THE STREET OF THE EYE

AND NINE OTHER TALES

THE STREET OF THE EYE

and nine other tales

by GERALD William BULLETT

Short Story Index Reprint Series

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To ROSALIND

—THESE FICTIONS

CONTENTS

	PAGE
The Street of the Eye	3
Sleeping Beauty	45
The Enchanted Moment	59
The Mole	79
A Sensitive Man	97
Miss Lettice	113
Wedding-Day	135
Dearth's Farm	145
The Ghost	169
The House at Maadi:	
Part I: An Afternoon in April	181
Part II: Sheila Dyrle	189
Part III: Sheila Fairfield	266
Part IV: Evening of the Same Day	299

THE STREET OF THE EYE

THE STREET OF THE EYE

'STORIES of the supernatural,' said Saunders, 'serve at least one useful purpose : they test a man's intellectual capacity. Not a very sure test, you may say ; but for purposes of rough classification it is sure enough. Incertitude, a sense of imminent surprise, is after all the very salt of life. Denounce the habit of classification as bitterly as you like —and I know well the intellectual perils that attend it—it is none the less true that we do, when we meet a man, like to be able to place him, roughly, in this category or that. And most men, by the way, submit to the process very meekly. You subtle folk '—here Saunders bowed to me in genial irony—' in attributing to the mass of mankind your own mental complexity flatter them grossly. I have heard you yourself discourse on the folly of the old religious psychology which divided mankind, arbitrarily, into sheep and goats. As philosophy, of course, it is nonsense, and the fathers of the church must have known that

as well as you and I do ; but as a formula for rough-and-ready justice, it serves. If you are pulling your weight in the boat you are a good man ; if you are not pulling your weight you are a bad man—that is a definite and verifiable verdict based on rational calculation. The fun begins when having made our calculation, and acted on it, new factors begin to appear which knock all our arithmetic silly. But in our dealings with men how rarely, on the whole, that happens ! You do not agree ? Well, you are permitted to disagree so long as you believe me to be sincere in my opinion. All modern thought, I know, is moving away from my idea as fast as, according to you, it is moving away from my church ; but I fancy that, in practice, the world will continue to adhere to it. If I were to say that all men are types, that would be not so much a falsehood as a wanton exaggeration of a truth. I know all that can be urged, and justly urged, against pigeon-hole classification ; but what impresses and startles me is how easily the greater number of one's fellow-creatures fit into the pigeon-holes. Unique souls, no doubt ; but the human soul is a mystery which I don't profess to understand and which you profess not to believe in. It is the ordinary workaday mentality of a man

that can be labelled with some approach to accuracy. And the supernatural story, as I say, is something of a test. Tell a group of new acquaintances some fairly well authenticated ghost-story, and they will fall apart and regroup in their special classes like a company of soldiers forming up into platoons. There will be the credulous fools on the one hand, ready to believe anything without question ; there will be the materialist fools on the other hand, snorting in angry contempt. Between the two—truth is generally found midway between extremes—between the two, preserving a delicate balance between scepticism and credulity, doubting the story, perhaps, but admitting the possibility, will be the wise men. I need hardly add, my dear fellow, that it is among these wise philosophers that I myself am to be found. There you have three well-defined types, and it is noteworthy that I am a bright specimen of the exemplary type. If you wish to be saved you have only to look at me and do your best.'

There was a gleam of laughter in Saunders's kindly and humorous eyes, a gleam that seemed to apologize for having read me something in the nature of a lecture. I had just told my clerical friend that queer story of Bailey's about James Dearth and the white horse. It had

interested him, and he was far more disposed to take it seriously than I was. It started him talking about the Unseen, a hypothesis in which he has a more than professional concern, and so led him to the bundle of generalities I have just recorded. They impressed me less than Saunders's remarks usually do, but I knew better than to interrupt him. Whatever be the truth about his theory of types, he himself is certainly a distinguished exception to the theory. One never knows where his talk will lead, and I for my part always listen in the hope that it will lead to a story. Saunders, with his penetrating vision and his unique opportunities, has seen many a naked soul, many a human creature stripped bare, by triumph or catastrophe, of the coverings that hide it from the public eye—yes, and from the eyes of intimate friends no less. He is as full of good stories as of bad sermons. And so I waited now, like a timid angler afraid even to cast in his line lest the troubling of the waters should scare the fish away.

