days before the King's Barton wedding, and events had moved rapidly since that agitating Sunday. He had cajoled his Pond Cottage friends into allowing Olwen to pay a surreptitious visit to what after all was her paternal home; and the child had fallen in love with Christie to such an extent that the visit had been repeated within forty-eight hours. And this very day Darnley was driving her in, as he came to School, with the idea that she should stay a couple of days under the Malakite roof.

"No one will interfere; it's all blown over," Wolf had said. "It would have to be some enemy if any fuss were made. But there won't be any fuss. A little gossip, when Christie goes out with her in the street . . . nothing more . . . and perhaps not even that!"

The only opposition to these proceedings came from Jason, who, though he would not confess himself jealous of this new passion in the child, brought forward the darkest suggestions as to the dangerousness of Blacksod as a place for little girls. "These large towns," he had said to them all, speaking as if Blacksod were a second Birmingham, "these large towns are full of disgusting goings-on. These tradesmen think of nothing but their merry little ways. And, of course, if you want

Olwen to have her meals with Mr. Malakite——" But to Wolf's delighted surprise he had received emphatic support in this enterprise from Mrs. Otter. He had, indeed, been quite as astonished at the insight displayed by that timid lady as by her defiance of the protests of her eldest son. "Olwen will only do them good, Jason," she had said. "There's a special providence over a child like that. She'll turn that sad little Christie into a different girl."

It was just after eight o'clock when Wolf swung round to wave a final farewell to Gerda. He had begged her to let him have a very early breakfast that morning; for Mrs. Solent wanted him to see her tea-shop with what she called "clear decks." Everything had always been in confusion, near closing-time, when he came in at the end of the day; but this morning, full of pride that her son should see her shop before her waitresses appeared, Mrs. Solent had unlocked and cleaned up the place herself at an incredibly early hour, and was waiting for him there now.

The new tea-shop was not far from the Grammar School, but it was in a side-street that branched off towards the meadows where the Lunt encircled the town. The town, in fact, melted into the country here even more quickly than it did on the Babylon Hill side or in the direction of Preston Lane. It was a more umbrageous country, at any rate, into which that little side-street led.

Into this quarter of Blacksod, cutting its way through heavy clay hills, diving between tall ferny banks covered with beeches and Scotch firs, following swifter

streams than the Lunt, ran the great Exeter Highroad; and it was the tourists from that direction that were now to be waylaid and entertained.

This process had apparently already begun; for when Wolf approached the neat little square building, lying back from the road, with a garden in front of it yellow with daffodils, his feeling was unmistakable that prosperity was in the air. The wind was keen and invigorating this morning, the sky clear; and as he strode up the path between the swaying daffodils, he had a sharp, prophetic sense of his mother's future. He saw this little shop moved to one of the main streets of the town. He saw still more of the savings of that enamoured farmer swept into the business! He saw his mother's grasp upon life growing more drastic, more daring, more debonair. He saw her power over material things increasing, her strange pride and exultant loneliness keeping pace with her power. "She'll leave me far behind," he thought. And there swept over him a wave of bitter shame at his own incompetence.

"She'll be doling out bonuses to Gerda and me," he thought. "We shall be hanging on to her skirts! We shall be a dead weight upon her."

Vividly he recalled the discussion that had taken place in the last few days between himself and Gerda on the subject of how to spend Mr. Urquhart's two hundred pounds. How childish Gerda was, and how reckless he was! The whole thing was ridiculous . . . with their tiny income to think of spending all this on just smartening up their house!

He knocked lightly now at the tea-shop door and entered without waiting for a response. He was amazed at the neatness and elegance of what he saw.

His mother greeted him in the highest feather. Laughing and jesting, she showed him the kitchen, the scullery, the sanitary arrangements, the furniture. "The rooms are empty upstairs," she said; "but do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to leave Herbert-land, with its dust and its smells, and move over here! I'm going to use one of my waitresses—I've got two, you know—as a maid. She and I will both sleep up there. There are three rooms: And I'll have a regular drawing-room. I'll have the kind of drawing-room I've always wanted—different altogether from that old place in town."

Mother and son were now seated on two immaculate wicker-chairs. Wolf had not yet dared to light a cigarette; but Mrs. Solent, with a quick, radiant gesture, offered him one of her own.

"You won't get enough exercise, mother, if you live where you work; and your precious drawing-room will always be full of the smell of cooking."

"Oh, we won't think of that!" she cried, making a stroke in the air with her cigarette as if condemning to annihilation every trick of hostile chance; and as he watched her, he realized for the first time what a power she had of forcing external events into line with her wishes. Never had he seen her so full of zest for labour and trouble and tension as she was that morning. Wolf himself felt sick with dismay when he thought of this place filled with tourists from Exeter, and the rooms upstairs reeking of culinary odours!

"What are you making that face about?" his mother asked.

"Am I making a face? I was wondering how much spirit you'll have left for those evening walks you're so fond of."

Mrs. Solent laughed gaily. "I had one, last night," she said, "towards Pendomer. There are lovely fields over there"—she nodded her head towards the west—"and delicious woods. I couldn't want anything nicer. I went out there last night . . . up the hill and over the hill . . . I half-thought of waylaying you at the Grammar School and taking you with me. But you know what I am! I love my Wolf." Here she extinguished her cigarette and rose from her seat. "But I *have* to be alone for these walks. I tell myself stories; I let myself be as romantic and excited as I can. That time of twilight stirs me up . . . like a nightjar, I suppose . . . and I have lovely sensations!"

She moved past him; and as she passed she bent down, took his head between her two hands, and kissed it. Then she went to the door, and, flinging it wide open, inhaled the cool, strong northeast wind. As she stood thus, with her straight, sturdy back turned to him, he seemed to get a supernatural glimpse of the whole power of her personality. This tea-shop and that hill "towards Pendomer" were only little, material symbols of a Napoleonic campaign that she was working out . . . not necessarily in *this* world at all, but in *some* world, some level of psychic conflict, parallel with his "mythology."

"Well, I've got to be off, Mother!" he cried. And as he extinguished his cigarette by the edge of hers, in one

of her new ash-trays, he instinctively squeezed it into an identical perpendicular position. Then, jumping up from the creaking wicker-chair, "I'm late as it is," he murmured. "I suppose Mr. 'Willum's Mill' comes here for his tea every day?" He strode to the door and stood there by her side. Mrs. Solent laughed, with the rich, careless, high-pitched laugh of a Ninon or a Thais.

"Only on market-days, my son. But I'm going to tea with *him*, next Sunday."

Wolf disregarded this confession altogether. "I say, Mother! You're coming to the wedding on Saturday, aren't you? The day after tomorrow. You haven't forgotten that?"

She turned towards him her radiant cheeks and glowing eyes. "Will the monster be there, to see Lorna's child married to your respectable friend? If she's there, I *must* come. What sport it'll be! The monster and I in the same pew, and your sister landing her patient fish!"

Across Wolf's mind flitted the image of that unwieldy figure stumbling over the milk-bottle at the grave.

"I haven't the least idea whether Miss Gault means to come," he said. "But *you* must come, Mother! You must leave your work to your two girls. I'll call for you at Mrs. Herbert's . . . about half-past nine . . . and we'll walk over. Well, I must run. Good-bye, Mother."

She met his embrace with a swift, almost greedy kiss, but immediately afterwards whispered with airy mockery: "Mattie Smith must be very grateful to you for giving her her darling! That pointed beard would never have been caught if my Wolf hadn't played matchmaker."

"What the devil are you talking about, Mother? They knew each other years before *we* came down here."

There shone in her brown eyes such a well-spring of satirical mischief, he found it hard to tear himself away. A spasm of vicious sympathy with this dark-spurting jet of malice produced the sensation within him of a nervous twinge that was half a tickling delight to him and half an adder's bite.

His mind reverted in a lightning-flash to his father's skull. Oh, how gentle, oh, how kindly that grin of death seemed, compared with this inhuman glee in the presence of perverse fate! A malign voluptuousness rose up within him, like an intoxicating bubble out of the very abyss, spilling black bile through veins. Ferociously he offered up that poor skull to this radiant sorceress. "You look just as you did, Mother, when you teased Mr. Smith so much, that Horse-Fair day. I hope *his* ghost won't be there on Saturday!" His words were innocent enough; but he knew too well what passed, under their cover, between himself and this woman. For good and evil he had made his choice between the living and the dead.

"I *could* not feel like this," he thought, "if I were the Wolf Solent I used to be. Good-bye!" he repeated. "I must run." . . .

All that morning, as he faced the Grammar School boys, his mind squeezed out the essence of this scene with his mother. He had gone over to her altogether! He had deserted the "fellow i' the cellarage." He had betrayed his "old Truepenny." All that long morning, while those boys' faces scattered themselves into his mind like grey

ashes into a pail, he struggled to make clear what had happened to him.

He had no longer any definite personality, no longer any banked-up integral self. Submission to Urquhart had killed more than self-respect. He could never have gone over to his mother like this if his "mythology" had survived. He could feel now that greedy kiss of hers upon his lips! He had come to Dorset . . . he knew it well enough now . . . to escape from her, to mix with the spirit of his father in his own land. But Fate was hunting him "back to London," and he began to have an inkling as to what the alternative to London was. The alternative to London was the bottom of Lenty Pond!

Wilder and wilder grew his thoughts as he rounded off the destiny of the House of Stuart to those furtive listeners. Rows upon rows of dwarf-men . . . that is how he saw them now, these boys of his . . . embryo-men, with a kind of distorted, atrophied intelligence, full of a jeering, idiotic cunning! Oh, how he hated them and the task of teaching them!

Suddenly in the very middle of his lesson he felt his voice changing and becoming strangely vibrant. Good God! What things were on the tip of his tongue to say to them! Was he going to "dance his malice-dance" before them, as he had danced it before that London audience? Life upon this earth began to show itself to him in a most evil light.

This killing of his "mythology," how could he survive it? His "mythology" had been his escape from life, his escape into a world where machinery could not reach him, his escape into a deep, green, lovely world, where

thoughts unfolded themselves like large, beautiful leaves, growing out of fathoms of blue-green water!

What were his sensations to him now? What was the air of a morning like this, without those mysterious emanations from the glimmering depths?

He had comforted Gerda; and the way she was happy now in her childish delight over that two hundred ought to have given a fresh glow to his days. But it didn't. That startling alliance between Christie and Olwen, which he had plotted in the face of so many difficulties, and which was apparently absorbing both of them in its excitement, ought to have satisfied him. But it only made his thoughts gloomier. The last time he had seen Christie, her mind was so full of Olwen and Olwen's future, that she scarcely listened to what he was telling her!

Through the dizzy foreground of these boys' heads, white collars, sharp elbows, and scratching pens, through the patient "notes" he himself was dictating to them, floated in long procession all the people of his life.

Urquhart was sending his book in instalments to Bristol to be printed. He appeared to be thinking of nothing else. Jason was revising another volume of poetry, which promised to raise him into the innermost circle of modern literature. Darnley, Mattie, Mrs. Otter—they were all happy just then. He found himself sheering off any thought of Miss Gault. But apart from Miss Gault, all his friends were in calm waters. Even T. E. Valley, so Darnley had informed him, was in a state of comparative peace of mind.

He found himself and Miss Gault to be the only unhappy ones. Yes, and they were the only consciousnesses

in the whole circle who gave a thought to that cemetery! When he and Miss Gault were dead, not a living soul would remember William Solent. Why, Mattie, the man's own daughter—not even once had Wolf been able to persuade her to visit that grave!

Oh, how he hated his work in that classroom! He did not only know in pitiless detail every map upon the wall . . . and feel toward it as something removed from every tincture of happiness . . . he also knew every ink-stain and fly-stain upon the wall. Those dirty marks were of equal importance with the maps. Both the marks and the maps represented a world that was totally bleak . . . a world of doleful invention, of disconsolate fancy . . . and yet a world in which he had to spend by far the larger part of his life.

He had just managed to cope with this desolate world by giving himself up to his secret vice the very second he left the school-gate. But those ecstatic sensations were now gone for ever! He might tear his nerves to pieces with his effort to get those feelings back. They would never come back! They were lost. How did human beings go on living, when their life-illusion was destroyed? What did they tinker up and patch up inside of them to rub along with, to shuffle through life with, when they lacked that one grand resource? . . .

He hurried back to Preston Lane for lunch, and was more than successful in hoodwinking Gerda as to his secret desolation. The girl chatted all the time about the spending of the two-hundred! So far she had bought nothing but one small pair of silver sugar-tongs. The cheque had been deposited in Gerda's name, and the girl

was touchingly proud of possessing her first "fortune," as she kept calling it. She apparently intended spending every penny in the next few weeks! At least that was the implication of her excited chatter; and Wolf was quite prepared to submit.

He derived a sardonic amusement from noting the fact that this "spiritual blood-money," which had cost him his secretest happiness, was apparently smoothing away altogether the moral bruise left by the Weevil incident. That "brown coat" might return to *his* mind now and then. Hers it seemingly troubled no more. As for the luckless water-rat, he did not show his face again. Wolf's private inkling was that he had been indignantly dismissed, once for all, in some brief scene to which the girl never alluded. But it may easily have been that the lad himself was frightened by the length to which he had gone. Wolf certainly found, in his own weary introspection into the feelings of a cuckold, that he had a tendency to avoid that part of the town where the sausage-shop was! . . .

His lunch over, Wolf strode back more dispirited than ever to the scene of his pillory.

He had come to loathe every aspect of that chair and desk which made up his spiritual scaffold. There he talked and fidgeted while those rows of cropped heads and protruding ears nodded and swayed like shocks of ruffled wheat under the conscientious, pitiless repetition of a recurrent winnowing. And this was destined to be his life indefinitely, *sans* the remotest chance of a change for the better, unless his mother, as a successful business-woman, gave him a pension!

What a mess he had made of his life! As he surveyed those spots and blurs and marks on these odious walls, he began to recognize the fact that until the last two or three days he had never faced reality at all. His heavenly vice, hugged to himself like a fairy bride, had protected him from reality. Here he was, thirty-six years old, and as far as *real reality* was concerned—the reality his mother lived in, the reality Darnley lived in—he was as innocent and preoccupied as a hermit who reads nothing but his breviary.

He had lost his breviary now, his Mass-book, his Mass! He had lost his whole inner world; and the outer world —what was it but rows of puzzled, protruding ears, into which, for an eternity, he had to pump tedious, questionable information?

When he left the classroom that evening, he waited for Darnley outside the building.

"I must see Christie first!" he kept repeating, as he watched the boys file out.

"Will you do something for me, old friend?" he said, as soon as his colleague appeared. Darnley fixed his mackerel-coloured eyes upon him in patient surprise.

"Even unto the third part of my kingdom, Solent!"

"Well, keep Mattie waiting for once, and go to tea with Gerda. Will you do that? Tell her I've got one of my walking-fits upon me and *have* to have some air. Tell her not to be worried, even if I'm late for supper. Of course, I don't mean you to stay all that time. But just tell her I shall be late; and she's not to worry."

"But what on earth's up, Wolf? Where, if a person may ask, are you going to run off to?"

"Oh, it's all right," Wolf said quietly. "I'm not sure yet where I *shall* go. Possibly I'll pay a visit to Mattie and tell her to expect *you!* Don't bother me with any details, my dear! Only, if you love me, go over to Preston Lane and make yourself amusing to Gerda and enjoy her tea. And make her understand that it's all right. That's the great thing . . . that it's all right!"

Wolf fancied there was a dim expression of disquietude in his friend's face as he nodded to him and hurried off; but he felt as if he would have run a worse risk just then than to disquiet Darnley. Hurriedly he made his way to the Malakite shop. "She's got Olwen in there now," he said to himself. "She won't want to see me."

But while he still kept repeating the words, "She won't want to see me," he rang the bell in the little side-alley.

To his surprise the door was opened immediately, and Christie herself, in cloak and hat, stood before him. "You!" the girl cried. "Well, you'd better come with me! Olwen has begun murmuring something about cake; and I've got none in the house. I've left her with Father, over their tea. They're both slow eaters; so we needn't rush *too* madly. Let's go this way!"

She led him up the quiet incline leading to the King's Barton road. He could guess now which was the actual confectioner's to which she was hurrying him . . . a little shop he had often passed on his way in and out of the town.

The horizontal sun was shooting its rays through great dark banks of western clouds as they approached this shop; and from its windows the fiery reflections fell

upon the road like the reflections of barge-lanterns into an estuary.

"Wolf! I never knew how exciting she was, how intelligent she was! Oh, Wolf, it's wonderful! We suit each other down to the ground."

He snatched at her hand and pressed it hard. Never in all his relations with her had he caught such a tone in her voice.

When they turned into the Barton road, there was wafted into their faces one of those wandering winds that seem to carry a burden of earth-mysteries from one unknown spot to another.

"What an evening it is!" she cried. "I smelt primroses then!"

"It's moss, I expect, and dead leaves," he said, "from the woods over there."

They soon reached the little shop; and he entered it with her, and helped her to choose the cake.

"Where are you going, Wolf? Over to Barton? Over to Pond Cottage?"

He held open the door for her in silence. There was a bell fixed upon the top of this door, which rang noisily at he closed it behind them. His nerves were so strained that this harsh jangle above their heads seemed ominous to him—seemed to have a sound of warning, like a reef-bell at sea.

"Yes," he said dreamily. "Over to Barton . . . over to Lenty Pond."

The girl missed this slip of the tongue.

"Is your sister happy, Wolf?" she asked. And then, without waiting for an answer: "Do you know what Ol-

wen said just now? She said she'd like to live with me when Mattie was married!"

Wolf prodded the ground with his stick. "Did she really? What a wise little girl! And what did you answer? I don't see why you shouldn't have her! I'm sure it would be all right now."

Christie sighed deeply, a long breath.

"*Would* they agree to it? Do you think they'd agree to it?"

"I don't see why not," he repeated, in a low voice.

"If you see Mattie tonight, Wolf, I wish you'd sound her about it . . . and Mrs. Otter . . . just to see how they'd take it."

He made no reply to this; but drawing under his arm her free hand, and straightening his shoulders, he gazed up the road.

"Do you remember our night in the cornfield, Chris? After that game of bowls?"

She lifted her head and looked sharply at him, and he received the impression that he had struck an unseasonable note.

"I'm not one for forgetting, Wolf. You ought to know *that* by this time."

"Urquhart gave me two hundred pounds for finishing his book, Chris. I've never told you that, have I?"

But she had turned her face away now and was evidently thinking about Olwen, and getting anxious to return.

"Oh, I'm so glad, my dear!" Her voice was sympathetic, but it was the calm sympathy of a friend, not the vibrant sympathy of a lover.

"What a detached little thing she is," he thought; and the memory came over him, with a rush of wild self-pity, of all they had whispered together in that cornfield. "I've never told her about my 'mythology' . . . but she ought to know, she ought to know what that two hundred means!"

"Well, I must run back. Olwen will have finished her tea." And she tightened her hold upon the cake and made a little movement to draw her arm away. But Wolf burst out then with a final impulse of desperation:

"It was a vile job. It's a vile production to be paid all that for! He's printing it in Bristol *now*. It'll just suit your father's clients! How do you think I'll appear to myself after this, Christie?"

The girl tossed her head proudly. "Oh, the clients!" she cried. "You're extremely moral tonight, Wolf! I daresay you thought *my* book would please the clients!"

"I read just a page," he said. But he released her arm now and only held her there by the grimness of his mood. "To sell my soul to Urquhart! . . . to do what young Redfern *wouldn't* do!"

She did look up at him now with a flash of penetration.

"But, Wolf—any deviltry he threatened you with, was to *make* you do it, wasn't it? Well! You've done it. You've submitted. He can't hurt you now, can he?"

"But the book—the book, Chris!"

The girl gave a faint little laugh . . . the laugh of an air-sprite for whom these human scruples were growing intolerably tedious. . . . "Well, there are plenty of things Gerda will be glad enough to buy with this money. You're different from what I thought you were, Wolf, if

you let an absurd fancy like this prey on your mind!" She paused a moment and then said gravely, "But Mother would have understood what troubles you."

She seized the sleeve of his coat with her fingers, and then stood silent, looking fixedly at him. Then she sighed very heavily, and, lifting up his arm to her face, pressed her lips to his wrist. After that she stared at him once more, in intense contemplative scrutiny.

He looked away, across her shoulder, over the scattered Blacksod roofs, over the Lunt meadows. Her sudden gesture of affection and something in the white immobility of her face made him think of the warning he had received in Urquhart's kitchen from that Farmer's Rest girl.

"I'll take a look at that pond tonight," he thought grimly. "If that's to be the upshot, I'd better see how it looks of a fine March evening!" . . .

"Well, give Olwen a kiss for me, Chris; and if I find Mattie at home I'll certainly try her out about that. I believe myself that she'll agree to it. She's so self-absorbed just now that I think she'll be glad to be left free. Well . . . God bless you, Chris! Don't drop the cake. Good-bye . . . good-bye!"

He did not look back after they separated, but the sound of her light-running footsteps made his heart feel desolately empty.

His last hope of recovering his old self seemed to sink down like a child's sagging balloon, pricked by a bodkin.

"She doesn't know. She's full of Olwen; and she doesn't know," he said to himself. But could he have *made* her know, even if he'd gone back with her? She

didn't ask him to go back. Why should she? But *could* he have made her know, even if she had? He had never told a living soul about his "mythology."

He grasped his stick by the middle now; and in place of William of Deloraine, there came into his head the Homeric description of Hector of Troy, when, with his great spear held in just that way, he imposed a truce upon the combatants!

As he caught himself with this thought in his mind he smiled at his own grandiose self-consciousness. Stoicism! That's what a man needed, made as he was made! Stoical endurance of whatever fate the gods rained down upon his head! No Trojan, no Roman, would blink and whimper at the thought of Lenty Pond.

It was not long before he reached the very spot where on the night of the bowling-match he had climbed over the hedge with Christie, into the cornfield. . . .

Moved to what he did by an obscure sense that this might be "the last time," he hurriedly scrambled through the thickset hedge. The field was evidently destined to lie fallow that season. He found a rusty barrow, with its wooden shafts protruding into the air like the horns of a buried monster; and upon this he sat down. The sun had disappeared now, and he felt disposed to let the twilight fall about him in that place of memory.

Slowly, as he waited, did the earth swing into greyness, into dusk, into darkness. Cramped and chilly, he felt as if it needed more energy than he possessed to clamber down again into the road! A sort of waking-trance fell upon him as he crouched there, growing more and more

cold and numb; and it was almost quite dark when he resumed his walk.

"I am like a ghost that's been damned," he thought, as he moved on. And indeed it was just as such a ghost would have felt that he had the sense of being cut off from all the magnetic reservoirs of the planet! He experienced a physical sensation of lightness, of hollowness, as he walked—as if he had been a husk, blown by the faintest of all winds!

When he reached the path that crossed the fields to the main highway, "I suppose," he thought, "the whole business has been inevitable since the beginning; the sort of thing that *had* to happen, if a nature like mine lost its pride?"

As he began to approach King's Barton he noticed that the night was going to be one of those clear, vapourless nights, when the sky is velvety dark and the stars exceptionally large and bright. He was walking with his head turned towards a specially luminous constellation, just above the arable uplands, a little to his left. Suddenly he became conscious, as an absolute certainty, that just above the horizon *behind* him, somewhere between Melbury Bub and Blacksod, there was a crescent moon, He swung round on his heel. Yes! There it was . . . the thinnest, most disembodied new moon that he had ever seen!

He surveyed that fragile-floating illuminated curve, comparable to nothing above or beneath the earth, and there came over him an inexplicable desire to do reverence to this immortal visitant. How had he known with

such certainty that there *was* a new moon behind him? He was not yet enough of a countryman to keep any account of these things. Well! whatever perch were left in Lenty Pond would know about this new moon!