'The surface mind is dull enough,' continued Saunders presently, 'dull enough to justify a label. It is the mysterious region below consciousness, the rich, dark, infinitely fertile subsoil, that passes the wit of man to understand. For the most part, one can only

reach it by vague conjecture. But sometimes, here and there, some beautiful or terrible flower shoots up from that underworld into the light of our conscious existence. As for your friend's experiences at the farm, I think, frankly, that there was sheer devilry in it, black magic. But it isn't always so. You remember what I told you about poor Bellingham.'

In the pause that followed, my hopes flourished exceedingly. Then I hastened to assure Saunders that he had told me precisely nothing at all about poor Bellingham, whose name I heard for the first time. And so, with a little coaxing, I got the tale from him.

I

By one of those fantastic coincidences that make life sometimes seem more artificial than fiction, as well as stranger (said Saunders), it was in a little café in Rue de l'Oeil, Marseilles, that I first noticed Bellingham. Strange that one should have to journey to the south of France to make the acquaintance of a fellow-collegian ! For Bellingham, too, was a Jesus man. I had nodded to him a hundred times in the Close, walked with him once or

twice for a few hundred yards, and passed him every day in the Chimney going to or from lectures ; but I knew next to nothing of him. Once, I remember, we met in the rooms of some other fellow and had coffee. Furnivall was there, who afterwards made something of a hit as an actor ; Dodd who got a double first in classics and then, before the results were out, accidentally drowned himself within sight of Trinity Library ; Chambers who, under a Greek pseudonym, wrote donnish elderly witticisms for undergraduate journals. Looking back on that inauspicious scene I know that not one of the men I have named possessed half the spiritual force of Bellingham, and yet, had it not been for after-events, I should not now have remembered that he was there at all. He was a tall slackly-built man, rather like a black sackful of unco-ordinated bones ; he stooped a little, peering out at the world under long bushy eyebrows from behind a large nose. The mouth was large and loose ; the cheeks sagged a trifle ; the ears stuck out from the head at an angle that, if you looked twice, seemed excessive ; and the hands were big and bony with long fingers that moved, sometimes, like a piece of murderous mechanism. It was as if the hands of a strangler had been grafted on to the body

of a morose, ungainly saint. I do not describe him as he appeared to me in that college room : that would be impossible, for I simply didn't observe him. He was no more to me then than an uninteresting ultra-reserved fellow-student drudging at ecclesiastical history and similar stuff. That I failed to single him out is sufficiently amazing to me now. My eyes must have been in my boots. But there it is —he made no impression on my somnolent mind. It was not, as I say, until we met again in that little café in Rue de l'Oeil that I really saw Bellingham. For the thousandth time I looked at him and for the first time I saw him. There was quite a little crowd of us : Hayter of Caius ; Mulroyd with his soft voice and Irish cadences ; an Oxford man whose name I've forgotten ; and the Honourable Somebody, a mild-mannered, flaxen-haired boy, a Fabian socialist trying to live down the fact that he was the younger son of a peer. But I'm forgetting myself : these people are merely names to you, and names they must remain. The Oxonian was a chance acquaintance who had encountered our party in Paris and diffidently joined us, a charming fellow who constantly tried—only too successfully, for he remains in my memory as the vaguest phantom—to efface himself.

Hayter, whose chief preoccupation, I remember, was the maturing of a new Meerschaum, played the elder brother to the flaxen-haired youngster. Mulroyd was my own particular friend, and it was he who had dragged in Bellingham, the misfit of the party. Bellingham was a curiously solitary man, a ward in Chancery or something of the kind ; no one knew anything about his origin or antecedents, and he had no friends. The suspicion that he was lonely, neglected, with nowhere to spend the Long Vacation, made him irresistible to Mulroyd ; and that he was conspicuously unsociable Mulroyd regarded as a clarion call of challenge to his own militant kindliness. Well, there's a rough sketch of the crowd that gathered in that little red-tiled, black-raftered, French hostel. You must imagine us all as sitting or standing about the place, in various negligent attitudes, drinking execrable *vin rouge*, and talking of routes and train-services and the comparative merits of ales. What turned the conversation towards more ultimate matters I cannot begin to remember, but turn it did. I think it was our Oxonian who interpolated some gloomy observation that set us all thinking of a brooding, inscrutable Destiny which for ever watched, with hard unblinking eyes, our trivial conviviality, lis-

tened, with infinite indifference, to our plans of to-day and to-morrow. The remark was succeeded by a pause that was almost a collective shudder, a pause in which, as it seemed to me, we all listened fixedly to our own heart-beats ticking away the handful of moments that divided us from an unknown eternity. You know what it is to be recalled suddenly, wantonly, to a sense of the immensities, to be aware that death, an invisible presence, is in your midst, to feel his lethal breath chilling the warmth of your idle joy. Even Madeleine, the daughter of the house, who had watched us hitherto with laughter in her dark eyes, and innocent invitation on her full lips, was conscious of the abrupt change of temperature. She understood not a word of our speech, but out of the corner of my eye I saw her hand make the sign of the cross and her lips move in prayer. Hayter, shockheaded, long and oval of face, ceased fingering his pipe and seemed lost in contemplation of its mellowing colour. A wistful light shone in Mulroyd's eyes. The Honourable Somebody—I can't recall his name—smiled and said 'Um.' In that pregnant moment during which we all sat peering over the edge of the unfathomable, questioning the unresponsive darkness, that monosyllable

sounded like an incantation, a word mystical and potent. As for me, I looked from one face to the other, trying to read what was written there, and so my glance fell upon Bellingham. Fell and was arrested, for the face of Bellingham was a revelation. What it revealed is difficult to describe in cold prose ; a musician could better express it in some moaning, unearthly phrase of music. It was as if there shone from that face not light but darkness, and as if over that head hovered a halo of dark fear, a crown of shuddering doom. The eyes flashed darkness, I say, and yet through them, as through sinister windows, I saw for one instant into the infinite distances of the soul behind them, the unimaginable and secret world in which the real Bellingham, the Bellingham whom none of us in that room had ever seen or approached, lived his isolated life. He was leaning forward, elbows on knees, his chin propped up in those gaunt skeleton hands that were several sizes too big for him. To me, who stood facing him, the effect was incredibly bizarre : it was for all the world as though some monster whose face was hidden from me was crouching at my feet offering the truncated head of Bellingham for my acceptance. The red-knuckled fingers formed a fitting cup for the

grotesque sacrifice. I put the horrible fancy behind me and sought to regain a human view of that face. Gaunt and pallid, with high cheekbones and burning eyes, it was a battle-ground of conflicting passions. But the natures and names of the passions I could only surmise. An ascetic and a voluptuary, perhaps, had fought in Bellingham, and his face was the neutral ground that their warfare had violated and laid waste. The merest conjecture, this, and it remained so, until it was proved to be false.

'It doesn't bear thinking of,' remarked Hayter, 'so it's best to avoid the thought. The animals are better off than we, by a long chalk.'

'There's religion,' said the flaxen-haired Fabian tentatively.

'Soothing syrup,' Hayter murmured. 'Religion doesn't face death: it only pretends it isn't there. Gateway to the larger life, and all that cant.' Hayter was a very positive young man in his way.

Mulroyd tried to banter us back into a more comfortable humour. 'Material for a first-rate shindy there. Now then, Saunders, speak up for your cloth, my boy!'

'I shall, when I've got it,' said I. A theological student does not care to talk shop

in mixed company. I was shy of posing as a preacher, and not to be drawn.

'Well, if Saunders won't, I will.'

The voice was harsh, and tense with emotion. It seemed to come out of the grave itself. We all stared at Bellingham, whom we had become accustomed to regard as almost incapable of contributing to a conversation. We waited. Hayter even forgot that work of chromatic art, his pipe.

'Death waits for every man,' said Bellingham. 'At any moment it may engulf us.' The triteness of the sermon was redeemed by the personality that blazed in the speaker. 'And then . . .' His voice trailed off into silence.