When he reached the wall of the churchyard, he noticed that there was a light in one of the lower windows of that great Perpendicular Tower. He paused and contemplated this light. In that vapourless darkness its effect in the middle of a great mass of masonry was singular and arresting. While he leaned upon the low, crumbling wall and surveyed this light, he became aware of the sound of men's voices—voices whispering . . . whispering furtively and suspiciously. Suddenly, by means of a light much less clear than the light in the window . . . "It's a lantern!" he thought . . . he detected the forms of three men, one of them much taller than the others, grouped around the boy's grave. He had no sooner caught sight of this group of noctambulists than the light in the tower went out.

Never had he felt less inquisitive, less concerned. He was tempted to walk forward and let the whole thing go. However, where all motives were equally futile, let a straw turn the scale! He climbed stealthily over the wall and advanced to the church-door.

The door was wide open, and he entered the central aisle, moving as cautiously as he could. Past the christening-font he moved; past the back of the rear pews. All was pitch-dark, and the peculiar smell of the church, suggestive of mildew and worm-eaten woodwork, was like a second darkness within the darkness. He was arrested in his advance by the sudden appearance

of a flickering light, which proceeded from the space under the tower where were the stone steps that led up to the belfry.

"Tilly-Valley!" he muttered to himself, as once more —as had been happening to him so often these last few days—he knew without question who this light-bearer was.

Yes! He was right! Descending the belfry-steps, with a flickering candle in his hand, came the figure of the little priest, his thin legs first, then his cassocked body, then his agitated white face, then his bare black scalp!

The expression of the man's face, when he caught sight of Wolf, was an epitome of consternation and relief, the latter emotion rapidly overspreading the former, like a kindly shadow crossing a distorted gargoyle.

"What's up, Valley?" whispered Wolf, taking the vicar's cold, limp fingers in his own. "What are they doing out there? Is it Urquhart? There were three of them. They had a lantern. God, man! You're trembling like a leaf!"

"I was in my garden . . . I saw them come in . . . over the hedge. . . . For a long time I watched them. I ought to have gone down to them . . . I know I ought . . . I've betrayed the Sacrament by not going down to them. . . ."

"It's all right," whispered Wolf soothingly. "You couldn't have done anything. They've probably been drinking. Monk's with him out there. I saw him . . . the great devil! The other one's that fellow Round, no doubt."

The priest broke away from him and began hurrying

up the aisle towards the altar, Wolf following at his heels.

"There would have been a time," he said to himself, "when . . . when . . ."

Wolf thought the clergyman was going to kneel down or even prostrate himself; but instead of this he placed the candle carefully upon the top of the altar, made a hurried genuflection, and then ran round like a panic-stricken thief to a small window in the side-transept which overlooked the invaded spot.

Here Wolf followed him and peered out too, leaning over his shoulder.

There were only two men to be seen now . . . and they were both busy filling up the open grave. The lantern was on the ground, and by its light they were seen working hard, stamping down the loose soil with the utmost concentration and scraping away all the tell-tale rubble from the surface of the grass. Not a word did the men speak to one another; but it was easy enough to recognize Monk. The other was undoubtedly the landlord of "Farmer's Rest." Mr. Urquhart had disappeared.

They worked at their job so rapidly that it was not long before the carefully folded rolls of turf-grass were being pressed down upon that oblong heap, concealing the raw clay. Wolf fancied he could even detect a patch of daisies upon this replaced turf. There was a patch of something, at any rate, that showed whitish, as the lantern-rays fell upon it.

Mr. Valley's cassock, as Wolf bent over the little priest, smelt unpleasantly of gin. The wall against which he himself was pressing the palm of his hand, as he

leant forward, felt damp and chilly under the touch, like the flesh of a corpse.

"They can't see our light, can they?" groaned the vicar, half-turning his head. "I'll blow it out!" whispered Wolf in reply; and leaving the man's side, he walked over to the altar-steps, extinguished the flame, and came back with the candlestick swinging from one of his fingers, and a fume of carbonic-acid gas floating round his head.

Shifting his stick to the hand from which the smoking candle was swinging, Wolf peered again through the narrow window. He could feel the body of Mr. Valley shivering; and to give the man some reassurance in the darkness, he placed his free hand upon his shoulder. Then, bending down, he laid both the candle and his oak-stick softly on the flagstones.

The two men at the grave seemed resolved to complete their job with the utmost scrupulosity. "I can't believe they *are* drunk," he thought. "He must have appealed to their superstition. He must have scared them into it."

What the man had said over the Malmsey returned to his mind. "He must have forced the coffin open!" he thought. And then, as he stared above Mr. Valley's head at those two figures beating the turf down, he was surprised to find himself completely indifferent and impassive. Whether Mr. Urquhart had been content to press his perturbed face against the cold featurelessness of Redfern's mortality, or whether, like Isabella in "The Pot of Basil," he had carried "so dear a head" back to his secret chamber, seemed at that moment a question that left him utterly incurious!

"There *would* have been a time for such a word," he said to himself; "but *now* all is equal!" He saw Roger Monk straddle over the grave with his long legs, move the lantern, and whisper something to Mr. Round. From the road outside there came the sound of children laughing and chattering. "I wonder Urquhart didn't wait till midnight. Anyone might have drifted in here; but I suppose they'd just take 'em for grave-diggers . . . or be too scared to go near 'em!"

"Thud! Thud! Thud!" went the spades of the two men against the sides of the grave. Valley's shiverings had stopped now. Wolf heard the little man's lips moving in the darkness. He was muttering a Latin psalm. Wolf now began to feel like a mute sentinel—a sentinel at the grave of everything that had ever enjoyed the sweet sun! Vast tracts of Dorset earth seemed spread out before him. He could hear a low wind in the sycamores of Poll's Camp. He could hear the wide expanses of Blackmore Vale sighing in their sleep. He recalled what he had felt at his first encounter with Urquhart . . . that vague awareness of something new and strange to him in the secret of evil. He seemed totally indifferent to all that now! Good? Evil? It all seemed to belong to something unimportant, irrelevant, remote. What did it matter? This grave those two were stamping down so smoothly . . . it was only one of thousands under that crescent moon! With the heart of life killed, what did it matter what happened to anyone?

The two men were exchanging whispers now. They were gazing with satisfaction at their work. Wolf recognized that his bare hand, whose outspread fingers were

pressed against the cold stone, had grown numb as he leant hard upon it, bending forward over Valley's shoulder. Ay, but what an unpleasant odour . . . like dissolution itself . . . emanated from the cold sweat of the little priest! But the man's shivering had subsided. That was a good sign. No doubt the departing of Mr. Urquhart had relieved the situation for him. As for himself, he felt an obscure regret at the squire's withdrawal. So deadly callous had his emotions grown, he experienced at that moment nothing but a weary curiosity. Yes, it would have been interesting to see that convulsed white face bending down over the form in the coffin! The old villain must have crouched on the grass, when they got the lid off, undeterred by the smell! Had Valley seen what happened from up there in the belfry? Probably he *had;* and the shock of it had brought him scrambling down, torn between the outrage of the sacrilege and his fear of the squire.

The two men were standing erect now and staring straight towards him. Of course, they couldn't see anything, now that the church was dark. They must be *feeling* the vibration of his and Valley's intense scrutiny.

How long had his hand been lodged on Valley's shoulder, and why was he gripping the man so hard?

He raised his arm, so that both his palms were pressing now against the coping of that narrow slit in the wall. One of them was numb, but the other was hot and pulsing feverishly. Ah, the foul fiend Flibbertigibbet! But a time will come when there'll be no more lanterns!

"Damn that beggar Monk! He's not satisfied yet. There goes his spade again. Yes, take the lantern away, land-

lord Round! Yes, nudge the great brute and call him off. Yes, there *are* steps in the road. You'd better clear off, both of you! God! I believe they're going to quarrel! But it's all nothing to me now. What is a quarrel over a boy's grave when the 'hard little crystal' of a person's inmost self has dissolved?"

"It'll be a quaint moment, though, when that great beggar gets back to the house and has to answer his master's bell! Will he say, 'Yes, sir . . . no, sir,' in his usual tone? He talked to me once of killing the man. Why does *that* come into my head at this moment? But no! He'll never do that. He'll carry up the hot drink and turn down the bedclothes, just as usual; and Urquhart'll say, 'The moon has gone down, eh? what?' just in his ordinary tone! They *have* done now . . . at last. . . . Oh, that's right! Don't forget the crowbar, Mr. Round! A crowbar? So they did intend to open the coffin!"

Wolf watched the two men make their way, slowly and carefully, between the graves, towards the wall that divided the churchyard from the meadow where the school-treat had been held. Once over this wall, only an occasional flicker of the lantern revealed their path; and soon even that vanished.

He turned from the window, pulling his companion after him. It was like touching something that had no feeling with something else that had no feeling, to tug at Valley's arm with his benumbed fingers.

After three or four futile efforts, he managed, however, to strike a match; and by the aid of this match, moving across to the altar-steps, with his fingers guarding

the flame, he relit the priest's candle. With a cold, weary impassiveness . . . allowing this impulse to reach Lenty Pond, which was indeed the only definite impulse he retained just then, its fullest sway . . . he suggested to the silent figure at his side that they might walk over together to Pond Cottage. "It'll cheer the little beggar up," he thought, "to have a chat with the bride and bridegroom; and I can drop him at their gate."

T. E. Valley seemed glad enough to postpone his return to the desolation of his littered study. "But I mustn't stay long!" he murmured.

During the first part of their walk together some mutual instinct prevented them from referring to the scene they had just witnessed; but at last, when they had reached Pond Lane, Valley burst out:

"I hope you're right . . . from a secular point of view . . . about my not interfering just now, Solent. From my own point of view I shall find it . . . hard . . . yes, very hard . . . no, I don't mean that . . . did I say hard? I meant that I shall find it . . . very . . . you know, Solent? . . . very shameful . . . to . . . to . . . forgive myself!"

They were walking now where the hedges were very high and thick. Wolf began to experience a confused exhaustion, that seemed to weigh upon his head as well as upon his arms and legs. It was as though a knot had been tied in the recesses of his being, which interfered with the flow of his blood. A heavy, inert apathy settled down upon him, which he vaguely associated with these high hedges. "It would have been ridiculous to meddle," he said. "You'd have done no good. Do you

know, Valley, I think I'd like to rest for a minute!"

"To rest? Certainly . . . of course. You mean it would be nice if we sat down? But it's very dark, isn't it? There's usually water in both these ditches; and they are very deep. Hadn't we better wait till we get to the Otters'?".

"Better wait," repeated Wolf wearily, feeling as if it would be a heavenly thing to slip gently down now into Lenty Pond and have done with it all; "better wait till we get to the Otters'."

"You're not feeling shaky, are you, Solent? I'm rather shaky myself. Take my arm. The air will be better soon. It's these hedges. I never come here alone, because of these hedges—and—well! you know? because of that pond over there. Don't mind them, Solent. They're only high hedges and deep ditches."

Wolf stopped motionless in the middle of the road. "I really would like to sit down," he said. "I mean, to lie down! I think I must be, as you say, shaky. I expect it's from standing so long at that window. Would you mind if I tried, with my stick, to feel if there *is* water in the ditch?"

"If you feel dizzy, Solent, why don't you lie down where we are—in the road? I've often done that myself. Here; lean on me! I'll help you. That's right. It's quite dry, isn't it? Here; I've got a handkerchief in my pocket, a big red one . . . it's as big as a scarf. Here; I'll put it under your head . . . so . . . so . . . so. Do you feel all right now, Solent? You *will* soon, anyway. Do you know, I've had some of the happiest moments of my life lying down in the road? The road to Blacksod is very

good for lying down on, because there's grass at the side of it and very few carts go that way. How do you feel now, Solent?"

A relaxation of every muscle and fibre in Wolf's body seemed to have taken place. He gazed up at the obscure form of the priest and at the shivering stars in the blue-black sky.

"It's—just—what—I—wanted," he murmured, with a luxurious sigh.

Mr. Valley was delighted. He hovered over him as if he had ensconced him in his own bed. "I thought you'd like it, Solent," he murmured. "Sometimes when I've been like this on the Blacksod road I've felt as if, with the round earth beneath me carrying me between the constellations . . . and the Blessed Sacrament waiting my return . . . I've felt as if—— What's the matter, Solent? Is the road too hard?"

But Wolf had only been fumbling with his hand to make sure he hadn't lost his stick. He felt extremely unwilling to move or to speak. But he was conscious of a stronger wave of affection for Valley than he had ever known before.

"Does your forehead feel feverish?" his companion enquired now, touching Wolf's head in the darkness with the tips of his fingers. "Don't think I'm inquisitive, Solent; but I'm a priest of God, and I . . . I notice people that are . . . people that are . . . disturbed."

"You're very nice to me, Valley. Please don't kneel in the road! I'll get up in a minute. It does me good lying here."

"Don't think I'm inquisitive, Solent; and don't an-

swer if you don't want to. But am I right in thinking that you've got something on your mind . . . something that troubles you till you feel dizzy, like you did just now?"

"I'll get up in a moment, Valley. I'm only lying like this now because it's such a nice sensation! Why do you think it's so dark, when the stars look so large?"

"It's these hedges, Solent. They keep the light out."

"The moon's gone down. Do you mean the light from Pond Cottage?"

"Solent! You won't mind if I say something?"

"No. I'm listening. Please get up. I don't like your kneeling."

"Shall I tell you what's troubling you, what's made you so dizzy, Solent? It's because Darnley is going to be married. I know exactly what you feel. I know well what you and Darnley are to each other. Do you know what I think, Solent? I think it's a shame you two didn't have the happiness of living together before you both married. It's *that* that's troubling you; aren't I right? It's thinking that your friend's lost to you?"

"Nonsense, my good man!" cried Wolf, scrambling hastily to his feet. "What has been weighing on my mind has nothing to do with this wedding. Come! Let's be getting on! I left Darnley at tea with my wife; I mean, I sent him off there."

His words were casual and careless; but Valley's suggestion hit him hard. It was the same hint that Miss Gault had made last Sunday. Was it possible that the accursed mood he'd fallen into . . . this mood of miserable apathy . . . had as much to do with the wedding as with the loss of his great secret?

His companion had difficulty now in keeping up with him, so fast did he walk. Presently he said: "Tell me this, Valley, if you don't mind . . . did you *see* what Urquhart was doing just now?"

They were close to the Otters' house when he spoke. He could distinguish the light from the drawing-room shining between the branches of the poplars. Valley laid his hand on his arm and clutched it tightly, compelling him to stop. The man's face was a patch of wavering greyness against the blanket of the dark, but he could detect its extreme distress.

"I can't—Solent—you know what I mean?—I can't tell you anything. It's all misery. Yes, I saw him. It was a long way from the tower. The belfry's high up. I think he loved him. *That's* what I *have* to think; but I can only bear it, Solent, by . . . by a little trick of mine." He paused; and then, to his companion's consternation, he uttered a ghastly little laugh.

"What trick, Valley, are you talking about?" Wolf instinctively swung his arm free, for the priest's fingernails were hurting his flesh. "What trick do you mean?"

His tone was irritable, for he was pondering in his mind how to get rid of the man and slip off. "I *must* set eyes on that pond before I see Mattie," he said to himself.

Valley's reply seemed to come from the darkness that surrounded them, rather than from any localized spot. "If . . . you . . . must . . . know . . . I have . . . to pretend . . . that I *was* Urquhart . . . myself!"

Wolf made no comment upon this. He looked up at the poplars in that well-known garden. They were illu-

minated on one side by a faint glimmer coming from his old window, the window of the room where he spent his first night in Dorset.

"What a man-lover you are, Valley! *My* trick is to escape from humanity altogether."

To his dismay the priest's reply to this was a repetition of the same cackling laugh.

"Yes; to escape from it altogether!" Wolf went on. "I don't know why that should amuse you, Valley." As he spoke he became aware of something burning at the back of the house. "Dimity must be burning refuse . . . some sort of greenery," he thought. "It's like the smell of dead flowers. It's like a bonfire of dead crocuses!"

This aromatic smoke, poignant and penetrating, floating on the air, gave him a very queer twinge. His nerves reached out invisible tendrils to respond to it; but under the disturbed contact between his sensations and his *enjoyment of his sensations*, this motion of response only caused him tantalizing discomfort. It caused him, indeed, a discomfort of so peculiar a kind, that he prolonged his silence almost rudely, while he gave way to it. It was a sharp, thin, long-drawn-out sensation, like some erotic agitation that is motiveless, meaningless, irritating.

What he felt made it more imperative than ever that he should get rid of his companion and hurry across that field! He turned round, tightened his hold on his stick, and spoke with a tone of quiet authority. "Valley," he said, "I can't go in at this moment. I've got to think a bit . . . out here . . . by myself. You go in and tell them so, will you? I'll follow you in, in a second or so, when I've thought something out . . . in my mind.

Mattie will understand. She knows my ways. Apologize to Mrs. Otter. No! Why should you do that? Just tell them that Darnley's with Gerda in town and that I'll be in in a minute. That's all that's necessary."

But the priest's fingers only tightened upon his arm.

"In town? With your wife? Darnley?"

"Having tea with her, my good man! Those body-snatchers have upset you completely. There! Go in and tell them!" And with a quick movement of his wrist he released himself from Valley's clutch and rushed off.

He found it an incredible relief to scramble over the familiar gap in that high hedge and run with long, swift strides across the field. It was as if all the rumours in the village about that pond had gathered to themselves invisible arms and were pushing him towards it. What he felt in his own consciousness was not a simple, nor was it a very complicated feeling. It was exactly as if the loss of his spiritual vice had left him inordinately thirsty, and he had an inkling that just to stare at the waters of Lenty Pond would give him some inexplicable satisfaction.

He blundered over the dark expanse of that great field as if Jason's water-nymph herself had been calling to him. Blindly, recklessly, he ran across it, stumbling over the mole-hills, not once glancing up at the starry sky, his stick clutched in his right hand as if it had really been the spear of William of Deloraine, and his panting breath coming in deep gasps. As he ran he did notice one thing, and that was the shadowy leap of a startled hare. The creature rose and dashed away from under his very feet; but instead of disappearing into the dark-

ness, he could see, as he ran, where it had risen erect, a short distance off, and was watching him, motionless and with a frozen intentness.

Ah! There it was—Lenty Pond in the cold starlight!

He moved close up to the edge of the water. He stood with both hands pressed hard upon the handle of his stick. He flung his consciousness, as if it were a heavy stone that all day long he had been carrying in his pocket, down into those silent depths. And then his body —not his mind, but his body—became acquainted with shivering dread. Was his mind going to issue the final mandate now, at this very moment? What was his body doing that it revolted like this? What was his body doing that its foot-soles clung to the mud as if they had been rooted there? It was not only his flesh that now turned sick with fear. The very bones within him began screaming—a low, thin, wire-drawn scream—before what his mind was contemplating. It was not that life—merely to be alive—had suddenly become so precious. It was not fear of Nothingness that made his body quake. *It was Lenty Pond itself!* Yes, what his flesh and his bones shrank from was not eternity. It was immersion in that localized, particular, cubic expanse of starlit oxygen-hydrogen!

He visualized Mr. Urquhart and Jason surveying his dead face. Would someone . . . the "automatic young lady," perhaps . . . have closed his staring eyes before those two looked at him? A fish hooked out of season! "He ought to have taken my advice," Jason would say, "and gone back to that lord in London!"

A phosphorescent Redfern began to manifest itself

now in that unruffled water . . . a Redfern with no features left!

"This may be," he thought, "the exact spot where he stood."

A spasm of shame oppressed him, that he should be so preoccupied with himself that the weight of all that boy's sufferings meant so little to him. Well, clean out of it now was Jimmy Redfern! But that did not erase the invisible pattern of misery traced upon the air at this spot.

"I'll ask Jason how he knew that the boy used to come here. I'll ask him as soon as I get back."

Get back? *Get back where?* So he wasn't going to utter that mandate to his panic-stricken body. . . .

How queer that he had nothing now left to decide! His future was already there, mapped out before him. It was only a matter of following the track. Yes! The track was already there . . . leading back again! All he had to do was to accept it and follow it from moment to moment, like a moving hand that threw a shadow over an unfolded map!

But where did that map, that track, that diagram come from, across which, like a sneaking shadow, he saw himself returning to Pond Cottage?

His consciousness, hauled up, as if by a string, from the bottom of the pond, began beating now against the dark wall that separated him from the portion of his being which was unrolling that map! Without his life-illusion he was at that moment completely devoid of pride. Afraid to jump in? Afraid of that cold water down there? It was nothing to him if he *were* afraid! There was

no "I am I" to worry about; no Wolf Solent, with a mystical philosophy, to look like a cowardly fool! But whose hand was it that was unrolling the map? His own hand? Was he, then, a furtive, secretive, desperate life-lover? Or was it the hand of Chance? But how could Chance unroll a map?

What was left of consciousness within him flapped like a tired bird against the whole dark rondure of the material universe. If only he could find a crack, a cranny in that thick rotundity. But the thickness was his very self! He was no longer Wolf Solent. He was just earth, water, and little, glittering specks of fire!

For the tenth-part of a second there seemed to be a faint cracking in this huge material envelope. But no! All was sealed-up. The monstrous cube of black immensity remained intact . . . darkness upon darkness. Drawing a heavy breath, he jerked himself upright. He had been leaning forward eagerly, preposterously, over the handle of his stick. But now, with a peevish effort, he tugged the thing out of the mud into which he had been pressing it. His mind had suddenly grown cloudy, lumpish, cloddish. He sighed deeply and let his stick swing loosely in his limp fingers. Then bending down with slack knees over Lenty Pond, he set himself to splash the water, foolishly, aimlessly, with his stick's end. This way and that he splashed it, in the immense stillness, under the flicker of those countless stars. And as he splashed it he began wondering to himself in a heavy logger-headed way why it was, that when all was pitch-dark except for those pin-pricks in the firmament,

he could distinguish so clearly between the liquid darkness of the water and the solid darkness of the surrounding earth.

He swung round at last, like a man who turns away from the extinguished footlights of an empty theatre, and began retracing his steps across the field. His dominant sensation, as he performed this retreat, was a singular one. He felt as if his consciousness were already ensconced like Banquo's ghost at the Otters' table, while some quite alien force was dragging across the field a numb, inert, apathetic human body, that raised one leaden foot after the other.

There was such a hubbub of voices issuing from the drawing-room of Pond Cottage, that with a sulky motion of the muscles of his chin, repeated several times as he stumbled over the flower-beds, he went round the house to the back-door. There, at his petulant tap, Dimity Stone let him in. "Mis-ter So-lent!" the old crone exclaimed, in her most quavering voice. "And where, for Lawky's sake, be Master Darnley? Sit 'ee down, Mister Solent, while I gets me breath. These goings-on do daunt a body terrible. 'Tis first one thing, 'sknow; and then be another! First there be talk of a cold bite o' summat to save I trouble. Then what do Master Jason do but come wambling in about hotting up they wedding-pasties what I've hid all day from they since a week a-gone, 'cept what Miss Olwen coaxed out of I."

The old woman kept shuffling her utensils about, as she spoke, from one orifice to another of her vast kitchen-stove. A most fragrant steam emerged from more than

one lid; and Wolf, as he sat on a hard chair, with one limp hand dangling his stick and the other dangling his hat, was aware of a pang of extreme hunger.

"And then," she went on, "must Parson come whiffling in, white as a lassie's petsycut, and Mistress must uncork a sip o' Scotch for he; and Miss Mattie, all of a tremble with her bride's-night dependin', must start crying about Master Darnley, where 'a be and what's keeping o' he."