'And then?' enquired Hayter, with a politeness that I fancied covered a sneer.

'And then,' said the man of doom, 'we shall find ourselves in the terrible presence of God.'

For once even the genial Mulroyd was stung to sarcasm. 'I must say, judging from your tone, you don't seem to relish the prospect much.'

'Never mind what I relish,' answered Bellingham sternly. 'In that hour you and I will be judged. We shall be forced to look into the eye that at this moment, and always,

is looking upon us.' There was an uncomfortable silence, as well there might be. We had not reckoned upon such an explosion of evangelical fervour, and it embarrassed us as some flagrant breach of manners would have done. Perhaps, heaven help us, we regarded it as a flagrant breach of manners. Bellingham was committing the cardinal sin : he was taking something too seriously.

'When I was a child,' went on Bellingham, without ruth, 'I was told the story of a prisoner condemned to solitary confinement. To this punishment was added the further horror of perpetual watching. A small hole was drilled in the cell-door through which an eye never ceased to peer at the prisoner. That was an allegory, and I have never forgotten it. Even now, you fellows, we are being watched.'

Some of us, I swear, looked round nervously, half expecting to catch sight of that vigilant eye. I, for my part, was angry. 'That's not an allegory, Bellingham,' I said. 'It's a damned travesty. You conceive God to be a kind of Peeping Tom, with omnipotence added. I would rather be an atheist than believe that.'

'Perhaps you would rather be an atheist,' retorted Bellingham. 'Perhaps I would rather be an atheist. But I can't be. Nor can

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you. Did any of you notice the name of the street?'

'Name of the street?' echoed some one. 'What street?'

'This street,' said Bellingham.

'We're not in a street. We're in a café,' said Hayter truculently. 'At least I thought so a moment ago. I begin to fancy we must be in a mission-hall.'

At the moment no one could remember having noticed the name. 'Well, I did notice it,' said Bellingham. 'It is the Street of the Eye.'

Mulroyd shrugged his shoulders, a gesture plainly disdainful of this touch of melodrama.

'Well,' said I, 'what of it?' For the fellow's morbidity had spoiled my temper. I expected a night of bad dreams.

'The Street of the Eye,' repeated Bellingham. 'We're all in that street; every man born is in that street. And we shall never get out of it.'

I believe some of us half-suspected that the wine had gone to his head, though how such stuff could make any man tipsy was beyond understanding. He continued to irradiate gloom upon us from under his shaggy brows. Mulroyd, to create a diversion, held out his hands to Madeleine in mock appeal.

'Du vin, mademoiselle! Nous sommes bien chagrinés.'

The girl's eyes brightened again. At the merest hint of a renewal of gaiety she rose, radiantly, as if from the dead.

'Let's have some champagne,' Mulroyd suggested, 'to take the taste of death out of our mouths.'

'*Carpe diem*,' murmured Hayter. 'Trite. But the first and last word of wisdom.'

'You can't escape that way,' remarked Bellingham, sourly insistent.

But we could stand no more of Bellingham just then. Flinging courtesy to the winds we laughed and sang and shouted him down. 'Death be damned!' cried Mulroyd, as we clinked glasses. Never was a toast drunk with more fervour.

2

You'll be surprised when I say that after this incident I got to know Bellingham better and to like him more. Strange as it may seem, he was not entirely without humour; and I fancied that he was the least bit ashamed of his outburst. The next day he went about like a dog in disgrace, feeling perhaps that every one disliked him. Back he went into

that shell of silence from which he had only once, and with such dramatic effect, emerged. He would never, I know, have gone back on the substance of his discourse ; but, as he admitted to me afterwards, he very quickly began to doubt the wisdom of his method. Fellow-undergraduates were not to be frightened into conversion by the kind of revivalist rant he had treated us to. He began to feel woefully out of place in our company. Mulroyd, good fellow though he was, could not bring himself to make any warm overtures to one whom he now regarded as a religious maniac ; on the surface he was breezy and friendly enough, but in his heart he knew that Bellingham must be reckoned among his failures, one who had failed to justify his ardent faith in the latent social value of every man. The others ignored him, though not pointedly, much as they had always done. My own attitude was different. I have, as you know, an insatiable curiosity about human nature—especially freaks of human nature, I'm afraid—and Bellingham had piqued that curiosity. I had repudiated his particular version of God as being nothing but an almighty Peeping Tom, and yet a weakness for peeping is my own besetting sin. All my life I have been a kind of amateur detective of the human soul. More-

over—though I don't stress this—I had more than a sneaking sympathy for the man. After all we had something in common, something that none of the others of our party shared with us. We were both hoping to be ordained. In spite of myself I had to admire the colossal courage of his intervention in that argument, even while I disparaged its tone. In fine, for this reason and for that, I made rather a point of cultivating Bellingham's acquaintance from that day forth. And I had my reward. I really believe that to me he revealed a more human side of himself than anybody else ever caught sight of. Next term, back at college, he made a habit of strolling into my rooms at five minutes to ten, and very often we talked till the early hours of the morning about this and that. Sometimes he became reminiscent about his childhood. His earliest memories were of a grey suburban villa, with a black square patch in front and a black oblong patch behind, both called gardens. The square one was marked off from the road by hideous iron railings and an iron gate. Bellingham assured me that the pattern of those railings was branded on his retina ; and in an unwonted lapse from literalism he declared that it was a pattern designed in hell and executed in Bedlam. ' Wherever I see it,' he

said passionately, under the influence of nothing more potent than black coffee, ‘ wherever I see it—and it is all over south-east London—I recognize the mark of the beast, the signature of an incorrigible stupidity. The very smell of those railings is noisome.’ He was like that : ever ready to see material things as symbols of the unseen, and very prone—like many religionists—to confuse the symbol with the thing symbolized. In the sheer exuberance of his passion, whether of joy or disgust, he would make some wild exaggerated statement that no one was expected to take literally ; and the next moment he himself would be taking it literally. If, for example, I had suggested to him that to talk of the smell of railings was a trifle fanciful, he would have been genuinely astonished. Whenever he loved or hated, rationality went to the winds. And he seems to have hated the home of his childhood pretty completely. The back garden, where he spent a good deal of his time, figured in his talk as if it were a plague spot, an evil blot upon the earth. If one is to believe his tale, this garden was always, in season and out, full of wet flapping underclothes hanging on a line. They used to lie in wait for him, he said, and smack him in the face : it was like being embraced by a slimy fish. He was glad, how-

ever, of the clothes-line posts ; he used to climb them and swing from the cross-bars, and once or twice he pulled one of these posts out of its wooden socket in the ground and stared down at the minute wriggling monsters that scuttled about in that little twilit world. Another thing that gave him pleasure was the sight of a neighbouring church, aspiring towards the sky, the throne of God. These memories may well have derived much of their colour from imagination, for both his parents died before he was ten, and he then left the suburban villa to become the ward of his uncle Joseph. Joseph Bellingham appears to have been conspicuously unfitted for the delicate task of bringing up a sensitive, solitary, and already morbid child, although not a word against him would his nephew have admitted. Justly or unjustly I was disposed to believe that this Uncle Joseph had completed the dark work begun in Bellingham by his childish solitude and loveless home. For his parents, I should have told you, were lifeless, disillusioned people. I suspect they had never been happy or passionate lovers, and that they regarded their son's birth as one more penalty rather than as the desired fruit of their marriage. In some preposterous way (naturally Bellingham was reticent here) the man had sacrificed himself

in marrying his wife—some fetish of 'honour' perhaps—and of course he spent the rest of his life hating her for it. This may or may not account for the fact that when I first got to know Bellingham he seemed extraordinarily insensitive, for a man of his temperament, to beauty. Not totally deficient—because even his hatred of a certain kind of iron railings implies some standard, however subconscious—but what sense of beauty he possessed had never been wakened : it manifested itself only in a series of dislikes. He had quite a devilish flair for seeing the most repulsive aspect of things. This was all in tune with his miserable theology. To the spiritual loveliness that radiates from the central figure of the New Testament—to that beacon he was as blind as he was deaf to the many golden promises of the religion of Christ. I do not mean that he swerved by a hair's breadth from orthodoxy ; I mean that there was some subtle twist in his temperament that made him accept 'the love of God' as a euphemism and 'the wrath of God' as a terrible reality. He thought more about hell than about heaven, because he had only seen beauty whereas he had *felt* ugliness. The one was an intellectual apprehension : the other was a perpetual experience. It was evident to me, from what he did not say, that

he had never known love, and I wondered what was in store for him.