"I told Mr. Valley to tell them," threw in Wolf, in a low voice. "I told him to tell them." The heat of the kitchen, after the chill night-air, and the stress of his recent experiences were beginning to make him feel dizzy again. "I told him to tell them," he repeated, trying to concentrate his wits upon the confused voices from the drawing-room.

Dimity looked shrewdly at him. "Why, ye be dodderin' yourself, Mister Solent! Here"—and she hurried to a cupboard and poured something into a glass—"here . . . drink this. 'Tis me wone cordial." And she watched him intently, with a hand on his shoulder, as he drained it off. "That's better, eh? Why, you be near as white as thik parson! 'Tis beyond I, what be coming to this house, these turnover days."

"What is it?" he murmured, spluttering and gasping, while the blood surged back to his head; "what is it, Dimity?"

"Nought but a drop o' elder-wine," she said, soothingly, patting him on the head.

The hubbub of voices from the drawing-room of Pond Cottage began to grow more relevant and natural. A

moment ago they had sounded in his ears as if he had been a spirit—a spirit whose body was left far behind, under the water with Jason's nymph.

"I told Mr. Valley to tell them," he repeated firmly.

"Missus said thik parson brought such a word," muttered the old woman, returning to her steaming saucepans. At that moment there reached them both the sound of an opening door and a man's steps in the front-hall. "He've a-come! Master Darnley be come!" cried Dimity, hurrying out of the kitchen.

Wolf rose from his chair, hat in one hand, stick in the other, and followed her out.

The sight of his friend's yellow beard against the lamp on the hall-table completed his restoration to normal intelligence.

"Oh, *there* you are!" cried the bridegroom cheerfully. "I told Gerda I knew you'd be here all right. She was a bit nervous about you." He paused to hang up his coat. The sound of their voices brought the drawing-room door open with a fling; and Mattie rushed out, flushed and excited. Even at the moment this occurred, however, Darnley had time to turn a quick sideways glance towards Wolf across the uplifted overcoat. "She's a darling, your wife!" he whispered emphatically.

Mattie's arms were round Darnley's neck before his hands were free. Wolf had never seen the two of them embrace; and when he awoke that night by Gerda's side, before a window pallid with dawn, he recalled the expression of his friend's mackerel-coloured eyes. They were like those of a man who pulls himself together, naked, tense, exultant, on the brink of a rapid torrent.

It was Mrs. Otter herself who took Wolf's hat and stick away from him now; and as he shook hands with the little lady, he was driven by an unexpected impulse to bend down and give her a hurried kiss.

"It seems the fashion," he muttered awkwardly, as he turned to greet Jason and T. E. Valley.

"I mustn't stay for more than this," he found himself saying presently, as he emptied his soup-plate and lifted his wine-glass to his lips. "Darnley says Gerda won't touch her supper till I get home."

"You don't know, of course, how our little girl is behaving?" said Mrs. Otter. "Miss Malakite isn't spoiling her too much, I hope?"

Wolf felt very grateful for all the easy implications of this little speech.

"Yes, I do, indeed," he said, rising to his feet. "I met Christie as I passed the shop . . . when was it? . . . oh, about half-past five, I think! . . . and she said Olwen was perfect."

He felt himself blushing as he caught Jason's sardonic eye. Why had he said "perfect"? But Mrs. Otter continued quite naturally:

"It's rather a test for the little thing. But Miss Malakite, I know, will make it easy for her." She paused and sighed rather sadly. "It's strange not to have her here," she added. "I feel as if she'd been here all her life."

"Your friend Miss Gault," said Jason, "would like to send the police after her."

His words produced an uncomfortable silence. Darnley rose to his feet and began sprinkling salt with his

finger and thumb upon a wine-stain he had made on the table-cloth.

"If they want to keep her," said Jason, "are you going to let them, Mother?"

"It's for Mattie to decide that," murmured Mrs. Otter.

"Your friend Miss Gault would soon decide it," repeated Jason. "She'd like to send her, and Miss Malakite too, to the Ramsgard Workhouse!"

"Things will work themselves out as God sees best, Jason," remarked Mrs. Otter reproachfully. Wolf noticed that as the lady spoke she surreptitiously laid one of her hands on Mattie's knee.

It was at this point that Mattie herself turned to Dimity. "You're tired," she said. "Do sit down now. And listen! I don't want you to do anything more tonight in my room." Wolf had always regarded it as a touching peculiarity of Pond Cottage that the aged servant entered freely into every conversation, as she moved about behind the chairs; but tonight he had a premonition, before the old woman opened her lips to reply, that she would say something unlucky.

"You can't see no corner of Miss Olwen's bed, Miss Mattie," was what she now brought out. "They things what I've been ironing be all spread out over'n."

Her words produced a silence even more disconcerting than Jason's reference to the police.

"You needn't . . . tell me . . . *that* . . . Dimity!" cried Mattie, in a strange, high-pitched tone; and then, snatching her hand away from Mrs. Otter, she suddenly burst out: "You can cover up her bed with all my new

things—you can all of you do it . . . yes, you can all of you do it!"

The girl thrust the back of her hand into her mouth, biting the skin. Her heavy face was distorted, her bosom was heaving. "Oh, I want my mother, I want my mother!" she wailed, clapping both hands over her face and swaying to and fro in her seat.

This unexpected reference to a woman dead so many years—he had no notion even as to where Lorna Smith was buried—gave Wolf a queer shock. Mrs. Otter rose hurriedly and threw her arms round Mattie's swaying head, pressing it to her breast. "My child! My child!" she kept repeating, while Wolf prayed desperately that the girl wouldn't thrust her away.

"I'm all right . . . I'm sorry, Darnley!" came her muffled voice at last.

Mrs. Otter let her go and slid back into her seat.

"I'll help you with the plates, Dimity," Mattie murmured, rising and straightening her shoulders. Darnley held the door open for her to pass out. She had snatched up Wolf's soup-plate and Jason's, which were the only empty ones.

"I'll say good-night, then," cried Wolf, looking at Mrs. Otter, "and I won't be late at the church!"

He gathered together his belongings in the hall, while Darnley, with his arm held tight round Mattie's shoulder, fixed his eyes gravely on every movement he made.

When Wolf had got his coat on, his friend left Mattie standing there frowningly, with the plates still in her hand, and opened the hall-door.

"Good-night, Wolf," he said quietly. "She'll be all

right now. Give my love to Gerda. By the way"—and he lowered his voice so that Mattie shouldn't hear him—"Gerda says your mother wants to come; and for that reason she'd rather come independently of you, with her father. I told her it should be exactly as she wished."

Wolf at that moment found it difficult to concentrate his mind upon this nice point.

"We'll all be with you anyway, Darnley. As long as we're all there, it doesn't matter *how* we turn up, does it? Well, good luck to you!" But he had no sooner got his friend's fingers in his own than he impulsively dropped them. Catching the man's head between his hands, he kissed him rapidly several times on the forehead. "Good luck to you!" he repeated, as he strode off down the garden. "I kissed the mother; why not the son?" he thought, as he reached the gate; but something produced a constriction in his throat that was akin to a sob. "Down, wantons . . . down!" he murmured audibly, as he fumbled for the latch of the gate.

He had scarcely found it, however, when the house-door behind him opened and a hurly-burly of voices reached him.

"But you've not even finished your soup!" . . . "You've only had one glass!" . . . "You might wait till Dimity has brought——"

His first idea was that these cries were intended for himself; but as he wavered there, in puzzled indecision, there came hurrying down the path, like a stray dog bolting for home, the agitated figure of T. E. Valley. The little priest was struggling into his overcoat as he ran, and repeating, "I've had all I want! I've had all I want!"

"Good-night, Wolf! Take care of him, for heaven's sake!" rang out Darnley's voice from the door, as the two men emerged into Pond Lane. They saw the light vanish away. They heard the door close. They were once more alone together.

"Well," said Wolf, "I suppose we go *this* way, eh?" and he made a motion to turn to the right.

"Would . . . you . . . mind . . . Solent," pleaded the man piteously, "if we went the *other* way? I *could* go alone . . . but . . . you know? . . . I'm feeling a little upset tonight . . ."

"Right you are, my friend!" said Wolf, with a sigh. "I daresay Gerda will forgive me. But I'm already a bit late; so let's walk briskly! Why"—he was already moving in the required direction, with the man's arm in his own—"do you want to go so far round?"

But Valley's mind had reverted again to the scene at the grave.

"The belfry-window was a long way off. I was fretting so much, too, thinking I ought to go down and stop it. Perhaps it *was* natural. . . . I should feel like that myself if it weren't for the Sacrament . . . I mean if . . . you know? . . ."

The priest's mutterings rose and fell like a cloud of weakly-humming gnats, over a twilit tow-path. Wolf continued to feel as if he were a wooden puppet galvanized into meaningless activity by a complicated system of wires. "If only they'd let me lie down," he thought, "just lie down for a hundred years, I'd deal with them all!"

Once more alone and striding homewards, he teased his memory about the name of an especially luminous

constellation that hung in the west directly over Blacksod. "The most contemptible people are allowed to enjoy the stars," he said to himself; and then he thought: "A lump of cowardice without past or future! But this lump has two legs to carry it, and a stick to prod the ground with. Ailinon! Ailinon! But I'll make Gerda laugh when I tell her about Tilly-Valley."

It gave him one of the first pleasant feelings he had had that evening, to think of making Gerda laugh. "I won't tell her till we're in bed," he thought. And then he thought: "I wonder if Olwen and Christie will sleep together tonight?"

As he moved between the well-known hedges of that road, along which just a year ago he had been driven by Darnley, he experienced a singular sensation. He felt as though he were beginning a *posthumous* life—a life that his own cowardice had snatched from the end intended.

It was as if such an end *had* actually been reached upon some psychic plane; so that now he but "usurped his life." Never would he know what actually happened at that King's Barton grave, any more than he would know what Miss Gault did after he left her in the Ramsgard Cemetery. But such things could not altogether pass. Must there not be some imprint of them left upon space itself? If so, such air-pictures might easily remain intact, even after the planet itself was uninhabited and frozen.

In his agitation he began fumbling at the handle of his stick, and he noted how the deep indents cut by Lob Torp on that night of the "Yellow Bracken" had grown smooth and slippery with handling.

"What I really am is dead," he kept saying to himself. "That's what I am . . . *dead.*" But out of his balanced indifference, like a man astride of a floating log, who by a miracle has escaped a whirlpool, he began to feel conscious of a faint satisfaction in the mere fact of having experienced that rush of the cold air about his ears and that splash of froth upon his cheek.

What he had to do now was to gather his forces together for a daily and nightly dialogue with the Cause of all Life and of all Death! As he came along into the outlying district of Blacksod, he visualized this Cause as an enormous shell-fish placidly breathing in and breathing out on the floor of a sea-like infinity.

He was staring at its fixed, idiotic eyes, and at its long, motionless antennæ, when he passed the turn to the Malakite shop. Then something in him, beyond all reasoning, loosened, stirred, leapt up. . . . "Oh, Christie! Oh, my little Christie!"

IN THE MIDDLE OF THAT NIGHT WOLF WAS AROUSED TO consciousness by the voice of Gerda anxiously soothing him; and even in his confusion he was aware at that moment of something exceptionally tender in her tone, something protective, something different altogether from a young creature's spontaneous alarm at being disturbed in its sleep! It was as if all the agitations of that last fortnight had unfolded some psychic bud or frond within her being, changing her from a capricious child into a full-grown sweet-natured woman.

"What did I say?" he asked, as his head fell back upon the pillow.

" 'I shall break between you,' you cried. 'I shall break between you!' And then, when I said, '*Between who, Wolf?*' you said, 'Between *them!* Can't you see? Between those two men!' "

"Men, Gerda? Did I say *men?*" And then suddenly, like a retreating image in a deep mirror, he remembered what his dream had been. He was himself a brittle stick, a piece of dead brushwood. At one end of him was the Waterloo tramp. At the other end of him was that complacent old man with the white cat. He had awakened in terror because he felt himself beginning to crack, as those two antagonists tugged.

After caressing Gerda with an emotional relaxation, such as the self-pitying weakness of a fever might have left, he settled himself again to sleep. His final thoughts

were concerned with the meaning of his dream; but beyond a fumbling association of the Waterloo waif with the loss of his "mythology," and the sleek cat-man with an acceptance of life on its lowest terms, the riddle remained unsolved.

He awakened next morning to a vivid awareness that this Friday was the eve of Darnley's wedding. He recalled his first encounter with his friend in that tea-room of the Lovelace Hotel; and his mind reverted to the waiter who was now a beggar. "Stalbridge," he thought. "A good man. I wish I'd given him that half-a-crown."

As he shaved himself at the familiar looking-glass, he entered upon a cheerful discussion with Gerda as to what they had better decide to do on the following day. Gerda displayed no hostility to Mrs. Solent's company, but indicated that it would please Mr. Torp if she went with him rather than with them; and as for their return to Blacksod after the wedding-feast, *that* could be left to chance!

"There'll be lots of carriages coming and going," she said, "and it'll be fun to see what happens! I shan't mind," she went on, "if we all walk home in a crowd. But I *would* enjoy going with Father. It'll be like the old days, when I used to go to funerals with him. He likes to go to places with me when I'm all dressed up."

"I suppose Darnley will be at school today just as usual," said Wolf; "but they've given him a week off. They're going to Weymouth. Did I tell you that?"

"To lodgings?" enquired Gerda. "We all took lodgings once, Wolf; one Whitsun . . . in Adelaide Crescent."

"No; it was an hotel, I think," said Wolf.

"The Burden?" she cried excitedly. "Oh, how I'd love to stay at the Burden! I've never stayed in an hotel in my life. I've never been *into* an hotel except the 'Three Pee-wits.'"

Wolf was silent for a second. Then he said slowly, contemplating his half-shaven face in the mirror with as much detachment as if it had been a cat's saucer of milk, "Well, we might go in to see them next Saturday. They wouldn't be leaving till the afternoon, I suppose. We could all have lunch at the Burden."

"Wolf," she cried, sitting up straight in bed—a movement that brought her head into the square of his mirror —"Wolf! Why can't we spend some of our money in a week-end at the Burden? Not this week, of course; but next week, just as they're coming back! Oh, I would love that so much!"

A wave of sadness swept over him. It was on the tip of his tongue to reply to her in her own words of last Sunday—"It's too late, my dear, it's too late!" For that beach in front of Brunswick Terrace came back to him, with the cries of the fish-sellers, with the dazzling sun-path on the breaking sea, with the wet planks and the painted boats. Ay, how he would love to see it all again —but who was he to see it? Hollow! Hollow! A drifting husk, empty of purpose and hope!

"I don't see why we shouldn't do just as you say, sweetheart. But let's get through tomorrow first, before we decide. But I don't see why we shouldn't stay one night, at any rate, at the Burden."

He caught her eyes in the glass, and they were radiant. She was actually clapping her hands, as she heard him;

and the cry of delight she gave seemed to him to have the sound of whistling in it!

Yes, even if he were doomed to drift now like a purposeless automaton, it was something to be able to cause such childish exultation.

Gerda wanted to be free that day from the trouble of preparing a midday-meal, so it was arranged that he should get a bread-and-cheese lunch at the Three Peewits. Perhaps Darnley would be ready to share it with him! At any rate Gerda should be left to her own devices until tea-time.

All that morning, as he supervised his boys' lesson, his mind ran upon what she had said about Weymouth. How strange that he had himself proposed to Christie that *they* should go down there this very Sunday . . . quite independently of the Burden Hotel! Everything in his life seemed gravitating just then towards Weymouth—towards that birthplace of his murdered "mythology"—but too heartless was he now to care a straw!

"I won't spoil Gerda's happiness by breathing a word about *this* Sunday," he said to himself; "and very likely, anyway, Christie will have forgotten. Olwen has cut me out. That's the long and the short of it. Olwen has cut me out!"

As he stared at the ink-stains on the wall, he found himself selecting one particular stain to serve as a raft in the dead-sea drift of his trouble. This stain was an elongated one; and before he knew what he was doing, he had turned it into a road—a road like that road in the Gainsborough picture.

As one boy after another came up to his desk with

some sort of written answer to the tedious historic question he had propounded to them, his mind began to envisage, with a rapid bird's-eye glance, all the years of his life, and the dominant part that had been played in them by this *ideal road*. He seemed to be able, as he stared at that elongated ink-stain, to recall fragments of old memories such as he had not thought of even once during the last twelve months! The longer he stared at that mark upon the wall the more rapidly those memories crowded in upon him. A village-green where a hollow tree had its roots in a duck-pond . . . two high banks covered with patches of purple clover and yellow rock-rose, where the dusty highway under his feet led to the top of a hill, from which he knew, by a sure instinct, the sea was visible . . . a deserted garden at the crossing of one thoroughfare with another, outside some cathedral-town, where nettles mingled with currant-bushes and where an old woman was shouting to an old man across a brook full of watercress . . . images of this kind, like mystical vignettes in the margin of an occult biography, kept passing and repassing along the road of his life—that is to say, along that elongated ink-stain.

So fast did such memories crowd in upon him that he grew consciously surprised at their presence, as a drowning man might be surprised at the concentration of a whole life's experience into a second of time!

He even remembered one particular occasion, in the outskirts of London, when he had made up his mind that those glimpses of things seen under a certain light were the sole purpose of his existence! He recalled the exact spot where he reached that conclusion. It was upon a

bench, somewhere beyond Richmond, under some enormous lime-trees. He rememberd how he had decided then that these particular episodes, snatched out of the flowing stream of visual impression, were more charged with the furtive secret of life than any contact with men and women. He remembered how he had pulled up a cool dark-green tuft of grass by the root, so excited had that conclusion made him; and how afterwards he had busied himself for some while in a conscientious attempt to replant it, using his stick as a trowel, greatly to the amusement of a flirtatious pair of shop-girls, who regarded him from a recumbent position under one of those trees.

It was ironical that at this very moment, when the power of his enjoyment of it had been killed, he seemed able to articulate his philosophy of the *ideal road* more definitely than he had ever done before. What it really had meant, this philosophy, was a power of seeing things *arranged under a certain light* . . . a light charged with memories of the past . . . a light capable of linking his days in flowing continuity! Well, it was all lost now . . . lost because it implied a certain kind of Wolf who was enjoying it; and *that* kind of Wolf was stone dead.

"Harrison Minor, what are you thinking of? You've cribbed this straight from Martin Major!" . . .

His voice must have assumed something of the harsh bitterness of his mood; for a lot of heads were raised from the desks, and there was a hurried whispering in Harrison Minor's corner.

"Reality has beaten me," he said to himself. "What I feel now must be exactly what religious people feel

when they believe themselves to be damned! They can talk of other matters; they can respond when you approach; but while they are chatting with you of this and that, there is always *perdition* lying at the bottom of their thoughts!"

"Every boy whose paper has been marked must go on quietly, please, with the Restoration!"

"Olwen has cut me out. That's the long and short of it. It was all in vain, that day in the cornfield! 'Mind touching mind, without need of words,' did we say? But she'll be happy with Olwen. Mattie will *have* to let her have Olwen." . . .

When he met Darnley, after that heavy morning was over at last, he learnt that Jason too would be at the Three Peewits. Darnley was silent and preoccupied as they walked through the streets; and Wolf set himself to accept the fact that they were destined to go on drudging at this School, side by side, *sans* intermission, to the end of their days! Precisely as they walked through these streets today, between School and Tavern, so would they be found walking twenty, thirty years hence, each meditating his own secret cares!

Chance had ordered it that not only was Jason awaiting them in the Three Peewits dining-room. There, in the best window-seat, with a bottle of Burgundy in front of him, sat Mr. Urquhart himself! Jason was drinking beer from a two-handled pewter flagon and helping himself with relish from a large rook-pie, covered with a crust of flaky pastry, that stood before him.

Both he and Urquhart had an air of having been established in their places for many hours. They were,

however, as far removed from each other as two guests in the same dining-room could possibly be! Wolf and Darnley went across to the squire and shook hands with him; and then, sitting down at Jason's table, they both ordered the same brand of Dorchester Ale, but in lesser proportion.

"There's enough for you two," said Jason, referring to the pie before him. "You're allowed second helpings here. I've had mine."

"How did those rogues make 'ee come in to town to-day, Otter?" remarked Mr. Urquhart, pulling his chair round, but keeping his elbow on his table and his fingers on the stem of his wine-glass.

"They've given me all next week off," replied Darnley.

"I've been saying that *I* ought to have a holiday too, just in his honour," threw in Wolf, feeling as if there were a pail of ashes in his belly that nothing he drank could so much as moisten.

This intercourse between the two ends of the room seemed to displease Jason. His face assumed its most stony expression, and he bent low over his plate.

"They've good custards here," he remarked, after a pause. "Custard's much better than those puddings that your friend Mrs. Stone makes."

"Don't call her Mrs. Stone, Jason," murmured Darnley, with a peevishness unusual to him in addressing his brother. "Wolf's as much a friend of Dimity as any of us."

For half-a-second Jason's brows contracted ominously; and then his whole countenance relaxed into a thousand humorous wrinkles.

"He'll be a better friend to her still, when he's tasted those wedding-pasties of yours, Darnley!" he said, holding up his tankard and making a sly motion with one eyelid and one shoulder in the direction of Mr. Urquhart, to whom his back remained turned.

There was a moment's interruption at this point, while the waiter was laying in front of the newcomers the beer and cheese they had ordered.

"You needn't look like that at my pie," said Jason. "Everyone isn't going to be married tomorrow!"

"Hurry up with your new poems," retorted Darnley, "and then you'll be able to treat us all to these luxuries."

But Jason had turned his sardonic eye upon Wolf.

"Solent can tell you what marriage is. He can tell you! You needn't think a person doesn't know what *you've* got in your head as you see me enjoying myself."

"What have I got in my head, Jason?" asked Wolf. His tone was meek enough; but the black bile of reciprocal malice was seething in the veins of his throat.

"Abuse of me, because of these rooks," chuckled the other. "You're longing to spoil my pleasure by telling everyone about their cawings and their proud nests. But *you'd* like a taste as well as anyone . . . if there were no one here to see you!"

These words of Jason's, and the look that accompanied them, caused Wolf a discomfort that resembled the squeezing of a person's tongue against a hidden gum-boil. It was impossible for him to help endowing with glossy, outspread wings the unctuous morsel into which the poet just then dug his fork! He felt the blood pricking him

under his cheek-bones. He thought of Miss Gault. He began to suffer from that old, miserable sensation that his body was a lump of contemptible putrescence, on the top of which his consciousness floated. This was the sort of occasion when in former days he used to summon up his "mythology." Well, that was all over now. He felt as disintegrated as the remnants on the poet's plate. He *was* those remnants. Dorsetshire had eaten him up!

The voice of Mr. Urquhart became audible to him. The squire was explaining in a querulous voice that the man Monk had been so truculent that morning that he had set the whole household by the ears. "Mrs. Martin came to me like a virago and threatened to give notice," he said. "I thought it best to beat a retreat. Always beat a retreat when servants mutiny, eh? What?"

As Wolf blinked at him across the foam of his beer-mug, he began to feel as if that vigil of his at the church-window had been a pure hallucination. "Redfern's grave will look the same as it always has," he thought, "when I next see it."

"Did you enjoy your walk this morning, Jason?" enquired Darnley, pulling at his beard. His brother regarded him with a long, sad, intent look.

"The clouds were like gentle spirits," he repeated slowly. "They were coming from eternity and could not stay. The fields were wet with dew for them. But they could not stay. The hazel-bushes were sobbing with sap for them. But they could not stay. The daisies were white with love for them. But they could not stay."

As the man spoke, he placed his knife and fork carefully side by side, drank what was left of his great tank-

ard, and replaced it on the table as scrupulously and softly as if it had been a living thing.

"They were going *to* eternity," he added in a low voice. And then, while his melancholy grey eyes assumed a look of such abysmal sorrow that Wolf wondered to behold it, "God comes and God goes," he said, "but no one feels Him except moles and worms. And they are blind and can't see. They are dumb and can't speak. I thought this morning, Darnley, that my poetry is no better than the tunnels of moles and worms."

"What's that your brother's saying, Otter," came the voice of Mr. Urquhart across the room. "Is he making rhymes about the waiter? Do 'ee tell him to be careful! Lovelace says a man was kicked out of his club in town for doing less than that; and besides . . . in this room, you know . . . though we've got——"

He was interrupted by the clatter of a horse's hooves outside the windows, and Wolf could just see, out there, the corner of a nursery-gardener's cart crowded with blue hyacinths.

As Wolf stared at those flowers, he caught Urquhart's eye.

"It's nothing to you, Solent, I suppose," he remarked, "but the proofs of my book came from Bristol this morning!"

Wolf murmured his congratulations; but into his mouth rose the sensation of the colour brown.

"He has got his wish over Redfern," he thought, "and now he's got his book too."

Mr. Urquhart was addressing the young waiter.

"Didn't know I was an author, Johnnie, did you? Mr.

Solent there and I have just brought out the very book for a sly rogue like you! I'll send 'ee a copy, me boy! Don't forget, now! Ask me for it, if you don't get it soon!"

What Wolf felt, as he listened to this, was that all the mysterious evil that he had associated with this man was in reality nothing more than senile perversity. Jason was right. But if Jason was right with regard to Urquhart, wasn't he likely to be right with regard to Wolf Solent? To Jason's mind . . . to Jason's peculiar satisfaction . . . evil was no more than a thin-drifting, poisonous rain, that seeped through into everything. Nothing was free from it, except perhaps the passionate heart of Olwen! But it was just a slimy rain. It had no spiritual depths. Mr. Urquhart and himself had been playing together a pleasant theatrical drama . . . all gesture, all illusion! Upon Jason's plate of well-cleaned rook-bones lay the fragments of their high Satanic play!

Mr. Urquhart had called the young waiter to his side now. Darnley and Jason were talking in low voices about the arrangements for tomorrow. . . .

It was then that an incredibly sweet fragrance came in through the open window! It may have been only the hyacinths; but, as Wolf breathed it in, it seemed to him much more than that. It seemed to come from masses of bluebells under undisturbed green hazels!

This happy sensation, however, was not permitted to him for long. In a second there followed a vibrant, penetrating drumming . . . an aeroplane! . . . With the beat of a demon's sharded wings this sound drew nearer . . . steadily nearer and nearer. . . .

Mr. Urquhart turned his head.

"Those young airmen are fine lads," he remarked. "I'd let any one of those chaps carry me to Thibet or Cambodia if he'd give me the chance."

Wolf noticed a strange light of excitement come into Darnley's blue eyes; and it was Darnley who spoke now.

"Yes . . . to fly!" he cried. "To clear your soul of all the earth-horrors! To wash your mind clean, in a blue bath of air! Think of it! To fly over land and sea till you realize the *roundness* of the earth! To feel your mind changing . . . becoming a purer instrument . . . as you leave this cluttered world!"

The drumming of the aeroplane was now accompanied by the harsh snorting and snarling of a large motor-car.

"Whether it's by air or by road," observed Jason, in the tone of a very old hermit, "these young men come down upon us; and it's best to win favour of the Lords of Science." He glanced sideways at the waiter. "They come by sea too, sometimes," he added, hunching his shoulders in mock-alarm. "This young man looks like a chief engineer on a liner," he went on, lowering his voice to a whisper, and glancing at his brother.

Wolf began to feel as if he were stranded alone on a high, exposed platform, hooted and shrieked at by thousands of motors and aeroplanes. . . .

Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. It was as if he searched in vain for any escape into the silences of the earth. No escape was possible any more! He was combed-out, raked-over, drained of all sap! His destiny henceforth must be to groan and creak in the wind of others' speed. . . .

"It's a miracle," repeated Darnley, "to be able to transform the whole bias of the mind by turning away from land and water and making the air our element!"

The man's singular-looking eyes were literally translucent with excitement.

"I'm afraid it's not of Mattie he's thinking," said Wolf to himself.

But Mr. Urquhart had just made some remark to his ex-secretary that Wolf had been too absorbed in his thoughts to hear. "I beg your pardon, Sir!" he murmured.

"That's the value of a book like ours, eh, me boy?" cried the Squire. "It'll be kept on newspaper-stands on the top of great iron landing-stages for people to pick up as they start for Australia or Siberia! It'll tickle their fancy, eh? What? By Jove it will . . . to learn what lecherous snakes their ancestors were."

"I didn't tell you, did I, Solent," said Darnley innocently, "that when I called at the Malakites' to let Olwen know I'd take her home this evening, the little minx refused to budge? She swears she won't leave Christie for a single night! There'd have been tears if I'd insisted. Well! It'll be . . . perhaps . . . easier"—he spoke pensively and slowly now—"if she does remain . . . where she is."

"Girls are all the same," remarked Jason. "They all like sugar and spice. Old Malakite probably buys more tasty sweets for her in this town than she gets with us." There was something about this speech that was more than Wolf could bear. He rose abruptly to his feet.

"Sorry, Darnley," he said. "I forgot something I have

to do before afternoon school! It won't be more than that, will it . . . what I've had?" and he laid down a shilling and three pennies upon the table. A grotesque consciousness of the way his quivering upper-lip projected and the way his hands shook, filled his brain as he spoke; but he bowed to Mr. Urquhart as he went out, and nodded civilly at Jason. "We'll meet later," he said, giving Darnley one rapid reproachful look as he left the room.

Once in the street, he paused, hesitating. He felt as if he were as much exposed to the gaze of the crowd as if he had been one of the featherless birds of Jason's pie!

Instinctively he began to make his way through the crowd towards the Malakite shop. Recognizing the import of this movement, he mentally confronted the only alternative to it . . . that of hanging about for half-an-hour in his deserted classroom. No! *That* would be misery too great! But when he reached the shop and had rung the bell in the side-alley, he felt tempted to bolt. The presence of Olwen seemed to change the whole situation. It was as if the little girl were clinging to both Christie's hands, held behind her back; so that she lacked the *power* . . . whatever her *will* may have been . . . to help him at this crisis!

He could not recall ever having waited so long at that door as he waited now. What a lovely day it was! But that balmy spring air . . . and he could see several clumps of pale jonquils in the little back-yard . . . floated over him as if he had been a dead man, as if he had really been drowned last night in Lenty Pond.

Here she was, running rapidly down the narrow staircase. . . .

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you, Wolf! I'm in such trouble! I've been thinking and thinking what to do. . . . I prayed that *anybody* might come . . . and now it's you! Oh, I'm so glad!"

He followed her into the house and she shut the door; and they stood close together in the little, dark entrance. Unaware of any conscious impulse, he hugged her tightly to his heart and held her there . . . his brain a complete blank to everything except the sense of holding her.

But this relief from reality was not destined to be permitted to him for long. The girl plucked at his wrists, turned her head away from him, struggled to release herself.

"Don't, Wolf! Not now, Wolf! I want your help . . . don't you understand? I don't want *that* now."

He sighed heavily, but let her go, and stood by her side, clutching the bannisters.

"What's the matter, Chris?" he murmured humbly.

"Olwen wants to stay with me . . . to *live* with me . . . you knew that, didn't you? But this morning she's been fretting about Mattie. Ever since she woke up she's been fretting. And now she says she'll be quite happy with me again if only she can go to the wedding and see them married! She wants to go *tonight,* Wolf. That's what she wants . . . to have a last night with Mattie . . . and come back here when they leave for Weymouth; but, you see, I had no way of reaching Darnley. Is Darnley at school today, Wolf? I don't know what I should have done if you hadn't——"

She was interrupted by a sound in the book-shop; and

Wolf saw her stiffen and lay her finger on her lip, and turn a tense, concentrated, narrow-lidded stare at the door leading into the shop.

Wolf did not like the manner of this intense listening. He had liked still less the tone in which she had welcomed his appearance, not for his own sake, but as a means of reaching Darnley! The truth began to deepen upon him that between Olwen and the old man Christie's world had never been more occupied, had never promised less free space for him and for his affairs.

The sounds within the shop, whatever their nature, ceased now, and she turned, smiling. She laid two small finger-tips, light as that feather in her "Urn-Burial," upon his coat-sleeve.

"I won't ask you to come up now, Wolf. You always excite her so, and I've just got her quiet." She paused and hesitated; and in the faint light of that little passage he could see she was anxious as to just how he would react under her appeal. "Will you see Darnley?" she murmured. He moved back a step and nodded gravely.

"Well, listen, Wolf dear!" she went on. "Bring him to tea here, will you? And ask him to hire a trap at the hotel, so he can take her out there tonight. You'll be able to bring her back tomorrow, won't you, Wolf . . . when the wedding's over?"

He promised submissively to do exactly what she wanted; and opening the door to let him out, she closed it quietly behind them both and stood by his side in the narrow alley.

Once more Wolf was aware of the humming of an

aeroplane above the roofs of Blacksod! Those aeroplanes were becoming a kind a devilish chorus to his comic tragedy!

The girl lifted her head, trying to get a glimpse of it, while he himself stared obstinately at the narrow velvet band that encircled her waist. "Damn these machines!" he muttered bitterly. "It'll never be the same world again!"

She lowered her chin and looked into his face. The sound of the aeroplane had actually brought—or so he thought to himself in his stubborn resentment—the same gleam into her eyes as into those of Darnley. All were against him now . . . all, all, all! These demons were ensorcerizing every soul he knew. The Powers of the Air! No, he would *never* yield to them! While a single grass-blade grew out of the deep earth, he would never yield to them!

"Oh, Wolf, you are wrong, my dear!" she cried fervently. "It *is* a new world! It is! It is! But it's a beautiful world. It means a new *kind* of beauty: glittering steel, gleaming wings, free spaces——" She stopped suddenly. He thought afterwards she must have seen something in his expression that troubled and puzzled her.

"I must go to Olwen," she murmured; and then, just as she had done before, she snatched at his hand and raised it to her lips. "Don't mind about the machines, Wolf dear. Bring Darnley to tea, won't you? And tell him to order a trap. She *could* walk, I know. But I don't want her to get Mattie all tired out. Au revoir, my dear!" And she slipped away into the house, giving

him, as she went, one of those especial smiles of hers that were always so baffling.

Back at his desk again, Wolf was compelled to bestow so much attention upon his boys that it was only once in all the afternoon that he fixed his eyes upon the mark on the wall, and gave himself up to his sullen meditations.

"This is the kind of thing," he thought, "that I've got to endure for the rest of my days, unless Mother, with her tea-shop money, pensions me off! I could bear it! I know well enough I could bear it, if only—— It's nice making Gerda laugh. It's nice doing what Christie tells me. But it'll be hard to go on in this room for thirty years."

He had occasion to denounce a couple of boys, ere the lesson was over, for a flagrant case of cribbing; and the way in which the elder of these boys—a great hulking lubber-head called Gaffer Barge—took all the blame upon himself, struck his imagination far more than he permitted that poor, sweet-natured lout to discover! When the clock finally struck the hour, and he found himself free, he stopped Gaffer Barge as the lad was slouching off.

"Barge," he said, "I wonder if you would be so awfully good as to do a little errand for me on your way home?"

There came into the boy's face, on hearing these words, a smile of such sheer, innate sweetness and goodness, that Wolf was staggered. He had been, if anything, rather abrupt and distant with the fellow in their daily rela-

tions, and the pleasure with which the boy responded to this unexpected request struck him in his present mood as no less than astonishing. It was as if in this desert of grim reality upon which he had been dropped from the back of his divine steed, he had heard the most heavy-humped camel utter melodious words.

"How good of you, Gaffer!" he cried eagerly, using the lad's nickname to indicate his appreciation of this response. "One minute, then; and I'll write a note."

He incontinently scribbled a line to Gerda, telling her not to expect him home till after tea. This missive he folded up and directed to "Mrs. Wolf Solent, Thirty-Seven, Preston Lane."

"Here you are, Barge," he said, handing it to him. "It's not much out of your way. But I'm really most extremely grateful to you." Whereat the lad slipped off, as shyly exultant as if he had made a hundred runs in a cricket-match.

There arose no obstacle, in the sequence of events that now occurred, to upset Christie's prearranged plan. With the fly from the Three Peewits safely ordered for seven o'clock, Darnley and Wolf took their places at the Malakite tea-table; and a situation that certainly possessed elements of awkwardness flowed forward as smoothly and easily as if the girl had possessed a social genius worthy of the subtlest adepts of high society.

Mr. Malakite was himself unusually voluble during the earlier part of the meal, and Wolf's attention was thoroughly arrested by the drift of the old man's loquacity.

"And so Urquhart wrote to him," the old bookseller

was saying, "and I got his reply yesterday . . . by the second post. Olwen met the postman and brought it to me in the shop. You weren't afraid of your old granddad, were you, my chick?" He looked round the table, as he said this, with an expression of crafty triumph.

"We mustn't bore Darnley with our business-affairs, Father," interrupted Christie, "on the very eve of his wedding-day."

But Darnley too had caught the unusual quiver of excitement in the old man's voice, and had fixed his blue eyes intently upon him.

"No, no," he said. "Please go on, Sir; please go on."

"It's a relative of yours, Mr. Solent, as well as of the squire's, so he tells me," continued the bookseller. "He knew I wanted to sell out, and he sent this gentleman my catalogue, and now I've got his reply . . . by the afternoon post. Olwen gave it to me while I was on the ladder, didn't you, my pet? You didn't know your granddad could climb a ladder, did you, my pretty?"

Wolfe experienced an intense distaste for the tone the old man adopted in thus addressing his daughter's child. He couldn't resist a furtive glance at Christie. But the girl was staring with one of her fixed, inscrutable looks at Darnley; and all he could interpret of her feelings depended upon a certain disturbing droop of her underlip. Like a flash there shot through his mind a startled doubt as the wisdom of the human race in allowing family-life to be so unapproachable, so fortified, so secretive. In spite of what he had often said to Gerda, it came over him now that there *was* something rather

ghastly in letting this girl and this child be shut up with this senile nympholept.

"From London, by the afternoon post," insisted Mr. Malakite. And Wolf, nervously receptive of every psychic current just then, felt more uneasy still at this imbecile repetition of so unimportant a detail.

"Is it Lord Carfax you are talking about?" he hazarded—thinking to himself, "How oddly that fellow keeps up his rôle in my life!"

But the bookseller nodded eagerly. "Did *you* write to him too about my stuff?"

Christie turned her head sharply at this. "I've never told Wolf anything at all about your catalogue, Father," she cried. "He doesn't approve of our selling"—she hesitated a moment, and then smiled her most mischievous smile—"the sort of books we *do* sell!"

This identification of herself with the worst aspect of her parent's business was a new shock to Wolf. He looked at her reproachfully; thinking of the nature of that book from Paris compared with which the lewdest court-trials in Dorset history were a mere pinch of honest dirt; but the girl's head was held high, and her eyes were flashing ominously.

"His lordship says he'll take the whole lot!" concluded her father triumphantly. "So *that* means, my pretty ones, that your silly old man has done the best stroke of business of his whole life!" He turned his eye defiantly upon Wolf as he spoke, as if challenging the whole world to interfere with him. "I shall be able to retire from work after this," he added, with an unpleas-

ant complacency, "and we'll go and live at Weymouth, won't we, my treasures? The silly old man will sit on the esplanade all the morning, and play bowls all the afternoon!"

Christie got up at this point and moved round to the little girl's elbow. While she was spreading a slice of bread for her, Wolf muttered something about goat-carriages. The child was all attention at once.

"Did Cinderella's coach have goats to pull it?" she asked. "Do goats go faster than donkeys?"

"I'll just run down and see if I can see anything of your fly," said Christie suddenly. And she slipped from the room with a movement as swift, and almost as imperceptible, as a breath of that day's soft wind.

The old man took advantage of her absence to begin retailing to Darnley the names, editions, and prices of some of his most curious and expensive volumes. Olwen, at this, left her bread-and-jam, slipped out of her chair, and, coming round to Wolf's side, scrambled up upon his knees and demanded a story.

Wolf felt sure that, in spite of her ranging herself so definitely on her father's side, Christie was embarrassed by the old man's excitement; and he had an inkling that she would remain down there in the doorway, looking for the carriage, until it actually drew up.

"Well, sweetheart," he whispered, "I'm not very good at stories; but I'll try." He clasped the child closely to him and shut his eyes so as to collect his thoughts.

"At the very moment," he began, "when we were all waiting for the cab to come, you and I saw an enormous

swallow . . . the ancestor of all swallows . . . big as a golden eagle, hovering close to the window." Olwen twisted round her head at this, in order to see the window.

"Without a moment's hesitation," he went on, "we opened the window together and got on the bird's back."

"Leaving everyone, Wolf?"

"Certainly. Leaving everyone! This great swallow carried us then over Poll's Camp and over the Gwent Lanes toward Cadbury Camp. It let us get down off its back at Cadbury Camp . . . which really is Camelot . . . and you and I drank at Arthur's Well there; and the effect of drinking that water was to turn us both into swallows, or into some strange birds like swallows. We sat, all three, in a row, on a sycamore-branch above the valley; and we wondered and wondered where we'd fly to. And a lovely wind, blowing over the dark rain that is held in the hollows of old trees, ruffled our feathers; and we knew, being birds, the language of the wind; and it said to us, 'The cuckoo-flowers have come out down by the Lunt!' And it said to us, 'If you stop chattering, you silly birds, and listen, you will hear the earth murmuring to itself as it sweeps forward through space.'"

"What did I say to it then, Wolf?" whispered the little girl, glancing anxiously at the door.

But he continued to hug her closely to him; and with his eyes still tightly shut, he went on in the same low tone: "You said to it, 'Blow us all towards Weymouth, wind, and be quick about it. I want to dig in the sand!'" . . .

"Wolf!" It was Darnley who was addressing him across the table.

He opened his eyes, and, as he did so, he became aware that his friend was looking at him with that same appealing glance that had arrested his attention when they first met at the Lovelace Hotel.

"Yes, Darnley?"

"Mr. Malakite was alluding to your father just now; and it just occurred to me that I've never told you what *my* father used to say when I had to go back to school. He used to say to me, 'Man can bear anything, if it only lasts a second!'"

Something behind his friend's mackerel-coloured eyes seemed at that moment of time to be reaching out to his inmost soul and crying to it for some answering signal. The fact that Mattie only yesterday had called upon her mother, so long dead, and that Darnley was now reverting to a father he had never even mentioned before, struck Wolf's mind as an ominous glimpse into the central nerve of life upon earth. He felt at that moment an out-rushing wave of intense affection for Darnley. But what could he do? Olwen refused to let him so much as even smile at the yellow beard across the table. She turned his head towards her with one of her sticky little hands.

"What did the wind say then?" she cried. "What did it say to me when I told it to blow me to Weymouth?"

"It said, 'You want too much!'" he went on. "It said, 'I'm afraid you're not a real bird at all! If you were a real bird you wouldn't care what you did or where you went, as long as you were flying. You'd hover over

Dorset, looking at everything—looking at every cuckoo-flower in the Lunt fields, and every nest in the Gwent Lanes. You'd hover——"

"Where is Christie?" came the voice of Mr. Malakite from across the table.

Wolf had to reopen his closed eyes at this. "Downstairs, I suppose," he responded brusquely. And then, catching hold of the child's hot hand as it clutched at his chin, "The wind," he went on, "lifted all three birds from off the branch and carried them northeast, where not one of them wanted to go! Over hill and dale it carried them, towards Stonehenge. And when it had let them sink down upon the highest stone of Stonehenge, it said to them——"

He was interrupted by Christie's reappearance.

"The fly's here, Darnley!" she cried. "Come, Olwen; let me put on your things."

"It said to them," Wolf concluded, "I can only take one of you to the house of my father. You must decide among yourselves which it is to be!' "

There was a general hush in the room as these words fell.

"Don't let it be me!" whispered Olwen hurriedly, clapping her hand over his mouth.

But Wolf's half-muffled voice must have been audible to them all.

" 'Let the one who can best bear to be alone, be the one to go,' cried the swallow. And as he spoke, he snatched up the trembling Olwen-bird with his beak and claws, and spread his great, pointed wings for flight.

Over Wilton he flew, over Semley, over Gillingham, over Templecombe, over Ramsgard, over King's Barton! And as he flew, the Olwen-bird's feathers were so ruffled by the speed, that she turned into a little girl again; and when he set her down at last on the window-sill, and she clambered back into the room, and called down the stairs to Christie and Darnley, it seemed as if she had never been out of the house at all."

Wolf was almost embarrassed by the grave hush that followed his conclusion.

"Heavens! I didn't know you were such a story-teller," murmured Darnley, as he picked up his overcoat.

"Did the wind take you to its house?" panted Olwen, flushed and fidgeting now, as Christie buttoned round her a grey-blue jacket with a rabbit-fur collar and proceeded to smooth down her hair under a small, stiff Russian cap; "and did you *like* being taken away from everybody, Wolf?"

He made no answer to the child's question. A deadly sadness had suddenly descended upon him; and through this sadness, as if through a screen of Mukalog's most disastrous rain, he fancied he caught an odiously possessive look shot forth upon Christie's bending figure out of the old man's narrowed eyelids. . . .

A few minutes later, as the faded vehicle drove off, with Olwen's thin little arm protruded from its side, like a white stalk out of a black bag, and he turned to Christie in the doorway to bid her good-night, he found an expression upon her face that sent a queer shiver through his nerves.

"I must go, Wolf dear," she whispered. "Don't forget all about me in the excitement of tomorrow."

They remained silent for a second, side by side, as if the physical chemistry of their two frames had its own occult understanding, beyond anything that could be said or done by either. Then she hurriedly touched his hand, turned from him, and entered the house without another sign.

For some mysterious physical reason, the familiar sour smell of the pigsty, when he finally reached Preston Lane, brought to his mind that incredibly beautiful look, of sheer, native goodness, on the face of Gaffer Barge.

That look had surged up from the depths to greet him when he was in his worst danger of being swamped by "reality." Gaffer Barge was certainly too unimaginative to blow any ideal bubble! Not even that old rascal with the white cat was more embedded in actuality than was this generous lout.

Wolf paused for a moment and ran the end of his stick along the railing of the pigsty as an unmusical man might draw his thumb across the strings of a violin.

He crossed the road and opened the gate into his puny garden. To his surprise, as he moved up to the door, he saw that their front-room was brilliantly illuminated. Hurriedly he let himself in; and he was no sooner in the hall than he was aware of youthful laughter proceeding from the parlour.

He burst in upon them, his hat and stick still in his hand. But it was only Lobbie Torp and Gerda, engaged in a vociferous game of cards!

Gerda's cheeks were burning and her eyes were brilliant.

"Lobbie's brought us a real pack, Wolf!" she cried excitedly. "They've got pictures on 'em, same as they have at Farmer's Rest!" shouted Lobbie in an ecstasy, pushing a card into Wolf's hand.

"Why haven't we ever thought of buying such nice ones, Wolf?" echoed Gerda.

"A pretty sort of game for a schoolboy to bring into my sober house," began Wolf smiling; "but you two are certainly enjoying yourselves."

"Well, we must stop now," said Gerda, in her most grave housekeeping tone. "I've got to get supper. He can stay to supper, can't he, Wolf?" she added, throwing into her voice a cajoling little-girl inflexion.

"Oh, don't let's stop, Gerdie! Don't let's stop!" cried Lob Torp. "Why can't we take sides again, with him joining in?"

But Wolf's presence had already produced a certain restraint; and Gerda did not find it difficult to slip away into the kitchen.

Wolf took off his coat, and, throwing it upon a chair, flung his hat and stick on top of it. He noted in his mind that this was the first time he had ever dispensed with his habitual hanging-up of these objects upon the pegs outside.