But though with me he became more and more unreserved, from all other fellows of his class and education he drew farther away. There was a spiritual uncouthness in him which prevented his taking kindly to the harmless social artificialities of academic life. As I told him—and he admitted it good-humouredly—he would have been more at home as chief medicine-man to a tribe of barbarians. In some remote and savage bush his niche awaited him. Even the traditions of politeness he grew to despise. I shocked him by admitting that I myself had more than once got out of accepting an invitation to breakfast or to coffee by feigning to be engaged elsewhere. Bellingham would have said bluntly, 'No, thanks,' and have left it at that. Courageous, no doubt, but it did not make for easy social relations. He became more and more dissatisfied, too, with the mild fashionable Anglicanism of our dean. Of his own religion sensationalism was the life-breath ; and the worship of good form, the religion of all undergraduates, was in his eyes the most dangerous idolatry. No one was surprised when, having taken his degree with the rest of us, he abruptly left the University. Instead of being ordained he became just what

I had chaffingly suggested, a medicine-man to a tribe of barbarians. To be more exact, he set up as a lay-missioner near the Euston Road. He had a meagre but sufficient private income which permitted him to go his own solitary gait. And there he busied himself wrestling with the Devil for the souls of all the miscellaneous street-scum he could lay hands on. God forgive me if I have ever in my heart derided Bellingham ! He had the heroism as well as the mania of a one-idea'd man. I find it hard to suppose that his converts were any the happier for having been injected with his particular virus of fear ; but, as Bellingham would say, where happiness cannot be reconciled to salvation happiness must go. Go it did, I have no doubt. Fear of the policeman was displaced by a scarcely less ignoble fear of God, conceived to be another policeman on a much larger scale. If I speak bitterly, it is not in spite of my religion but because of it. Before I have finished the story you will understand that I have cause for bitterness.

We exchanged a few letters, he and I ; but it was not until eighteen months later that, at his own invitation, I went to see him. 'Saunders, I need your help,' he said in his letter, and added something about my being his only

real friend and so on. He had dismal little lodgings in a dismal little side-street the name of which I have forgotten. Bellingham himself opened the door to me. I had told him when to expect me and he must have been waiting at the window. He greeted me in a shamefaced eager fashion that touched my heart. I was astonished at the change in him : the more astonished because it was at once subtle and impossible to miss. There was a gentleness in his eyes that I had never seen there before. He was more human. He led me to his own rooms—they were at the top of a four-storied house, and looked out on a prospect of smoking chimneys—and forced me into the only comfortable chair he possessed.

I began smoking, but he denied himself that nerve-soothing indulgence. His eyes, alight with an unwonted shyness that was only half shame, avoided meeting mine. We fenced for a while, talking over our Jesus days ; and all the while my mind, involuntarily, was seeking a name for something in that room that I had not expected to find. Presently Bellingham rose from his chair. It was an abrupt and surprising movement. 'Like to see the rest of my quarters ?' he said, in a tone desperately casual. I followed him into the next room, and there, in one glance, the mystery

was made clear. The bedroom was the answer to the problem of the sitting-room. What I had detected while we sat talking was domesticity, a subtle but decided fragrance of home : a certain precision in the arrangement of books and furniture. In the bedroom, with its two spotlessly white-sheeted beds and its vase of flowers standing in the centre of a miniature dressing-table, the same story was told more eloquently ; there was, accentuated, aggressive, the same neatness and daintiness of effect which a contented woman instinctively imposes on her surroundings. No bachelor, however fastidious, could have achieved it. 'Quite a jolly little place,' I remarked, to hide my own surprise and his embarrassment. 'Very,' said Bellingham, and we went back to our seats by the fire.