He lifted the table out of the way, and the two of them sat down by the fire. A couple of cards on the floor made Wolf recall, as he stooped to pick them up, that game of draughts he had intruded upon between Gerda and Bob Weevil.

"How's your friend Weevil?" he asked Lobbie at random.

"Pining for Gerdie," was the boy's startling answer. "I went long o' he to Willum's Mill last Tuesday night when Mr. Manley were out courtin'; but he were too lonesome to put a worm on a hook! He said Gerdie never liked they wriggling worms and he weren't never going to disturb they again. He said he reckoned them had *their* feelings, same as other folk. I told 'e 'twere all a girl's foolishness, and that we were men; but he said he had sworn a girt oath to do everythink what our Gerdie wanted, though he reckoned he'd never set eyes on she again." Lobbie paused, and, feeling about in his pocket, produced a packet of peppermints, one of which he put in his mouth and another he handed to Wolf, who accepted it gravely.

"He made a vow," the boy repeated, staring solemnly into the fire, as if completely weighed down by the strange aberrations of human passion; "a vow like what King Harold did make, on they unknown bones."

"Have you seen him since, Lobbie?" enquired Wolf.

The boy hesitated and glanced rather uneasily at his host.

" 'Tisn't that I haven't seen him," he murmured obscurely. "If you *must* know," he burst out, " 'twas when I asked he to come to Grassy Mound, out Henchford way, where the girls do enjoy theyselves, rolling down thik bank. And do 'ee know what he said to I?" Lobbie fixed a portentously dramatic look upon his hearer, the undissolved peppermint in his cheek increasing rather than diminishing its impressiveness. "He said there

weren't no pleasure in 'em! 'Twas upsetting to a person to hear him; but that's what he said . . . 'no pleasure in 'em' . . . meaning, *you know what!*"

"Your friend is in love with our Gerda, I'm afraid," said Wolf coldly.

" 'Tisn't Adultery, be it," enquired Lobbie, "for he to carry on so about another man's wife?"

In place of answering this question, Wolf escorted his brother-in-law into the kitchen. There the boy's youthful spirits, as he helped his sister dish up the supper, left Wolf time to slip out into the yard and possess his "soul," such as it was, in five minute's solitude.

Actuated by one of those capricious motions which he habitually obeyed, he moved over to the stunted laburnum-bush by the wall. On one branch only were there any buds; whereas their neighbour's lilac, growing in the pig-man's back-yard, was covered with embryo leaves. He laid his hand on the trunk of this abject tree and looked up at the great velvet-black concavity above him, sprinkled with its minute points of light.

It was then that he distinctly heard, just as if the trunk of that little tree were a telegraphic receiver, "Wolf! Wolf! Wolf!" uttered in Christie's voice, but with an intonation twisted out of her normal accent by some desperate necessity.

As he heard these words he seemed to see her face, exactly as he had seen it at that open doorway a couple of hours ago, only with a look upon it that forced him to make an immediate drastic decision.

He went back into the kitchen.

"Come on, Wolf!" cried Gerda, "we are ready to begin."

Not for one single second did he doubt the truth of what he had heard under that tree. "I must get away without upsetting them," he thought. "I must get away without their guessing that anything's wrong!" He nodded his head with a forced grimace.

"Sit down and start, my dear! I've got to run out for a minute to get something." By the light of the parlour-fire he pulled on his overcoat. His fingers shook so much, as he tightened the collar round his neck, that it was not easy to button it. Then he went into the kitchen again. The brother and sister were seated at the table now, laughing and jesting with absorbed hilarity. "There's something important I *have* to get, Gerda! Keep my plate hot for me, will you? And enjoy yourselves till I come back. Don't wait dessert for me! But I'll come back all right . . . before long." Throwing these words among them in a voice full of exaggerated cheerfulness, he snatched at his stick and was out of the house before they had time to realize what he was doing.

Like a stage-group in a charade, just glimpsed by some hurried messenger through an open doorway, as he rushes on his way, those two laughing faces at the table lined themselves against his agitation. He even retained enough detachment, as he strode along, to note how easily these children of Dorset made a natural circle for their festivity, from which he was inevitably excluded. Still there arose no flicker of doubt in his mind as to the truth of the summons he had received. It

tugged at him so hard that before he reached the book-shop he was actually running. . . .

God! There was a man talking to Christie at her door.

He approached them breathless, his heart beating violently. He felt the complete confusion which a person feels when he sees some utterly alien object in possession of a familiar spot!

The stranger was talking in authoritative tones to Christie, who herself stood exactly as he had seen her last.

"I'll be back in a couple of hours," the man was saying. "But if he *should* regain consciousness before that, you must let me know. You've got someone to send, haven't you?" He remained for a moment hesitating, his bowler-hat in one hand and his black bag in the other. His countenance was illuminated by a faint flicker from behind the form of the girl. She must have laid down her candle upon a step of the staircase.

The first impression Wolf received was of an old photograph-album in his grandmother's drawing-room in Brunswick Terrace; the second, one of a certain hospital-entrance in a street in London. It was later that these impressions explained themselves. The man had the drooping mustache and unintelligent wooden forehead of an old-fashioned army-officer. About his person hung a smell of laudanum or chloroform.

"What is it?" cried Wolf as he approached. "Can I help? Can I do anything?"

Dark as it was, Wolf was conscious that the fellow gave him a look of frigid suspicion as he bowed him-

self off. "You can send for me if anything—otherwise in a couple of hours," were his final words as he moved away. . . .

Christie led him then up the well-known staircase. "He is dying," she said, as they entered the bedroom of Mr. Malakite, a room whose existence was barely known to him. Then there commenced a strange vigil beside the unconscious form of that old man.

Christie herself sat on a chair on the left of her father's bed; he, on a similar one on the right. In broken whispers the girl told him how her father had fallen backwards, down that narrow staircase, soon after he and she had been left alone.

"I think I lost my head, Wolf. I think I ran crying into the street. Anyway, people came round . . . a lot of people . . . and they fetched Doctor Percy. Father's been like this ever since. Doctor Percy examined him. It's some internal injury, he thinks. He says he thinks his spine is hurt in some way; but the worst injury is internal. He thinks"—here the girl spoke in a voice that startled Wolf a good deal more than the meaning of her words—"that he's bleeding to death inside."

Each five minutes that passed in this singular interlude seemed as long as twenty minutes of any ordinary time-flow. Christie was completely different from her ordinary self. She avoided Wolf's eyes. She repelled his touch. She seemed reluctant to resume anything approaching their old intimacy.

He longed to ask her whether she had actually called out his name aloud, or whether that psychic summoning

had conveyed its message independently of either of their two conscious minds. But he was too troubled by this unusual look upon her face and this unnatural reserve, to ask any questions. He longed to enquire how the old man had come to have such an accident at all; but he dared not refer to it. There emanated from the girl an ice-cold barrier of inflexible pride, setting him at such a distance that no real exchange of feelings was possible.

Every now and then she would get up and move the bedclothes under the old man's chin, as if fearful lest he should be suffocated. But the particular way she did this struck Wolf as having something unnatural in it, for she did it exactly as if the old man were already dead. She touched him differently from the way she would have done it had he merely been unconscious. Her attitude seemed to display the shrinking abhorrence that living people experience at contact with inanimate flesh.

To Wolf, who was both ignorant and very unobservant in matters of this sort, it did begin to present itself at last, as he watched the old man's face, that he really *was* dead . . . had died, in fact, while Christie and he had been watching over him! Incontinently he muttered something to Christie, and, bending over the bed, inserted his hand beneath the clothes and felt for the old man's heart. What he actually said to Christie was, "I'll find his heart, shall I?" But in all the agitation of that moment he was still shockingly aware of the girl's avoidance of his eye.

"I can't feel it. I don't believe he's breathing!" he blurted out. "Look at his lips!"

The girl did not answer him. She bent low down over her father's face; so low, that a loose tress of her hair fell against the old man's closed eyes.

Then she straightened herself up with a jerk, and Wolf pulled his hand away from under the bedclothes. He felt inert, utterly unable to deal with this crisis. Stupidly he watched her across the old man's stiff figure. He had been by degrees noting the aspects of this room which was so completely strange to him. *Mr. Malakite's bedroom!* He had even permitted himself to wonder what kind of spiritual "eidola" . . . the creation of the thoughts of this singular old man . . . lived and moved, like invisible homunculi, in this bare room! For the room was absolutely bare. With the exception of a small framed picture, in staring colours, of Raphael's *Transfiguration*, propped up upon the mantelpiece, there was nothing upon the walls. The only thing to be seen in the room now was death—death upon the bed, and the daughter of death standing at the window!

Mr. Malakite's bedroom-lamp was of a very different appearance from that old green one in Christie's room. It was a small ship's-lantern; and her father was wont to read deep into the night, so Christie had once told him, with this lantern balanced upon his knees as he lay in bed.

The ship's-lantern did not throw a very strong light; and Wolf, as he laid his fingers on the old man's forehead, with a vague notion of establishing the fact of life's extinction, was aware of Christie's figure at the window as a taut bow-string of quivering feeling.

"He does not breathe. It must be the end, Chris," he murmured gently.

The girl turned abruptly and came back. Twice, as she crossed that little space between the window and the bed, he saw her straighten herself up, hold back her head, and shut her eyes, clenching her fingers tightly as she did so, and making an odd little indrawn gasp, as if she were swallowing the very dregs of all human bitterness.

"Shall I go and fetch Doctor Percy?" he asked, moving round the foot of the bed.

He caught her eye for a moment then, and it was like the eye of a wild bird imprisoned in a boy's hand. She huddled herself against the wall at the bed's head, her head bowed upon her folded arms, her body as rigid as the form on the bed.

Something about the nape of her small neck, as she hung there, with drooping head and tense, taut limbs, hit Wolf through the heart.

"Don't you mind, O my dear true-love! Don't you mind!" he whispered desperately, clasping and unclasping his fingers, but not daring to approach her. His consciousness of her mood was so intense that when he thought of trying to take her in his arms he saw her wild white face and flashing eyes turned upon him—turned against him with terrible words!

"Do you want me to go for that doctor, Chris?" he repeated, in a dull, flat, wooden voice.

A long shiver passed through her body, and she turned round, her arms hanging limp by her sides.

"I'd . . . rather go . . . myself," she said, in a low, heavy tone. "Go . . . myself," she repeated.

With stiff, leaden movements, after that, she went into her own room and came back in her loose winter coat and woollen cap.

"O Chris!" he cried, as he saw her there, hovering in the doorway; "O little Chris!"

But she made a movement with her hands, as he approached her, that was almost peevish—the sort of movement with which a little girl beats down the jumping and barking of an excited dog.

"I'll be back in about twenty minutes, Wolf," she said calmly. But he noticed that not one glance did she cast at the form on the bed, not one glance at him. The words she uttered, natural and commonplace as they were, were addressed to that gaudy rendering of the *Transfiguration* on the mantelpiece.

And then she was gone . . . melting away, so it seemed to him, as if she had actually been a spirit. The sound of the opening and closing of the street-door affected him like an everlasting farewell. He recognized in that second that something had happened in his own heart that was like a wall falling outwards . . . outwards . . . into an unknown dimension.

In addition to the bookseller's ship's-lantern, which stood on a small table, there were two candles on the bare chest of drawers, one on each side of a faded leather case, containing two hair-brushes. Wolf sat down again and watched his own shadow sway, with the flicker of those two candle-flames, across the countenance upon the bed.

Very faintly, from the parlour on the other side of the landing—for the door was still wide open—came the ticking of Christie's clock.

His consciousness, like the man at watch on a ship that has been submerged in some terrific wave and rises to the surface cloudy with salt-foam, turned instinctively to his lost "mythology," turned to it as to something lying dead on the floor of his soul. And it came over him, by slow degrees like a cold glimmer of morning upon a tossing sea, that the abiding continuity of his days lay, after all, in his body, in his skull, in his spine, in his legs, in his clutching anthropoid-ape arms! Yes! that was all he had left . . . his vegetable-animal identity, isolated, solitary . . . hovered over by the margins of strange thoughts!

The intense reality of Mr. Malakite's figure beneath those bedclothes, of his beard above them, of his nostrils, his old-man's eyelids, his ugly beast-ears, narrowed the reality of his own life, with its gathered memories, into something as concrete, tangible, compact, as the bony knuckles of his own gaunt hands now resting upon his protruding knees! Thought? It was "thought," of course! But not thought in the abstract. It was the thought of a tree, of a snake, of an ox, of a man, a man begotten, a man conceived, a man like enough to die tomorrow! With what within him had he felt that shrewd thrust just now about his true-love Chris? Not with any "glassy essence." Simply with his vegetable-animal integrity, *with his life,* as a tree would feel the loss of its companion . . . as a beast the loss of its mate!

His thoughts focussed themselves mechanically upon

the white lips of the man on the bed and upon his wrinkled eyelids, but they were no longer occupied with these things. His mind reviewed the loss of his life-illusion. How many chances and casualties, how many little criss-cross patterns, puffs of aimless air, wandering shadows, unpredictable wind-ripples, had combined to disintegrate and destroy it!

"I must not let slip what I found out just now," he thought. And then, as a triangle of tiny wrinkles upon one of Mr. Malakite's closed eyes wove itself into his mental process, "Whatever," he said to himself, "Christie may feel, I know that she, and no other, is my real true-love! Yes, by God! And I know that my 'I am I' is no 'hard, small crystal' inside me, but a cloud, a vapour, a mist, a smoke, hovering round my skull, hovering round my spine, my arms, my legs! *That's what I am*—a 'vegetable-animal' wrapped in a mental cloud, and with the will-power to project this cloud into the consciousness of others!"

As he articulated this thought he gave himself up to a vivid awareness of his body, *particularly of his hands and knees,* and, with this, to a vivid awareness of his mind as a cloudy projection, unimpeded by material obstacles, driven forth in pursuit of Christie.

"I command that she shall be all right!" he muttered audibly, addressing this word to the universe in general.

All these thoughts raced through his head while, for no earthly reason, he transferred his gaze to the bookseller's eyelashes.

"But if I send my mind after her, where is the will that sends it? In my hands and my knees?"

But with the help of Mr. Malakite's eyelashes, which were of a yellowish white, he decided to suppress all those logical ambiguities. "The great thing is to have a *feeling* of my identity that I can strengthen, whatever happens! Perhaps my will *is* in my knees and my hands. It doesn't matter *where* it is, as long as it can drive forth my mind to look after Christie!"

At that point he was aware of a cold, sickening doubt with regard to Christie. Strange that he should only discover what love for her meant, at the moment when that closing door rang in his ears!

What a childish optimist he was! Were gorillas like that? *Their* identity, anyhow, was in their hands and knees!

A middle-aged gorilla, watching the dead face of an old gorilla—such was his present situation. . . .

Suddenly the left eye of Mr. Malakite—the one upon which Wolf's gaze had so mechanically been fixed—opened perceptibly and looked at him.

"She'll be back soon, Solent," said Mr. Malakite.

"Do you want anything? Can I do anything for you, Are you suffering, sir?" Wolf found himself on his knees at the side of this awakened eye. The lid kept flickering up and down, raising itself with difficulty and then closing again; but the amount of conscious intelligence revealed by that life-cranny when Wolf was able to peer into it, was terrifying.

"She pushed me down," said Mr. Malakite.

A preposterous nursery-rhyme about an old man "who

wouldn't say his prayers" came into Wolf's head. But he murmured gravely, "Can I get you a drink of water or anything?"

"Your father." These two words came very faintly. The flickering eyelid sank down and stirred no more. . . . "I think I see your father." This time the voice was almost inaudible. But the next word was clearer. "Good," said Mr. Malakite.

Wolf had risen from his knees now and was hanging over the dying man, his face a few inches from his face, his hands, palms-down, pressed into his pillow. . . .

"And great." These last two syllables seemed uttered rather by the old man's spirit than by his lips; for the latter were closed as tightly as his eyes.

"He . . . will . . . for——" The sound of this ghastly susurration seemed to come from under the bedclothes, from under the bed, from under the floor, from under the book-shop beneath the floor, from under the clay-bottom of Blacksod. . . .

"For——" The repetition of the syllable seemed like the echo of an echo; but Wolf became aware of a shocking twitching in the muscles of the old man's face.

"For——" . . .

A wave of atavistic sentiment rose up in Wolf's throat from countless centuries of Christian unction. He found the word "forgive" quivering on the tip of his tongue, and recklessly he let it descend, like a drop of consecrated oil, on the man's dying. His idea was that Mr. Malakite was confusing the one person he had ever re-

spected with some obscure First Cause. Then he found himself staggering back.

With a convulsion of his whole frame, the bookseller jerked himself to a sitting-posture. Spasmodically drawing in his legs, like a frog swimming on its back, he kicked off every shred of clothing. . . .

"Forget!" he shrieked; and his voice resembled the tearing of a strip of calico. He was dead when he sank back; and from one of the corners of his mouth a stream of saliva, tinged with a red stain, trickled upon the pillow.

Hurriedly Wolf pressed down those elevated knees and pulled the bedclothes up to the man's chin. Then, taking out his handkerchief, he wiped the mouth with it, screwed it into a tight ball and wedged it between the blankets and the jaw of the dead. That done, he drew a long breath and stared at Mr. Malakite. But where *was* Mr. Malakite? The face above the stained handkerchief seemed a *new phenomenon* in the world—something that had no connection with the old man he had heard crying the word "forget" just now. It was as if the thing he had known in his experience as Mr. Malakite had completely vanished; and *from somewhere else* had arisen this frozen simulacrum.

"Forget," he murmured to himself; and then he felt a longing to convey at once to Miss Gault the news that a man upon his death-bed had confused William Solent with God!

But at the image of Miss Gault, tumbling over her milk-bottle upon his father's grave, a sudden moisture

seemed to flow into the cavities behind his eyeballs.

"It's not for you," he said grimly to the figure on the bed, as he recognized this tendency to tears. "It's for Miss Gault." And actuated by a queer desire *to prove to the corpse* that it was not "for him," he laid the tips of his fingers on the bookseller's forehead. "How soon do they get cold?" he said to himself. . . .

At this point he heard the door opening down below, and the sound of voices and footsteps. He hurried out of the room and met Christie on the stairs.

"He's dead, Chris," he said. "I couldn't do anything." This addition to his news sounded singularly foolish as soon as it was uttered. Even at that inadvertent moment, on the eighth step of those back-stairs, he blushed to have spoken such a banality.

"It's too late, doctor," said she, turning her head towards the man behind her.

"I feared so," said Doctor Percy.

"Poor old gentleman!" repeated Doctor Percy. "He is spared a great deal." The tone in which this amiable epitaph echoed through that house and penetrated into the shop, with its shelves of perverse erudition, had an irritating effect upon Wolf's nerves.

He felt a malicious desire, as he moved aside to let Christie pass, to catch the man by the sleeve of his neat coat and whisper in his ear something monstrous. "She had to throw him downstairs, you idiot; she had to throw him downstairs!"

Mr. Malakite's daughter was standing by his bed's head when the two men entered the room. Her arms, with the fingers clasped desperately inside the palms,

hung down by her sides like torn tree-limbs in a deadly wind. Her head drooped upon her chest. He fancied for a moment that her profile was contorted with crying; but when she raised her head, her brown eyes were dull, abstracted, and completely tearless.

After bustling about the body for a minute or two, as if professional nicety required more evidence of death than nature in decency could afford, Doctor Percy bowed himself off.

"Come into the other room, Chris! No! . . . Come along! You *must*, my darling." Holding her by one of her clenched hands . . . and she obeyed him like a somnambulist . . . he led her into her parlour, where he made her sit down on a chair, over the glowing heap of cinders.

He sat down close to her side; and without looking at her, but still holding tightly that small clenched hand, he began speaking rapidly, emphatically, monotonously.

"Chris, there's nothing about all this that I don't know *as well as you do* . . . nothing, my darling! It's as if some crust were shattered for a moment and we looked through . . . into those horrors that are always there! It's the same with us all, Chris! It's the same with the whole world. There's only one thing for us to do if we're to endure life at all, Chris; and . . . and your father said the word himself before he died. Are you listening, Chris? He became conscious for a minute; and he said it to me like a message for you. . . . O Chris, little Chris, it was a message to both of us!"

She did not lift her head; but he knew, from the

quiver in the fingers he held, that her attention was arrested.

"He said 'forget,' Chris . . . just that one word. O my love, my only love! From now on that is the word for us. We know what we know. We bear it together. Listen, little Chris! You've got to go on living, for Olwen's sake. I've got to go on living for Gerda's sake. When you went away just now, I knew, in one great flash, what you and I are to each other. We shall be *that*, my dear, dear love, till we both are dead! Nothing can change it any more. Nothing can come between us any more. As to everything else . . . are you listening, little Chris? . . . we've both got to 'forget'—just as he said. It's the only way, my precious. When that crust breaks, as it did just now, it's madness to dwell upon it. It's the unbearable. No one can bear it and go on living. And you've *got* to live, Chris, for Olwen's sake, just as I've got——"

He was interrupted in the middle of his speech. The daughter of Mr. Malakite sprang erect upon her feet and uttered a piercing scream. Then she beat the air with her clenched hands.

"Damn you!" she cried. "Damn you! You talking fool! You great, stupid, talking fool! What do *you* know of me or my father? What do *you* know of my real life?"

Wolf drew away from her, his body bent forwards, his hands pressed against the pit of his stomach, his eyes blinking.

For a second he saw himself and his useless words exactly as she described them. He saw all his explana-

tions as if they had been one prolonged windy bellow, covering the impervious grazing of a complacent ox!

But grim terror swallowed up this spasm of personal humiliation. What if this tragedy were to unsettle Christie's wits?

He used his will now as if it had been a master mariner, giving rapid, desperate orders in a deafening storm! He deliberately smoothed out of his face every shade of feeling except a thundering anger.

"Stop that!" he cried, as if he had been speaking to Olwen. "Stop that, Christie!" And he made a step towards her. She had never seen him in such a mood, never heard such a tone from him. His nervous concern gave vibrancy to his pretended anger. Her contorted features relaxed, her clenched hands dropped down; she stood there before him like a solitary pier-post—desolate but unbroken—about whose endurance the last waves of the storm subsided in foamy rings.

Then, to his infinite relief, she burst into a flood of tears. He never afterwards forgot the extremity of those tears. Her face seemed literally to dissolve; it seemed to melt, as if the very stuff of it were changing from moulded flesh into streaming water!

She flung herself down on the sofa and buried her head in its faded embroidered roses. Approaching the back of the sofa, and leaning against it, he watched her huddled form lying on its bed of relief, very much as a master showman might watch the performance of a darling puppet, over whose form and gesture he had worked in secret, by the light of an attic candle, for many a long, starved month!

The lamp Christie always kept on the sewing-table in her parlour must have been burning steadily ever since they had had tea. The chimney was black now with soot; and Wolf moved across and turned the wick down a little. As he performed this small action, he received, to his astonishment, an inrush of furtive, stealthy satisfaction.

This was the first of such feelings that he had enjoyed for many a long day. "*Mr. Malakite is dead.*" Was it *that* particular collocation of words, as his mind visualized them, that gave him this physical thrill of relief? Or was it just the change of the girl's mood?

He could see, even by that diminished lamplight, when he returned to the sofa, that her streaming tears had made a dark, wet stain upon that pink embroidery. Oh, she would be all right now! Whatever had passed between her and the old man—whatever plague-spot of unspeakable remorse had appeared upon some sensitive fibre in her consciousness—these tears would wash out everything!

How could there be so much salt-water in one tiny skull?

The tears of women! How from the beginning of time they had washed away every kind of evil thing, every kind of deviltry! Down the centuries had flowed those tears, clearing our race's conscience from poisons, washing clean the mind of man from the torture of rational logic, washing it clean from the torture of memory, recreating it, fresh, careless, free, like a child new-sprung from the womb! But how could such a wide, dark, wet

stain upon those pink roses have come from so small a skull!

He didn't dare to speak to her as he pressed his hands upon the back of that familiar sofa and stared across her form, curved there like a dusky tree-root, into the dying fire.

As had happened once or twice before to him in his life, he fell at this crisis into a kind of waking-trance. That flood of tears became a river, swifter, deeper than the Lunt, and on its breast he was carried, so it seemed to him, into an imaginary landscape, far enough away from the corpse of Mr. Malakite and his ambiguous books! It was that same landscape which the Gainsborough picture had conjured up. But instead of a road there was this river; and the river carried him beyond the terraces and the gardens into less human scenery. There, between high, dark, slippery precipices was he carried, by the water of Christie's weeping; and there he encountered in strange correspondency those same towering basaltic cliffs past which he had drifted in a similar hallucination nearly a year ago, as he waited for his mother's train on the "Slopes" of Ramsgard!

He was brought back from this drugged condition by the sound of the street-door bell; but it was not at once that he realized that he was the one who had to answer this summons! Staring at the curve of Christie's wet eyelashes on her drowned cheek, as that dark stain on the pink roses grew wider, he was startled by the idea that this particular grouping of material substances

might be no more than reflections in a mirror. There, below this girl's figure, below these darkened roses, was there not hidden some deep, spiritual transaction? The feeling passed away quickly enough; but as it passed, it left behind it a stabbing, quivering *suspicion*, a suspicion as to the solid reality of what his senses were thus representing, compared with something else, something of far greater moment, both for himself and for her!

All this while the street-door bell continued to ring; and it was ringing now with violent, spasmodic jerks.

He straightened his back, and, moving away from the sofa, stood motionless in the middle of the room, listening.

"I must go down," he thought. "It's most likely that doctor come back, to make sure once more that the old man's dead!"

Again the bell rang, this time with a long, continuous, jerking pull. . . .

Wolf glanced at the back of the sofa. There was no movement there, nor any sign. He went out on the landing and waited for a moment at the door of the dead man's room, which they had left wide open. How different was the immobility of that form from the motionlessness of the one he had just left!

He listened to the silence, waiting for the bell to ring again. "Why is it," he thought, "that I find it so hard to go down?" He moved to the head of the stairs. "Why do sounds like this," he thought, "hit corpses in the face and outrage them like an indecency? Does death

draw up to the surface some new kind of silence, to disturb which is a monstrous abuse?"

Brought back to reality by the cessation of the ringing, and a little fearful as to what the doctor might do if thwarted in his professional zeal, Wolf ran down the stairs and flung open the street-door.

There, in his Sunday clothes, and with an expression of extravagant decorum upon his whimsical visage, was Mr. John Torp!

"Doctor told I, master——" he began.

"Come in, Mr. Torp," said Wolf helplessly, wondering vaguely what new process of pious science that stark figure upstairs was to expect. "Come in and sit down, will you, while I tell Miss Malakite you're here?" He let his father-in-law into the house and closed the door. It was easier to tell Mr. Torp to sit down than to give him anything to sit upon. "I don't know," he began awkwardly. But Mr. Torp caught him by the sleeve with one of his plump hands.

"It came over I," he whispered, "that Miss Malakite wouldn't be wanting one of they arrogant death-women with her Dad. And as I were an undertaker meself afore I took to me stone-job, I thought I'd run round and help she out."

"I'm sure it's most kind of you, Mr. Torp," murmured Wolf, noticing now for the first time that his father-in-law was carrying a heavy carpet-bag. "I'll go up and tell Miss Malakite you're here. I expect she'll be very grateful for your help."

"Don't 'ee say more than just that one word, Mister," replied the other, in a tone of such unctuous slyness that

Wolf made a grimace in the darkness. "Some relatives do like to use a common sheet. But I do say 'tis the corpse's feelings what us have to reason with. These here shrouds"—and he tapped Wolf's knee with the carpet-bag—"be calculated to lie as soft and light on they, as lamb's-wool on babes. 'Twas one of these here shrouds that thik bull-frog Manley cheated his wone mother of, by his dunghill ways; and her a woman too what always had a finicky skin. But don't 'ee say more than just that one word, mister. Missy up there, 'tis only likely enough, will give no more attention to these here shrouds than if she were tucking her Dad in's bed. But 'Leave it to Torp' is what thik corpse would say, were speech allowed 'un. They be wonderful touchy, they corpses be, if all were told; and it be worse when folks' tongues run sharp upon 'un, as we know they do on he above-stairs. 'Twere me thoughts of *that*, mister, that made I reckon Miss Malakite would be glad to see I, sooner than they death-nurses, who be all such tittle-tattlers."

It had by this time begun to dawn upon Wolf that his eccentric father-in-law had been genuinely actuated by a philanthropic impulse in making his appearance at this juncture. With this in mind he caught the man's hand and shook it warmly. "I'm sure we're much obliged to you, Mr. Torp," he said.

"And don't 'ee worry about your Gerdie," concluded the worthy man. "Missus went round to she when I comed away. Our Lob runned in, 'sknow, with a tale of your leaving your vittles and the Lord knows what! So when doctor told I you was here, I let *she* go to

Gerdie, and came round here me wone self. Ye knew, I reckon, that there were trouble in this house? Well . . . no matter for that! Every man to his wone concerns, be *my* motto."

The rough tact of this little outburst of indulgent interpretation was the final touch in the winning of Wolf's gratitude.

"I'll go up and see Miss Malakite," he said. "You wait here, Mr. Torp. I'm sorry there are only the stairs to sit on."

He found Christie putting coal on the grate in the parlour. She had closed the door of her father's room. She turned to him a face flushed by her struggle with the fire, but bearing the impress of her desperate crying in some fashion he could not just then define. At any rate she appeared in full control of herself; and he felt intuitively that as far as remorse went, her reason was clear and unpoisoned.

He shut the parlour-door and hurriedly explained Mr. Torp's mission.

"He knew I was with you. Doctor Percy must have told him. He knew you'd want some undertaker's woman to do what's necessary . . . to 'lay him out,' as they call it. He knew what gossips these demons are. So he just came himself. It was nice of the old chap, wasn't it?"

The psychic tension between them, as he hurriedly communicated all this, was so great that he found they were both on the verge of a childish giggling-fit. Wolf took advantage of this mood to tell her about the contents of the carpet-bag. "Oh, Chris," he found himself

saying, with a queer chuckle in his voice, "when the old man used that particular word, I had such a weird sensation! I thought of the shroud in which Samuel appeared to Saul. I thought of the shroud in which Lazarus came out of his grave. I thought of the shroud that Flora MacIvor made for Fergus before he was executed. And then to see that carpet-bag! It might have been a monstrous thing, eh, Chris? Nobody but this old fellow could have carried it off. Gad! but what a word it is! A *shroud!* Doesn't it make you want to be drowned in water, Chrissie, or burnt into cinders?" He paused for a minute, struggling to keep back from her one of those forbidden thoughts to which he was so hopelessly subject. But their mood was too close. They were like a couple of excited starlings perched on a gallows that sways in the wind. . . . The love that was between them gave a mad gusto to that incongruous moment, with Mr. Torp waiting below-stairs to wash an incestuous old man with soap and water, and Christie's parlour-door shut for ever to Mr. Malakite!

"Isn't it awful, Chris," he whispered, "to think of what Redfern's shroud must have looked like when they——" He suddenly remembered that he had never told the girl a word about what he and Valley had seen; and he stopped abruptly.

"When they?" she echoed faintly.

"I'll tell you another time, Chris," he flung out; and he seized her fragile figure in the most self-effacing embrace he had ever bestowed on anyone since he was born.

"YOU'LL BE SURE TO BE BACK FOR TEA!"

These words were uttered by Gerda as she stood in their doorway, with Lobbie Torp at her side.

"Make it fairly late, then," said Wolf. "I don't want to cut short our walk."

"The best part of our walk will be looking forward to our return," remarked Wolf's companion, with a smile that Wolf saw reflected, as if it were a bunch of honeysuckle, in Gerda's delighted face.

"Well, I'll have tea ready for *you*, whether Wolf's home or not!" cried the excited girl.

"And I'll get back from *my* walk as soon as you do," threw in Lobbie Torp. "I'm going down by the Lunt to cut a new walking-stick. . . . Bob's going with me. He likes the *other* kind . . . proper shop-sticks . . . but's he's coming all the same. Shall I cut you a stick too, Lord Carfax?"

The visitor turned to the boy with the gravest attention.

"An ash-stick, Lobbie? Could you grub up an ash *root?* No! I suppose it wants a spade for that! But an ash-stick, with its own root for handle, is just what I *am* on the lookout for." He turned round to Gerda with sly, screwed-up eyelids. "You're sure you won't change your mind, Mrs. Solent, and come with us? . . . and Lobbie too?" he added, with an after-thought that brought wrinkles of roguery into his face.

Wolf had already caught the amorous glances with which their visitor had enwrapped Gerda. It was just as if some drooping "Gloire de Dijon" rose in a deserted garden were enwrapped by a rich slant of August sunshine, full of the heavy poppy-scents of all the yellow cornfields it has crossed, negligent, careless, and yet massively intent! "Why *don't* you and Lobbie come with us?" Wolf feebly muttered; but as he spoke, there surged up within him a flood of black bile. Oh, how he hated just then, as he stood with his fingers on the iron rail of his gate, every one of the people of his life, except Christie! The maliciousness he felt at that moment amounted to a deadly distaste. He hated his mother, he hated Gerda, he hated Carfax, he hated Urquhart, Miss Gault, Jason! He hated them all, except Christie . . . and, perhaps, old Darnley with his yellow beard.

"We'd help you get tea, Gerda?" he murmured obstinately. "Or we could get it in Ramsgard!"

How queer this malice within him was! It made his pulses literally thud with its crazy violence. It gave him a savage, animal-like desire to dig his chin, in a tumbling, tossing wrestle of hate, into the flesh of Lord Carfax.

"Do come, Gerda!" he repeated, in a stubborn refrain. The girl shook her head; but the radiant expression she had been wearing in the last two hours did not pass from her face. It was evident to Wolf that Lord Carfax had completely won her heart during the short time he had spent under her roof.

"Do you really want to see where he's buried?" he asked, as he conducted his visitor through that grassy

lane he had recently discovered, which made it possible to reach Poll's Camp without passing through the town.

"I like all graveyards," replied Lord Carfax, "and I've always been interested in your father."

"It's a cemetery," remarked Wolf sulkily. "He's been there a long time," he added.

The weather-beaten countenance of "the lord from London" wrinkled itself into many genial wrinkles as it glanced indulgently at Wolf's surly profile.

"I was a good deal more interested in him than *she* thought quite decent," he went on. "I used always to tell him I'd visit his grave when he was dead. It was assumed between us, you know, that he *would* die. He always talked of being dead. It seemed to please him in some way. It certainly never gave *me* any great pleasure, that particular thought!" As his visitor said this he fixed upon Wolf a look of such humorous whimsicality that it was almost impossible to see it and remain morose and truculent. It was a look of penetrating sweetness, and yet it was shamelessly cynical. Wolf found himself softening; but this in itself was a thing that increased his secret irritation!

"I'd like to show you his grave," he said bluntly, feeling as if he would be glad to strike that kindly visage, and then to kiss it and ask its pardon for the blow!

He tried to transfer his attention, as they left the lane and entered the first of the orchards, to the beauty of that particular afternoon, the last Saturday in May. It was warm and windless; but a screen of thin, opaque clouds obscured the sunlight, filtering the hot rays, as

in some old picture, into a mellow spaciousness of watery gold. In fact, the atmosphere resembled nothing so much, to Wolf's mind, as the look of a great glass jug of cowslip-wine, which about a month ago his mother, in her drastic, picturesque manner—quite shameless about the number of flowers she sacrificed for such a thing—had held up to his lips.

He had plenty of time, as they drifted through the long grass of those three hedged-in orchards that led to the foot of the hill, to note every feature of his visitor's appearance. Lord Carfax was to all intents and purposes an old man; but he held himself so erect, and he walked with so resolute a step, that Wolf would have taken him for a man of fifty. He was in reality rather short—not much taller than Lobbie; but the massiveness of his great square head, combined with the solid sturdiness of his frame, produced the constant illusion that he was of normal height.

He was certainly eccentric in his clothes. His attire on this occasion gave Wolf the impression of a seafaring man. He might have been the elderly skipper of an old-fashioned packet-boat, bound from Weymouth for the Channel Islands! Wolf had been fascinated by many things in him from the very start. Partly owing to his mother's sardonic predilection, but much more owing to the man's own unique personality, he felt completely at ease with him. The fact that it was due to this man's initial intervention—as a relative of both Mr. Urquhart and Mrs. Solent—that he had come to Dorset at all, combined with the part the fellow's shameless opinions had played in his own secret thoughts, gave

to this rugged and leathery countenance, now that he saw it at close quarters, an almost legendary glamour.

A flicker of snobbishness entered into his feelings too. But he salved his conscience over this by assuring himself that he would have been in any case attracted to a person of this original character. He smiled grimly to himself, however, as he assisted "Cousin Carfax" in pushing his way through the hedge-gaps, to discover that he was already hoping that Jason would never learn of this prolonged visit! Carfax, he knew, was generally supposed to have left for London on the previous day. His remaining at the Three Peewits last night was a sudden caprice, of which even Mrs. Solent was unaware. Wolf suspected that Gerda's beauty had more to do with it than anything else!

They had hardly got through the last hedge, and were just about to ascend the southern slope of Poll's Camp, when they came upon a shabby-looking man—something between a tramp and a poor workman—who was resting himself on a turf-covered mole-hill.

To Wolf's surprise this man turned out to be none other than Mr. Stalbridge, the ex-waiter of the Lovelace Hotel!

The man rose at their approach; and Wolf, ashamed of his behaviour at their last encounter, greeted him with exaggerated deference, shaking hands with him and introducing him to his companion. The ex-waiter professed a vivid memory of their meeting in the Lovelace Hotel more than a year ago, and explained that he had got a temporary job in Blacksod and was now returning to spend the Sunday in Ramsgard.

Mr. Stalbridge's ceremonious manner offered such a contrast to his shabby attire, that Lord Carfax, who seemed to collect human curiosities as boys collect butterflies, entered into a lively conversation with him, and finally appeared prepared to receive him into their company as a fellow traveller. Wolf felt a little piqued by this; for though he had allowed for Gerda's attractiveness as an element in their visitor's interest, he had assumed that this excursion to the father's grave implied a certain desire on his guest's part to exchange ideas with the son! Apparently he was mistaken; Carfax's attention promised to be totally absorbed by Mr. Stalbridge, whose humorous anecdotes about the Lovelace family and other local magnates continued with small abatement until they reached the summit of Poll's Camp.

Wolf's original sensation of pique at this encounter had increased to a pitch that needed the control of some quite serious effort of mind, when they stood at length on the top of the grassy eminence.

Gerda's radiance under Carfax's admiration returned to him now as an integral portion of the slight he was enduring. "If she sees much more of these sophisticated people," he thought, "she will lose all the simplicity of her nature!"

He flung his gaze round the immense expanse revealed to them, while Lord Carfax drew heavy breaths, leaning on his stick; and Mr. Stalbridge continued the sly process of his courtly seduction. Without being obtrusive in any particular detail, the lavish waves of the season's fertility, feathery grasses, green wheat, new

budding honeysuckle, buttercups in their prime, red and white hawthorn, seemed to flow over every field and every hedgerow, between where he stood now on Poll's Camp and the mount of Glastonbury.

He felt at this moment as though humiliation were dripping into his heart, drop by drop, like carefully poured medicine into a tumbler of water. So this "lord from London" took really not the slightest interest in him! Anxious to help his mother, to help Jason, to help Mr. Stalbridge, the great man had evidently found Wolf himself tedious and uninspiring!

"Damn the fellow! What do I care what he thinks of me?" he said to himself; but as Mr. Stalbridge became more and more voluble, and the leathery creases of my Lord's hewn and quarried physiognomy wrinkled themselves in increasing appreciation, he found that his humiliation grew unbearable. That luminous look upon Gerda's face! Why, he had not been able to summon up that look for the last six months! She had become a grown-up woman with him these latter days, tender and considerate; but this man's admiration transformed her back again into an irresponsible little girl!

As soon as the visitor had got his breath, they all moved on, following the outer circle of the camp and heading for Babylon Hill.

Wolf was the last to climb across the stile into the highroad. How rich with the season's over-brimming vegetation that hedge-side was! What intoxicating earth-smells hung about that well-known stile! Trailing dog-roses that carried frail green buds, whose sweetness resembled the fragrance of apples and sunburnt hay,

mingled there, as he climbed that stile, with the white blossoms of tangled umbelliferous growths, their stalks full of warm, moist sap.

He glanced at the two men's faces, as they stood, quite oblivious of him, conversing there in the road. Yes! There was a scooped-out misery in the ex-waiter's eyes that reminded him of the man of the Waterloo steps! He was evidently making some personal appeal to Carfax now. Perhaps he hoped to get employment from him. Perhaps he *would* get employment from him! What a thing it was to be possessed of the power that Carfax had! Carfax was now succouring the Waterloo-steps man!

He remained for a minute balanced on the top of the stile, hugging his knees. He would give this poor devil every second he could snatch for him of this lucky chance! Slowly he turned his head and looked down upon the roofs of the town. "Christie! Christie!" And there flowed over him the memory of the day, just three weeks ago, when he had gone down to Weymouth. There he had seen her—seen her with Olwen in their new home by the backwater. Till the last minute of his departure, he and she had sat together on the dry sand under the Jubilee Clock, while Olwen paddled among the other children in a sea that danced and glittered in the jocund sunshine. He could smell the sharp sea-smells now. He could taste the salt. He could feel the living slipperiness of a broad brown ribbon of seaweed that Olwen had picked up, and that both he and Christie had pressed against their mouths. He could see the name "Katie" painted in green on a boat-stern, and the far-

away look of the sailor who leaned against it, thinking God knows what!

It was owing to Carfax—owing to his unstinted purchase of all those ambiguous books—that these two had enough to live on. He remembered the night when Christie had yielded to the little girl's mania for the seaside. "It's our fate, Wolf dear," she had said, as he touched her cold cheek. He remembered those last minutes under the sea-wall; how they had sat so stiff and straight, letting the loose grains of sand run through their fingers, staring into each other's eyes!

There was no book-shop any longer under that roof down there! Someone else, some overworked greengrocer's woman, was at this moment washing her dishes in Christie's little alcove, between that parlour and that bedroom. . . .

"Are you ready, Solent? I promised your wife to keep you alive-o!"

Carfax's voice was friendly. "I'm a fool to feel so touchy," he thought, as he jumped down into the road and joined them.

"He's won his fling," he thought, glancing sideways at the ex-waiter's face, as they moved on together. It was queer to see that film of unspeakable relief forming itself, like "cat-ice" over a pool, above those sockets of despair. Ailinon! but the chap *was* like that Waterloo-steps man. He was at least that man's representative! He had denied him half-a-crown that day outside the Abbey; and now Carfax had stepped in. Everything he would like to have done Carfax had done. And now he was dragging along at Carfax's heels to visit "old True-

penny!" What a humorous fiasco his whole life down here in Dorset had been! He had been defeated by Urquhart . . . paid off, fixed up, bribed, squared! He had betrayed that skull in the cemetery. He had let his true-love slip through his hands. His "lord in London" had recognized Jason's genius, discovered Gerda's beauty, poured oil and wine into the wounds of Mr. Stalbridge, added a new glory to the tea-shop. Why the devil should he find anything worth bothering about in Mr. Wolf Solent, teacher of history in the Blacksod Grammar School?

As the three men approached a certain group of larches where Wolf had once wondered what it would be like to live with Darnley, it became clear to him that Mr. Stalbridge *was* to leave his present miserable job. Apparently he was to be transformed into some sort of leisurely factotum, or assistant major-domo, in my Lord's London house. What incredible luck for the ex-waiter! Wolf at this point did feel a certain glow of admiration for this rugged collector of human butterflies. "How the devil does he keep that seafaring air," he thought, "among his servants in London? Anyway, the hiring of Mr. Stalbridge is just the kind of thing I'd like to do myself."

The ex-waiter's affair being settled, Wolf began to assume a more prominent place in the attention of the great man.

"How's my crazy cousin Urquhart?" he enquired. "I gave his house a wide berth this time! He's become 'heavy weather' these days, with his fixed ideas. Don't you feel the same?"

"What ideas do you mean?" murmured Wolf.

His companion gave him a slow, quizzical smile. "That book of *yours*, for one thing! And his absurd idea that he killed that boy Redfern. I met Doctor Percy at your mother's last night, and he told me the boy had died of double pneumonia. Percy attended him . . . saw him die, in fact . . . had to turn out that precious Vicar of theirs, who was howling like a poisoned jackal. Urquhart himself's going to die, Solent. By Jove! I felt death in his hand a year ago. I like the fellow; but when his idealizes his confounded peculiarities to quite such a tune, you get dead sick of him! I'm all in favour of honest bawdry myself; but why sing such a song about it? Natural or unnatural, it's nature. It's mortal man's one great solace before he's annihilated! But all this bladder-headed fuss about it—about such a simple thing—one way or the other—I don't like it. It's not in my style." Wolf was astonished at the massive four-square tone in which the man uttered these last words . . . as if he'd been a great admiral-of-the-fleet criticizing some popinjay captain for a frivolous manœuvre.

"What do *you* think?" he enquired of the ex-waiter. "Do *you* agree with Lord Carfax that annihilation is not to be gainsaid?"

The old man appeared to hesitate for a moment. Then he bent his head and took off his hat. "I believe in the Resurrection of the Body and the Life Everlasting," he said gravely, "if it's no offence to his lordship."

"Put on your hat, Stalbridge; put on your hat," said the other. "What do *you* think, Solent? You don't seem to enjoy expressing your views. You're like Ann. She

covers everything with such malicious sarcasm that she makes everything equally unimportant. Do *you* believe in a future life, Solent?"

They were now passing one of the numerous cattle-droves that led into that maze of grassy paths, bordered by high hedges, which Wolf had come to know as the Gwent Lanes. Wolf himself was walking on the right of Lord Carfax, the ex-waiter on the left; so that as he turned to answer this historic question, he caught the profiles of both these old men silhouetted against the rich vegetation of this avenue of grass and greenery.

"Sometimes I agree with Mr. Stalbridge," he said, "and sometimes with you. At this moment I think I agree with you; but that is probably due to the fact that I've been rather hard-worked at the school lately."

Carfax made no comment upon this; and presently Wolf heard him begin to give a humorous account to the new servant of what he described as his "open house."

That glimpse of the Gwent lane behind those two faces had brought to Wolf a sickening sense of what he had lost in the disappearance of his "mythology." A year ago, how little would it have mattered that he should have replied so lamely to the great question Carfax had put to him! He would have let it go. He would have fallen back on that sense of huge invisible cosmic transactions, in the midst of which he played his part, a part totally unaffected by any casual mental lapse.

As they walked on, and he listened with a negligent

ear to the discourse between this master and this servant, he recognized that the corpse of his life-illusion had received two fresh spadefuls of earth.

The resemblance, faint though it was, of Stalbridge to the Waterloo waif, considered in the light of that unbestowed half-a-crown, gave to this generous caprice of Carfax the quality of something that stepped in "between the election and his hopes."

But worse than this were my Lord's words about Urquhart.

Ailinon! Ailinon! Was all the agitation, all the turmoil, all his consciousness of a supernatural struggle with some abysmal form of evil, reduced now to the paltry level of a feeble old bachelor's fantastic self-deception?

If his imagination had been so moon-struck as to make so much of a pure phantasy, was it any wonder that this sagacious man-of-the-world turned away from him with indifference—turned to his wife's beauty, turned to the ex-waiter's idiosyncrasy, found in him nothing more than a pedantic usher in a provincial school? He had been living in a vain dream all these years of his life—living in it ever since he sat in the sunshine in his grandmother's bow-window, watching those painted boats rock and toss on the glittering Weymouth waves.

"Christie! Christie! O my lost darling, O my true-love!"

They had now arrived at the point where it was necessary to follow a field-path across the pastures in order to reach the cemetery. Mr. Stalbridge proceeded with

elaborate ceremony to bid them both farewell, touching his uncovered forehead to his new master and extending his hand to Wolf.

"The seven-o'clock train, at Ramsgard, then," were Carfax's last words to him; "and don't bother about a ticket. Look out for me in a third-class smoking-carriage!"

As they crossed the fields towards the cemetery, Wolf visualized the journey of those two old men that night. In some queer way he felt as if Carfax were a competent actor, naturally assuming the precise rôle in which he himself had failed! Carfax would hear that imbecile youth cry out "Sandbourne Port!" and rattle the milk-cans on that little, deserted platform! Carfax would see the tower of Basingstoke Church. Carfax would see that placid-grazing cow. Carfax would observe, crossing the same coloured picture of Weymouth Bay, the same blue-bottle fly . . . or his exact representative . . . in the whirligig of chance!

His companion's feet seemed to drag a little now, as they made their way between a flowering hawthorn-hedge and a field of green barley.

"I expect we'd better take a carriage back," Wolf remarked.

"It's not my boots," growled Carfax. "I always have them made at the same place. It's my socks. A person knits them for me who was my nurse in former days. She's getting old, and her stitches gather into knots that seem dedicated to gall my kibe."

"I wonder if we shall find Miss Gault at the grave," Wolf said, as he lifted up a barbed-wire rail with the

handle of his stick for Lord Carfax to crawl under. "I hope we shall. The last time I saw her was when she tripped over a milk-bottle and I got angry with her attitude to my mother."

The deep-set eyes of his companion had a whimsical gleam in them as he struggled to his feet.

"It was your father's affair with Miss Gault," he gasped, "that gave me my chance with Ann. God! how Urquhart used to gird at me for my mania for that sweet creature! I suppose you have no more idea than a leopard's cub, Solent, how enchanting she was in those days!"

Wolf stopped short as they picked their way between the graves. "What was it you said made you want to see where he's buried?" he enquired in a high-pitched voice.

The ancient mariner's visage before him contracted itself into what almost amounted to a gamin's grimace.

"I detect," he said, "a tone in your voice, Solent, and a quiver in your lips, that suggest I'm on dangerous ground. But the truth is I swore to him once that if he caved in before me I'd come and make a signal to his old cadaver. That's twenty-five years ago, Wolf Solent; and I've never done it till this moment."

"One minute!" interrupted Wolf, as the visitor made a motion to advance. His voice certainly had a vibration in it that was a surprise to himself. It was apparently no surprise to Lord Carfax; but the man gave him a quick, penetrating, suspicious glance. Wolf flung a hurried look sideways. It was impossible to see William Solent's headstone from where they stood. No stranger could

possibly find the spot unless led to it by an habitué of that place.

"Did you have an exciting love-affair with my mother?"

The remark sounded quite as childish, quite as insolent, to his own ears, as doubtless it did to those of his interlocutor. But he followed it up with a further challenge.

"My mother treated my father abominably!"

His lip *was* trembling now. Violent pulses throbbed in both his wrists, like liliputian engines. He knitted his eyebrows and glared at the rugged folds of tanned skin that surrounded this man's eyes, giving them the guarded alertness of a kindly, but very wary, deer-stalker.

Carfax squared his shoulders; and then, without removing his gaze from Wolf's face, he proceeded to button his overcoat tightly about his neck. The next thing he did was to fold both his hands—one of them holding his ash-stick—massively behind his back. The measured gravity of this gesture, as Wolf recalled it afterwards, resembled that of some seventeenth-century cavalier accosted by a highwayman!

His compact, sturdy figure, his formidable, level stare, presented themselves to Wolf like the embodiment of every banked-up and buttressed tradition in English social life.

"You were very young at that time, Solent," he remarked in a guarded tone.

"You must have got enormous satisfaction," Wolf went on, "in punishing my father for his rascality. You and my mother must have felt like avenging angels!"

The weather-beaten creases about the man's eyes thickened so shrewdly that no more than two gleaming little slits of menacing roguery confronted Wolf's vibrant nerves.

"I don't think we felt exactly angelic," chuckled Lord Carfax.

The curious thing about what happened then was the ferocious lucidity with which Wolf ransacked his own emotional state.

He recognized that one part of his nature was stirred in an affectionate response toward the rugged face before him. What he felt was that the skull under that mound in the pauper's plot *must* be championed at this crisis, or it would be betrayed beyond recovery.

"You think all scruples are uncivilized bigotry where sex is concerned; isn't that it?"

Carfax merely bowed.

Wolf knew perfectly well that what he was yielding to now was an insane desire to make this man responsible —as if he had been fate itself—for all the convoluted bitterness of his dilemma between Gerda and Christie! Those imaginary dialogues with the fellow, over the kitchen-stove, seethed in his mind like steam under a lid. He knew, too, that he was revenging himself now for Carfax's attraction towards Gerda, for his indifference to himself.

"Come!" he cried in a trembling voice, "Come! There isn't time to hunt about here for the place they used to bury workhouse inmates in, twenty-five years ago!"

Carfax took off his hat and rubbed his corrugated forehead with the palm of one of his hands. When he

removed his fingers, Wolf caught a glimpse of a pair of agitated eyes roving in troubled scrutiny over the headstones to his left. The man's eyes had indeed become so much like those of a nervous hunter, that his whole face assumed a disarming and boyish anxiety, as if he were watching for the head of an otter or the fin of a pike in a disturbed stream!

"Come!" repeated Wolf. "I'll put you on the road to the Lovelace, and you can get a carriage or something to take you back to Blacksod. I'm going to walk back; but Gerda won't forgive me if *you're* late, and if you get a cab you'll be with her long before I am! I'm sure she's buying cakes for you at Pimpernel's this very moment!"

Before he had reached the word "Pimpernel" in this speech, at which point the lips of Lord Carfax broke into a smile of roguish gusto, he was aware of a very stern, straight look from the man's grey eyes.

"I've annoyed you for ever now, I suppose," Wolf murmured in a low voice. Lord Carfax surveyed him sternly.

"I don't like it when people's nerves get out of control," he said. "My instinct is to beat them down, as a menace to civilized behaviour! But after all, Solent, here I am, at your father's request! If you'd rather not show me his grave"—it was at this point that Wolf caught that disarming glint again, like the baffled innocence of a fisherman, emanating from beneath the old man's eyelids—"I don't want to annoy you. But don't be too leisurely over your stroll back, my lad. If

you are, there won't be many of those Pimpernel cakes left!"

"This is your nearest way out," said Wolf laconically. Stepping carefully, in advance, between the rows of green mounds, upon many of which grew little patches of yellow buttercups and white clover, he guided his mother's and his wife's admirer to the main cemetery-entrance. He managed to cast a quick glance in the direction of the grave. No! Miss Gault was not there.

Once in the road, he began giving his companion careful directions how to reach the Lovelace.

As he repeated those directions, he was aware of the man's attentive countenance, bent a little sideways towards him, wearing something of the expression with which an experienced ostler would attend to the inarticulate language of an erratic horse!

The effort of formulating those practical instructions in that silent spot, while the invisible magnetism of so much death-nourished vegetation permeated his senses, threw Wolf's brain into a confused stupor. He found, while he was slowly explaining to Carfax how to take the short-cut under the Preparatory School wall, past the Headmaster's garden and the entrance to the Abbey, that he was *surprised* at having seen nothing of Miss Gault. He kept glancing at the deserted roadway before them, so warm, so opalescent, in the diffused light. He had an obstinate feeling that Miss Gault *must* be upon that road, either coming or going—a feeling that resembled some kind of chemical clairvoyance in the very marrow of his bones.

His mind, preoccupied with Miss Gault, became now most vividly conscious of the slaughter-house. The slaughter-house looked especially harmless at that moment; but he regarded it with sick aversion.

"These deeds must not be thought after these ways; so, it will make us mad."

Of course, even while he saw her standing there, he knew he was imagining it, and that she had no palpable reality. This phenomenon, this visualizing of a bodily image that was *known* by his reason to be unreal, was one that he had suffered from before.

"You'll find her," he was speaking of the sedate lady in the hotel-office, "very stiff but very polite." But while he was uttering these words, he saw Miss Gault's figure quite palpably before him. He saw her bony shoulders turned to him, black in the roadway. And there was her arm, with clenched hand, lifted up in prophetic malediction!

"They're killing something in there," he thought. And then, for the infinitesimal part of a second, there arose within him an awareness of blinding pain, followed by thick darkness smeared with out-rushing blood. As this sank away, there ensued a murky dizziness in his brain, accompanied by a shocking sense that both his father's skull and this woman's arm were appealing to him to do something that he lacked the courage to do. His legs had turned into immovable lead, as happens in nightmares.

"Very stiff . . . very polite," he repeated mechanically, perfectly conscious that he was smiling into the man's face with a forced repulsive smile.

But Carfax had suddenly become an alert, compact man of action. His expression was more mariner-like than ever. Wolf's eccentric maliciousness might have been a troublesome wave risen from an unexpected reef. Carfax looked curiously at him, his heavy eyelids screwed up, his mouth a little open, his chin set square in his muffler.

"Off with you, lad!" he said in a pleasant voice. "It'll do you good to have that walk back alone! Off with you; and look alive-o now! . . . if you're going to get home before I finish up those cakes!"

Not Mr. Stalbridge himself could have obeyed his new master more submissively than Wolf obeyed this command. He was well inside the cemetery before Carfax had gone half-a-dozen steps. From behind the hedge he followed his measured and resolute advance up the road, up the warm clover-scented road, past the slaughter-house.

It was through the tangled greenery of a clustered tuft of budding honeysuckle that he watched Lord Carfax. The faint sweetness of that leafiness remained with him, like a covering of ointment round the bloody stump of an amputated limb, when finally he left his vantage-ground and strode over to the pauper's plot.

The first thing he noticed was a pair of white butterflies flying awkwardly together, linked in an ecstasy of love. They seemed to float upon the warm clover-scented air as if their four wings belonged to one single life . . . an insect-angel of an Apocalypse of the Minute!

"I should not have had the courage to interfere," he thought, "even if an animal *was* being killed. But Miss

Gault would. She'd have rushed straight to the place!"

He dug the end of his stick into the turf by the side of the mound and leaned on the handle, frowning down upon what he visioned six feet below.

"O Christie! O my true-love!"

Stubbornly he set himself to analyze how it was that with the loss of his life-illusion he could yet feel as he did about Christie!

There hung about the idea of her still . . . yes! still, still, still! . . . and it was *this* that he must explain to that skull down there . . . a sweetness as exciting as the wildest fancies of his youth, as those dark, secret fancies where the syllables "a girl" carried with them so yielding an essence that breasts and hips and thighs lost themselves in an unutterable mystery!

"Do you hear me, old Truepenny?" and it seemed to him, as he stared at the grass, that his soul became a sharp-snouted mole, refusing to cease from its burrowing till it had crouched down close beside those empty eye-holes, and had fumbled and ferreted at that impious, unconquerable grin!

His father *must* hear him! Surely, between those bones that had set themselves against his mother's bones, so that he might be born, and his present living body, there must be something . . . some sort of link!

That was what he wanted, some ear into which he could pour the whole weight of his seething distress. Where else could he go?

Back once more across the grave floated those interlaced, fluttering wings. The contrast between the clover-

scents that his nostrils inhaled and the desperation of his mood seemed to him like a well-aimed shaft of derision.

"If there *is* some monstrous consciousness behind all life," he thought angrily, "it's responsible for *all* the horrors! Come on, old Truepenny; let father and son celebrate this meeting with a private little curse at God. Let the worm in your mouth be the tongue shot out at Him! Let the look in the eyes of that Waterloo-steps man be His eternal peace!"

No sooner had Wolf articulated this catapult of malice against the unknown First Cause, than, without any apparent reason, he suddenly bethought himself of the boy Barge.

"Barge would never curse God," he thought. "Under the worst extremity of suffering he never would! Barge would forgive God instinctively, without an effort." Barge did, no doubt, forgive Him every day! If Barge had the power of causing God to be tortured for all the torture God had caused, Barge would refrain, *as naturally as the wind blows.* Barge would let the great evil Spirit completely off!

As he meditated upon this forgiveness of God by Barge, Wolf found himself pulling his stick out of the earth and wiping the end of it, even as a duellist might wipe a sword, with his bare hand.

"But to forgive *for oneself* is one thing," he thought. "To forgive for others . . . for innocents . . . for animals . . . is another thing! Barge *is* an innocent; so it may be permitted to *him* to forgive. I am not an inno-

cent. I know more than Barge. I know too much."

He remained in deep, fixed, wordless thought, after that, for several minutes. Then he opened and shut the fingers of his left hand with a convulsive movement. Had his father's skull been able to cast a conscious eye upon him, through the intervening mould, it would have supposed he was freeing his fingers from the clay which, a moment ago, he had wiped from the stick; but what he really was doing was getting rid of the contamination, not of clay, but of thought.

He had told himself a story in that brief while! He had imagined himself meeting Jesus Christ in the shape of the man of the Waterloo steps. He had imagined the man stopping him—it was by the stile on Babylon Hill—and asking him what he was doing. His answer had been given with a wild, crazy laugh. "Can't you see I'm living my secret life?" he had said.

"What secret life?" the man had asked.

"Running away from the horrors!" he had cried, in a great screaming voice, that had rung over the roofs of Blacksod. But immediately afterwards he had imagined himself as becoming very calm and very sly. "It's all right. It's absolutely all right," he had whispered furtively in the man's ears. "You needn't suffer. I let you off. *You are allowed to forget.* It doesn't matter what your secret life is. I've told you what mine is; and I now tell you that it can be borne. So you can stop looking like that! Any secret life can be borne when once you've been told that you have the right to forget. And that's what I've told *you* now."

It was when he was imagining the man's answer that

he had been compelled to practise his own doctrine with violent rapidity; and the next thing he did was to stoop down and dig his fingers into the roots of the grass, where he supposed his father's head would be. "Good-bye, Father!" he muttered; and straightening his back, with a sigh he turned sharp round, and without further parley moved from the spot.

He began by directing his steps towards the main highroad by which they had come; but he hadn't gone far when he suddenly swung about and made for the King's Barton lane.

"I don't want him to pick me up," he thought. "They're sure to take him that way." As he followed the familiar road to King's Barton, he recalled his first drive along it, by Darnley's side, fourteen months ago.

How he had stared into the future then . . . that future which was now the past! How he had hugged his "mythology" to his soul, during that drive, feeling so confident that nothing in that fertile land could arise to destroy it!

As he went along now, trailing his stick behind him, he became aware that with the approach of the end of the pearl-soft afternoon the voices of countless hidden blackbirds were mounting up, rich and sweet, from the green depths of the hedges.

"She's lost the power to whistle," he said to himself, "just as I've lost my mythology!" And the identity of Gerda, her excitement about their new silver, their new curtains, their new clock, her radiance in being attractive to Lord Carfax, melted into the sad-gay music poured forth from those invisible yellow beaks, until

he felt as if he were walking along a road that passed through her heart, a road the very atmosphere of which was the breath of her young soul!

Those blackbird-notes in the hedges seemed to allay the tension of his nerves as if they had been the touch of the girl's flesh. His outraged mind, with its grievance against the First Cause, seemed actually to float away from his body as it moved quietly along. Between his body, thus freed from his tormented spirit, and the increasing loveliness of that perfect day, there began to establish itself a strange chemical fusion.

He came upon a certain gate now where he had once wondered what it would be like to live with Darnley. Once more he rested there, leaning his arms on its grey top-bar and staring over the expanse of greenness separating him from Melbury Bub.

Yes, without any conscious motion of his will something was softening within him towards the long future stretch of the days of his life!

He began to grow conscious of how separate his assuaged senses were from that tormented spirit of his that had just cursed God. What was it that had worked this change in him? Those blackbird-notes? Was it merely that his body, hearing those sounds, plunged into the sweetness of Gerda's body? But now, from the thought of Gerda his mind reverted to Christie. After all, it was the same First Cause which tortured him that had made it possible that such a being as Christie should exist. God must be something that all conscious lives are doomed to curse and to bless in eternal alternation!

After all, Christie *did* belong to him, as she had never belonged, and never *would* belong, to anyone else. So easily might he never have met her—never met the one person he could love with all the worst and all the best in his contradictory nature! Many would be the Saturdays, many the Sundays, he would walk with her now, along the backwater, along that familiar esplanade! In an upwelling of sad, sweet tenderness, he saw himself as an old grey-headed schoolmaster . . . still at his job in that ink-stained room . . . walking, with Christie on one arm and Olwen, grown tall and disdainful, on the other, past the bow-windows of Brunswick Terrace!

Certain little physical tricks Christie had, separating her from everyone else, came back to him now. The way she would turn her face sideways to speak to him when she was poking the fire, the way she swayed her wrists as if over an old-fashioned harpsichord, when she was arranging her teacups, the way she would hitch up her skirt when it hung too loose over her straight hips, the way she would stretch her head out of the window, drinking up the air with a kind of thirsty fury after struggling to express some subtle metaphysical idea that had baffled her power of words—all these things hit him now with no empty finality of loss, but with a sort of mystic consummation. It was as if, utterly beyond his effort—as it was beyond his merit—chance itself had caused the earth to whisper some clue-word into the ears of his flesh, a word that his *body* understood, though his mind was too humiliated to focus itself upon it.

Pondering upon what was happening to him, he turned

from that gate and continued his way; but his stick was held firmly by the handle now, and his feet were no longer dragging as they moved.

He began obscurely to feel that he might get *some* happiness out of his life after all . . . even if he had to work at that school till he died . . . even if he never were allowed so much as to kiss Christie again!

He became more and more aware that it was just the simple chemistry of his body that, under the beauty of this hour, was coming to its own conclusions! It was as if his flesh were drinking in and soaking up this beauty, while his soul, cut into pieces by his recent humiliation like a worm by a bird's beak, wriggled and squirmed somewhere above his head!

His outward skin luxuriated in all this loveliness. It drenched itself in the pearl-soft air, like a naked swimmer in a glimmering sea. But his mind was still malcontent. It kept wincing under its own recent twinges. But it was divided from him in some way, so that it was no longer able to turn a torturous screw in his living brain! It was just as if some heavenly music were pouring into an entranced ear, while the brain behind the ear was beating about in chaotic misery.

Chaotic indeed! The core of his mind felt as though it were a multiple thing and lacked a centre. It felt as though its disintegrated consciousness resembled that of an amœba, of a zoophyte. It felt envious of the human happiness that had begun to penetrate its attendant body. Wolf knew that the man holding that oak-stick was himself; he knew it was Wolf Solent, on his way home to

eat Pimpernel's cakes and to watch his wife flirt with Lord Carfax. But he felt that the identity of his soul and his body was broken. His soul had received such crushing disgraces that like a thousand globules of quicksilver it no longer dwelt where normal souls *ought* to dwell!

It was out of all this chaos within him, that he now set himself, as he strode along, to concentrate his will upon Christie and upon her life by that Weymouth backwater. "Oh, may she be happy!" he cried blindly to the grass and the trees. And then a queer psychic inkling came upon him, an inkling that it would be possible for him, now that he no longer had anything left but certain bodily sensations, now that he had become a depersonalized inhuman force, without hope or aim, to exercise a genuine power, an almost supernatural power, over the future of the entity he loved. The more he pondered on this, the more possible did the thing appear to him! As he surveyed the blossoms of a great lilac-bush in the first King's Barton garden he reached, he seemed to visualize the demiurge of the universe as so much diffused sub-conscious magnetism submissive to nothing but commands . . . commands rather than prayers!

The luminous enchantment which this perfect afternoon threw upon those blossoms caused him to stop deadstill in front of them.

"I *command*," he uttered in a grave, loud tone, "I *command* that she shall be happy!" And then, with a grotesque solemnity, as if for a second of time he had been given the power to destroy all ordinary sense of

proportion, he repeated, as though addressing a slow-witted interlocutor, "It's Christie Malakite I mean, who lives by the Backwater at Weymouth."

He concluded this fantastic ceremony by an audible chuckle; but his steps, as he strode through the village of King's Barton at a swinging pace, were freer and stronger than they had been for a very long time.

Still, however, he could not shake off the feeling that his soul had become a drifting multiplicity without any nucleus. There had occurred an actual "resurrection" of his body, which was now giving to his behaviour the aspect, the motions, the gestures of exultant well-being, while his inner nature remained a blur of disgusting confusion.

"Walking is my cure," he thought. "As long as I can walk I can get my soul into shape! It must have been an instinct of self-preservation that has always driven me to walk!"

He had reached the churchyard-wall now; and he couldn't resist the temptation of stopping for a minute to visit Redfern's grave. As he was scrambling over the low rampart of crumbling yellowish stone, he heard the droning of an aeroplane somewhere above his head.

"Mine enemy hath found me out," he said to himself. "I suppose walking up and down upon the earth will cease altogether soon. Well, I'm going to walk till I die!" And to avoid giving his airy antagonist even the honour of one inquisitive glance, he proceeded to keep his eyes in religious malice rigorously fixed upon the grass beneath his feet.

His method of advance was more conducive to cerebral

revenge than to alert vision; and when he did reach his destination he found a wheelbarrow full of grass by the side of the grave, and beyond the wheelbarrow, bending low and armed with a pair of gleaming shears, the figure of Roger Monk.

The peculiarly subtle smell of the green grass in the wheelbarrow gave him a thrill of such strange contentment that his greeting of his old acquaintance was cordial in the extreme.

"How's the squire?" he enquired after a minute or two's discussion of the weather. Roger Monk chuckled grimly.

"There was a time, sir," he replied—and Wolf noticed that the gardener's accent still wavered between the intonation of the Shires and the intonation of Dorset, "when, as you know, sir, I could have given that man his queetus. But he's not what he was, Mr. Solent, and that's the long and short of it."

The word "queetus," in place of "quietus," so tickled Wolf's fancy that he could only make an amiable grimace in response, a grimace that implied that the world had long been aware that Mr. Monk's bark was worse than his bite.

"How does he sleep these days?" he enquired.

"Much better, sir, thank 'ee. In fact, he's slept wonderful sound ever since Master Round and me dug this 'ere grave as 'twere right it should be dug. Old Jack Torp, if I may say so, made a poor job of this burying! Squire was worriting himself over it fearsome. That beer-barrel of a Torp, if you'll excuse such speaking, Mr. Solent, of a party a gentleman like yourself be allied to, ain't

no more a sexton than he be an undertaker! Them stone-cutters should leave the spade alone. They should leave burying alone, and stick to their own job."

This plausible and innocent explanation of what he and Valley had witnessed did not by any means convince Wolf. But neither did it lessen his humiliation. He began to feel as if the perversity of Mr. Urquhart, the incest of Mr. Malakite, the lechery of Bob Weevil, the morbidity of Jason, were all of such slight importance, compared with the difference between being alive and being dead, that he had made a fool of himself in making so much of them. Such, at any rate, seemed to be the opinion of his body; and it was his body now that had taken the rudder in its hand! His body? No! It was more than his body! Behind the pulse-beat of his body stirred the unutterable . . . stirred something that was connected with the strange blueness he had seen long ago over the Lunt-meadows and more recently at the window of Pond Cottage . . . something to that was connected with that heathen goodness that came so naturally to Gaffer Barge.

"How is Mr. Valley, Roger?" he asked. "I haven't seen him since before the Otter wedding."

Monk lowered his voice and jerked his thumb in the direction of the vicarage. "Squire's gone to drink tea with him this very afternoon," he whispered. "Squire don't know that I know it. Nor do he know that Mrs. Martin and our maid knows it. He's a proud old gent, is Squire; and he's cursed the Reverend so bitter that 'twould be awkward if all were known."

"Are they friends again, then?" asked Wolf.

Mr. Monk gave a furtive glance at the church and another at Redfern's grave. He seemed to suspect invisible eavesdroppers from both those directions.

"Squire ain't, and never has been, what you might call religious," he said, "but he's got fixed in his mind, since his sleep returned to him, that our parson have worked a miracle. 'Twould be all my place is worth if he knew I know what he's up to." Here the man came extremely close to Wolf and almost touched his face as he whispered in his ear, "He've a-been over there three times this week already!"

Wolf drew away as discreetly as he could. Mr. Monk's breath smelt so strongly of gin that he wondered if the servant hadn't been drinking with the clergyman in the kitchen prior to the master's refreshment in the study!

A queer notion seized upon him now, as he looked this man up and down—a fantastic and even obscene notion. He mentally stripped the tall rascal of every rag of clothing! He visualized his heavy chest, his huge knees . . . he saw them unwashed and dirty. . . . But suddenly, in the twinkling of an eye, he knew for a certainty, beyond all logic, that this astronomical universe, of which the monstrous frame of Mr. Monk occupied the foreground, was merely a filmy, phantasmal screen, separating him from an indrawn reality into which at any moment he might wake—wake despoiled and released. It was the feet of Mr. Monk, or rather the dirty nails of his huge toes, observed with this grotesque maliciousness, that seemed the seal of certainty upon this mystical knowledge!

"Well, I must be emptying this barrow and getting home," said the innocent Roger.

"Good luck to you!" replied Wolf in a loud, hollow tone, as he recovered from his trance.

When the man had gone off and he was left to himself, he had time to note that not a sign was left now of the grave's recent disturbance. Redfern's mound, neatly sheared by the gardener's shears, looked just the same as all the other graves in the vicinity.

Wolf sighed wearily. That last piece of information about Mr. Urquhart seemed to have landed him on the deepest bed-rock of his self-contempt. What? Had he seen himself all this while as a great spiritual antagonist to the squire, only to find at the last that the man was paying surreptitious visits to T. E. Valley?

"Probably," he thought, "he's begging Tilly-Valley to let him take the Sacrament!"

He stared at the mound in front of him, wondering, with cynical indifference, whether the body of the boy had been exposed or not. But now, at any rate, he was "free among the dead."

"Christie! Christie!" He tried to visualize that fragile figure at this very moment coming back to tea from a stroll along the backwater where she had gone with Olwen to see the Abbotsbury swans!

Death and Love! In those two alone lay the ultimate dignity of life. Those were the sacraments, those were the assuagements. Death was the great altar where the candles were never extinguished for such as loathed the commonplace.

And it was just this that these accursed inventions

were seeking to destroy! They would dissect love, till it became "an itch of the blood and a permission of the will"; they would kill all calm, all peace, all solitude; they would profane the majesty of death till they vulgarized the very background of existence; they would flout the souls of the lonely upon the earth, until there was not one spot left by land or by water where a human being could escape from the brutality of mechanism, from the hard glitter of steel, from the gaudy insolence of electricity!

" 'Jimmy Redfern,—*he* was there!' " he hummed savagely as he moved off; and then, as he scrambled back into the road, he wondered to himself what new mood it was that he had detected in Roger Monk. The man seemed to speak of Mr. Urquhart with a completely different intonation. Wolf's morbid imagination began at once picturing a new Mr. Urquhart, a Mr. Urquhart in an old age of dotage, fallen entirely into the hands of Mr. Monk and of that precious crony of his that he called "Master Round"!

"I'll call at the Manor House next Saturday," he thought, "and find out what Tilly-Valley has done to him."

He glanced at his watch. Oh, he would be hopelessly late for tea! Well, Gerda wouldn't mind; and Lord Carfax would be thoroughly delighted!

He soon found that the faster he walked through that unequalled atmosphere, the stronger and calmer grew his mind.

The muscles of his body, his skin, his senses, his nerves, his breath, seemed to be gathering up from the soil a

new power, a new endurance. The final stamping-down of the earth upon his old life-illusion was the vision, though it may well have been imaginary, of Mr. Urquhart pleading for the Sacrament with Tilly Valley. He recognized now that his secret motive of all these months . . . yes, he had felt it by the banks of the Lunt, the day of the "yellow bracken" . . . had been his faith in some vast earth-born power within him that was stronger than the Christian miracle! Had Tilly Valley won, then? Had he beaten them all? Had the absurd little fool mesmerized the soul of the great John Urquhart, even as he had mesmerized the soul of Mr. Round?

"Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!"

No! He would *not* yield! The inborn goodness of Barge . . . a thing natural and inevitable as the rising of the sap in the tree . . . was stronger than all the "white magic" in the world.

Oh, Christie! Oh, Christie! Would Gerda mind if he went down to Weymouth tomorrow week? He felt a longing to ask Christie what *she* thought about the difference between the "goodness" of Barge and the "faith" of Tilly Valley. Perhaps, now it was dead, he would tell her about his "mythology."

Quicker and quicker circulated the blood through his veins as he entered Blacksod and reached the familiar parting of the ways. There was no hesitation there now. He had never once gone past the book-shop since she had left it!

He found himself dallying with many happier thoughts as he hurried by the Torp yard. Surely he had fallen as low as he could fall! The loveliness of this day . . . a

gift thrown out to him by Chance, the greatest of all the gods . . . seemed to have touched his body with a kind of blind new birth. He began to feel conscious again, as he had done over the corpse of old Malakite, of himself as a moving animal, full of a vivid, tingling life that extended into the very fingers with which he clasped his stick. And not only as an animal! The immense vegetable efflorescence by which he had been surrounded seemed to have drawn his nerves back and down, soothing them, healing them, calming them, in a flowing reciprocity with that life that was far older than any animal life.

Ah! His body and his soul were coming together again now! Emanating from his lean, striding form, from his spine, from his legs, from his finger-tips, his spirit extended outwards, dominating this forked "animal-vegetable" which was himself. And with this new awareness as his background, he set himself to face in stoical resolution all the years of his life, as he saw them before him, dusty milestones along a dusty highway!

He said grimly to himself, "No gestures now!" And it was *not* a gesture that he made at this moment, as he gathered himself together to be an usher in Blacksod Grammar School for the remainder of his life! He kept his spirits down on purpose, visualizing the innumerable moments of discomfort, of nervous misery, that lay before him. He stretched out his hand to pluck at those wretched future moments, so that he might appropriate them now and grapple with them now. . . .

"But it isn't all there is!" he said to himself as he approached Preston Lane. "The whole astronomical world is only a phantasm, compared with the circles within

circles, the dreams within dreams, of the unknown reality!"

He passed Mrs. Herbert's house and came to the pigsty. Ailinon! The memories! Peering furtively up the street to his own threshold . . . yes, he could see that the parlour-windows were both open. He came to a pause now, hot and breathless from his rapid walking, and leant upon the pigsty-railing. That smell of pigs' urine, mingled, just as it was a year ago, with the smell of the flowering hedge, gave him a thrill of delicious sadness, and all Dorset seemed gathered up into it! Little wayside cottages, fallen trees, stubble-fields, well-heads, duck-ponds, herds of cattle visioned through the frames of shed-doors—all these things flooded his mind now with a strange sense of occult possession. They were only casual groupings of chance-offered objects; but as they poured pell-mell into his memory, across the reek and the jostling of those uplifted snouts, he felt that something permanent and abiding out of such accidents would give him strength to face the ink-stained classroom—to face the days and days and days—without his "mythology" and without Christie!

He must have been at the cellar-floor of misery when he licked with his mental tongue the filthy toe-nails of Mr. Monk.

And yet it was from that very beastliness that he discovered the fact that beyond all refutation an actual portion of his mind was *outside the whole astronomical spectacle!*

More heavily than ever now did he lean on that railing,

while the pigs, to whom all human heads were the same, grunted and squealed for their bucket.

Then he straightened his back, waved his hand to the disappointed pigs, and moved on.

He had hardly taken a step when he suddenly thought of Poll's Camp. What was it? An entrancing bird's note made him stop again and glance up the road to where the great ash-tree extended its cool, glaucous green branches against the pearl-soft sky.

Another yellow-beak! It had been a thrush last year. Were Gerda and Lord Carfax listening to this liquid music as they ate their Pimpernel cakes?

Fool! Fool! Fool! It was not in the tree at all. Oh, he had known it all the while! In the deepest pit of his stomach he had known. It was the girl herself. The blackbird's notes were issuing from that open window. It was Gerda's whistling. That strange power had been given back to her at last!

For a second he just abandoned himself to the beauty of the sound. It was this pearl-soft day itself, consummated, incarnated, in flowing drops of immortal ichor!

Then a queer transformation automatically took place in him. His ripened "soul," that magnetic cloud about him, drew close to his body like a garment of flexible steel. His muscles contracted, like those of a feline animal stalking its prey. His whole personality became a tense, bent bow of cold, vibrant jealousy, the string pressed taut, the arrow quivering.

Hunching his shoulders, his stick held by the middle—but he had no thought of either Hector of Troy or Wil-

liam of Deloraine!—he ran across the road and advanced stealthily and rapidly along the pavement. His gaze was fixed on the dark aperture of the window through which the whistling came. He intended to *see*, at least one good second, before he *was seen!* . . .

Yes. He had known it. He had known it far down in his consciousness all that long day! His glance, when he reached the window, was swift, decisive, devastating. It lasted less than a third of a second; and then he drew back and shuffled out of sight against their neighbour's railings.

The teacups had been used, the cakes eaten. And there, seated in the low chair by the side of the littered tray, was Lord Carfax, with a look of the most sun-warmed aplomb that he had ever seen on a human countenance; and there, seated on his knee, with her lips pursed-up and the expression of a radiant infant upon her face, was Gerda . . . whistling . . . whistling . . . whistling! . . .

"Ripeness is all." The words seemed to come into his mind from nowhere . . . to come into his mind from that region, whatever it was, that was *not* the universe!

They certainly had not their ordinary meaning for him, as he recoiled from what he had seen. They meant that the lords of life had now filled his cup—filled it up to the brim. Little had he known how much this girl's devotion to him had come to mean. Christie was his horizon; but this girl was the solid ground beneath him. And now the ground had moved!

Like a man who sees his foothold cracking between his feet, and, instead of hurrying forward, looks down, in curious interest, one foot on each side of the crevasse,

at a disturbed beetle scrambling up one of the edges of the chasm, Wolf stood on the pavement outside the pig-dealer's house and stared at the shed across the way.

If only she hadn't let him take her on his knee! How *interested* all the people of his life would be that she had let him take her upon his knee! He felt as if Carfax had come into his life for this sole purpose alone—to take Gerda upon his knee! How he could see the nodding heads of all the people of his life, as they glanced at one another *displaying their interest* in what had happened!

Carfax had saved the man on the Waterloo steps. At least he had saved Stalbridge! Carfax had paid Christie five times their value for the books in the shop. Carfax had condemned Urquhart to a harmless dotage. And now, with the crumbs of Pimpernel's cakes strewing the tea-table, Carfax had restored to Gerda her unique gift.

Bob Weevil had had to be cajoled into that bedroom before he grew daring. "Lords in London" had none of these Blacksod scruples. To Carfax it was nothing . . . a trifle, a bagatelle . . . and yet it was pleasant . . . to feel the warmth of a girl's body pressed against him, while by his glowing sympathy he gave her back her youth, gave her back the life that she had lost in her twelve months with a priggish schoolmaster!

Wolf found it necessary at that moment to act in an almost jaunty manner. He balanced his stick under his arm—a thing he had never done before; and he thrust his hands into his trouser-pockets—a gesture that was completely unnatural to him. He began moving along the pavement towards the town; but when he found himself opposite Mrs. Herbert's door, he remembered . . . he

must have been instinctively turning to her, like an outraged cub to its dam . . . that his mother lived now above her grand new shop!

It was at this point that he realized that he must find some immediate purpose . . . something that it was *imperative* for him to do. As his eyes fixed themselves upon the green hedge opposite him, he became aware, through a small children-made gap, of the amazing gold of the meadow beyond. Why, the field was full to the very brim of golden buttercups! It was literally a floating sea of liquid, shining gold!

He felt drawn towards the meadow by a bodily necessity, as if he had been a sick dog seeking certain particular grass-blades by the side of the road! Nothing at that moment short of physical force could have prevented him from climbing through that gap and entering that field. In the stunned condition of his emotions, his actions were obedient to the crude craving of that bodily necessity. The automatic movements of his muscles necessary to reach those yellow flowers followed one another with the inevitableness of water seeking water.

Once in the field, it was just as if he were wading through golden waves. And then he suddenly remembered that it was into this very field that he had flung Mukalog. What a shining mausoleum for that little demon!

He couldn't resist the distraction of fumbling about at random with his stick among the buttercup-stalks. What if he *should* by some crazy chance, just at this juncture, stumble upon the obscene idol? How would those long weeks of exposure to the weather have affected it?

While all these notions were pursuing one another over the surface of his mind, like criss-cross ripples over a wharf-brimming tide, something else within him was thinking: "In a few minutes I shall be entering that parlour and shaking hands with Carfax. In a few more minutes Carfax will have gone off to his train, and Gerda and I will have been left alone." He suddenly ceased fumbling in that golden sea with the end of his stick. There was nothing else for it but to take up, like a camel with the last straw laid upon his hump, the swaying burden of his life! "Carfax will probably stay over Sunday. He'll be infatuated. Her whistling will hold him like sorcery. But on Monday he'll take his train . . . and I shall go back to the School; and everything will be as it was before." But then he remembered the visitor's arrangement with Stalbridge—how the ex-waiter was to meet the seven-o'clock train at Ramsgard.

"No! By God, I believe he'll clear off as he said! He's not a fellow to play fast and loose with a hired servant."

He began walking to and fro now, with a firmer step, across that field. Back and forth he walked, while the sun, fallen almost horizontal, made what he walked upon seem unearthly. Buttercup-petals clung to his legs, clung to the sides of his stick; buttercup-dust covered his boots. The plenitude of gold that surrounded him began to invade his mind with strange, far-drawn associations. The golden ornaments, tissue upon tissue, leaf upon leaf, covering the dead in the tomb of Agamemnon, the golden pilasters of the halls of Alcinoüs, the golden shower that ravished Danaë, the golden fleece that ruined Jason, the

cloud of gold in which the doomed Titan embraced Hera, the flame of gold in which Zeus embraced Semele, the golden fruit of the Hesperides, the golden sands of the Islands of the Blest—all these things, not in their concrete appearances, but in their Platonic essences, made his mind reel. The thing became a symbol, a mystery, an initiation. It was like that figure of the Absolute seen in the Apocalypse. It became a *super-substance*, sunlight precipitated and petrified, the magnetic heart of the world rendered visible!

Up and down he went, pacing that field. He felt as if he were an appointed emissary, guarding some fragment of Saturn's age flung into the midst of Blacksod!

"Enjoying the sweet light of the sun . . . deprived of the sweet light of the sun," these phrases from Homer rang in his ears and seemed to express the only thing that was important. Carfax taking Gerda upon his knee, Urquhart begging Tilly-Valley for the Sacrament, his mother borrowing from Mr. Manley, Roger Monk trimming Redfern's grave—all these human gestures presented themselves to him now through a golden mist, a mist that made them at once harmless and negligible, compared with the difference between being alive and being dead!

With his face turned westward, as he stared in his march at the great orb of the horizontal sun, which by reason of the thin screen of clouds that covered it was no more dazzling to his eyes than the periphery of a full moon, he realized that long ago, at Weymouth, he had had an extraordinary ecstasy from the sight of the danc-

ing ripples of the wide bay turned into liquid gold by the straight sun-path.

"Was it sunrise or sunset?" he wondered; but he could not remember anything beyond that dance of gold and the rapture it caused him.

The deeper the enchantment of the moment sank into his being, the clearer became his conclusion with regard to the whole matter.

In the recesses of his consciousness he was aware that a change had taken place within him, a rearrangement, a readjustment of his ultimate vision, from which he could never again altogether recede.

That sense of a supernatural struggle going on in the abysses, with the Good and the Evil so sharply opposed, had vanished from his mind. To the very core of life, things were more involved, more complicated than that! The supernatural itself had vanished from his mind. His "mythology," whatever it had been, *was dead.* What was left to him now was his body. Like the body of a tree or a fish or an animal it was; and his hands and his knees were like branches or paws or fins! And floating around his body, was his *thought,* the "I am I" against the world. This "I am I" included his new purpose and included his will toward his new purpose. "There is no limit to the power of my will," he thought, "as long as I use it for two uses only . . . to forget and to enjoy! Ha, old Truepenny, am I with you at last? Air and earth-mould, clouds and a patch of grass, darkness and the breaking of light . . . Ay, it is enough! And with this as my background, why can't I be as heathenly 'good' as

Gaffer Barge? My will can do *anything*, when I limit it to 'forget . . . enjoy.' "

And there suddenly came upon him, as he thought of these things, the memory of another blundering mystic, another solitary walker over hill and dale, who in his time, too, discovered that certain "Intimations of Immortality" had to take a narrower, a simpler form, as the years advanced!

> "But there's a tree, of many one,
> A single Field which I have looked upon,
> Both of them spoke of something that is gone."

Increasingly as he stood there, quite motionless now, did the golden sea around him clarify his thoughts. "I must have the courage of my cowardice," he thought. "I can never be brave like you, old Truepenny; but I can plough on and I can forget." He dug the end of his stick resolutely into the roots of the grass, into the grave of Mukalog; and there slid into his mind an incident from a visit he had paid long ago to Weymouth . . . *before Christie had ever gone there.* . . .

He was drinking tea alone, drinking it from a particular china "set" belonging to his grandmother, a "set" called Limoges. Beside him was a book with a little heap of entangled bits of seaweed lying upon it, which he was separating and sorting. There came a moment when he suddenly realized that the book, beside which was his teacup and upon which was the seaweed, was "The Poems of Wordsworth." A thrilling ecstasy shot through him then. In a flash he associated the heightening of life that came from his tea-drinking both with the magic of the floating rock-pools where he had found the seaweed and with the

magic of Wordsworth's fluctuating inspiration; and there came upon him a sense of such incredible loveliness, "interfused" through existence, that he jumped up from his chair and began rapidly pacing the floor, hunching his shoulders and rubbing his hands together. . . .

That experience came back to his mind now. "If I can't enjoy life," he thought, "with absolute childish absorption in its simplest elements, I might as well never have been born!"

And then there came over him a feeling that he could never have expressed in definite words. It was as if an intangible residuum of all the emanations from all the places in town and country through which he had passed, hovered about him now, like the sea-smell of those seaweeds about that book!

From this feeling his mind reverted easily enough to the thought of death. "Death, the sweet sleep; death, the heavenly end," he repeated. And as though the words had been the burden of an old sentimental song, he felt something within him respond to them with a melting nostalgia. . . .

Then, as he turned eastward, and the yellowness of the buttercups changed from Byzantine gold to Cimmerian gold, he visualized the whole earthly solidity of this fragment of the West Country, this segment of astronomical clay, stretching from Glastonbury to Melbury Bub and from Ramsgard to Blacksod, as if it were itself one of the living personalities of his life. "It is a god!" he cried in his heart; and he felt as if titanic hands, from the horizon of this "field of Saturn," were being lifted up to salute the mystery of life and the mystery of death!

What he longed to do was to plunge his own hands into this Saturnian gold, and to pour it out, over Mr. Urquhart, over Mattie, over Miss Gault, over Jason, over all the nameless little desolations—broken twigs, tortured branches, wounded reptiles, injured birds, slaughtered beasts—over a lonely stone, on which no moss grew, in the heart of Lovelace park, over a drowned worm, white and flaccid, dropped from the hook of Lobbie Torp into some Lunt pool, over the death-pillow of old Mr. Weevil, deprived now of his last conscious gluttony, over the lechery of the "water-rat" himself, so pitiful in its tantalized frustration! All . . . all . . . all would reveal some unspeakable beauty, if only this Saturnian gold were sprinkled upon them!

Reversing the position of his stick in his fingers as if he scrupled to touch this golden sea with anything but its handle, he did his best to turn this new clairvoyance upon the knot of his own identity. Hardly knowing what he was doing, he moved up close to the back of the pigsty; and as he swung his stick by the wrong end, its handle brushed the tall weeds that grew against the shed.

"It's my body that has saved me," he thought; and as if to assure these patient senses that his spirit was grateful, he abstractedly pinched his thigh above the knee with his left hand.

Behind the pigsty! It seemed to him odd that he had lived here a whole year and had never seen this familiar shed from the back. It was queer how he always shirked reality, and then suddenly plunged—plunged into its inmost retreat! Behind the pigsty! It was only when he got desperate that he plunged into the nature of human beings—that he got behind *them!*

Ay! How coldly, how maliciously, he *could* dive into the people he knew and see their inmost souls . . . from behind, from behind! Poison and sting . . . the furtive coil and the sex-clutch; yes, a spasmodically jerking, quivering ego-nerve, pursuing its own end—that was what was behind everyone!

Behind the pigsty! How often had he visualized every single person of his life, in some treachery of meanness! How often had he caught them in some incredible posture of grotesque indecency! Oh, it was his own mind that was diseased . . . not Nature. Well, diseased or not, it was all he had! Henceforth he was going to take as the talisman of his days the phrase *endure or escape.* Where had he picked up that phrase? Behind a workhouse? Behind a madhouse?

Between himself and what was "behind" the Universe there should be now a new covenant! The Cause up there could certainly at any minute make him howl like a mad dog. It could make him dance and skip and eat dung. Well, until it *did* that, he was going to endure . . . follow his "road," through the ink-stains, and endure!

His eye happened to catch sight of a large grey snail with its horns extended, ascending the tarred boards of the shed. It had just left a pallid dock-leaf that spread itself out against the boarding, and to which its slime still adhered. His mind rushed off to thousands and thousands of quiet spots, behind outhouses, behind stick-houses, behind old haystacks, behind old barns and sheds, where such grey snails lived and died in peace, covering docks, nettles, and silver-weed with their patent slime! How often had he hurried past such places with hardly a

glance! And yet their combined memory reconciled him more to life than all Roger Monk's flower-beds.

By God! He must be crafty in dealing with these modern inventions! He must slide under them, over them, round them, like air, like vapour, like water. *Endure or escape!* A good word, wherever it was he had picked it up.

Well, never mind the motors and the aeroplanes! King Æthelwolf was at rest, staring up at that fan-tracery. It only needed an adjustment . . . and he could be as much at peace in life as that king was in death!

Was Carfax making love to Gerda now, all soft and yielding and relaxed, after her whistling?

Everyone had to *feel* according to the fatality of his nature; but who was he to make pompous moral scenes?

Alone! That was what he had learnt from the hard woman who had given him birth. That every soul was alone. Alone with that secret bestower of torture and pleasure, the horned snail behind the pigsty!

Endure or escape. He must spread the wisdom of that word over all the miserable moments that were to come.

Oh, Christie! Oh, Christie!

Well, he must go in and face those two now.

He took up his stick firmly and securely by its proper end, and for a few paces moved forward blinking, straight into the circle of the sun, as it aimed itself at him over the rim of the world. Then he swung round, scrambled through the gap, and hurried across the road.

"I wonder if he *is* still here?" he thought as he laid his hand on the latch of the gate. And then he thought, "Well, I shall have a cup of tea."

THE END

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