Bellingham tried to take up the thread of our conversation where we had dropped it five minutes before. But for his own sake I cut off that line of retreat.

'Look here, my dear fellow ! You didn't ask me over here in order to discuss our esteemed Dr. Morgan. Tell me all about it.'

Bellingham faced me squarely at last. 'You mean my marriage ? ' I nodded. 'Well, to start with, I'm not married.'

I think he expected me to flinch at that ;

and perhaps my failure to do so disconcerted as well as encouraged him. I said nothing. I felt that I could do more good by listening than by talking.

'She has been in these rooms for two months,' said Bellingham. 'And what you saw in there —that has existed for ten days, just ten days.' I divined that this was his way of indicating to me the duration of his married life. 'You see I didn't fall at once, or easily. The Devil is always insidious, isn't he? Saunders, that girl is a magician. Joan, her name is. She transformed this place. It's not bad now, is it? You should have seen it before she came. And me, too—you should have seen me before she came. It's a new life to me. I'm translated. And yet . . .'

'How and where did you meet her?'

'In the street, at the beginning of November. Her husband kicked her out. A swine he is; thank God I've never set eyes on him. Told her to go and sell herself, and come back with her earnings.'

There was a pause. 'And she?' I asked.

'She was on the streets for five days. Yes, a prostitute for five days.' I saw Bellingham's face contract with pain, and I knew that something deeper than pity had been stirred in him. And so the recital went on. Bit by bit I got

his story and pieced it together. He did not spare himself ; but even his passion for repentance, his ingrained conviction of sin, could not persuade me that he had been guilty of a very heinous crime. He had rescued the girl, at first in sheer compassion, and cherished her as he would have cherished any other fragment of human salvage. And her presence, her pathetic prettiness and her childish need of affection, had been too much for him. In a passion of gratitude, I surmise, she had offered him, with a full heart, what she had so reluctantly sold to casual men during her five days purgatory. The appeal to his manhood was too sudden, too overwhelming, to be resisted. Beauty, seen for the first time in dazzling glory, had invaded his heart and beaten down his defences. For the first time in my experience of him there was inconsistency in Bellingham. He spoke, one minute, of his ' fall,' like any sour moralist ; and in his very next sentence he would become almost lyrical about this ' new life,' this shattering apocalypse of beauty. It was as if the man had been cloven in twain and spoke with two voices. And that, I believe, is the real key to the baffling terror that was to follow.

Later in the afternoon, in time to prepare tea for us, came Joan herself, a big-eyed child

in her early 'twenties, with very fair hair, like a little lost angel with a Cockney accent. The sudden fear that leaped into her eyes as she timidly greeted me would have stabbed any man's heart. She was absurdly fragile, and I saw at once that those five evil days had been no more than a gruesome physical accident which had left her courage shaken but her innocence unimpaired. She guessed, no doubt, that we had been discussing her ; and both Bellingham and I felt caddish, I dare say, when we remembered having done so. But I succeeded in winning her confidence by displaying a keen interest in her market-basket, which she carried on her arm, and in a very few moments she became garrulous about her shopping experiences, displaying a pretty pride in her purchases. They included, I remember, three dried herrings and a pound of pig's-fry. The herrings we had for our tea, and I have never enjoyed a meal more.

In the evening, during a long walk through mean streets, Bellingham came to the point. He had said, you will remember, that he needed my help. What he wanted was no less than that I should play the part of conscience to him. I was to be instated, apparently, as his spiritual pastor. For the sake of that poor child happily darning his socks at home, I

could not refuse the embarrassing honour thrust upon me. And when I learned that repentance was actually beginning to gain the upper hand of him I was glad indeed to exert any influence I possessed on the side of humanity. He had had a vile dream, he told me, and it was evident that he regarded it as a warning sent by that vigilant deity of his. In the dream his landlady, who believed him to be a legally married man, came and smiled at him over the bedrail, and wagged her head till it detached itself from the body and multiplied. The air was full of these grinning heads, poised like dragon-flies, all their evil eyes on Bellingham. Terror, he told me, took concrete form inside his own head : he could hear it simmering, sizzling, gurgling, boiling, splitting ; it drove him out of bed, away from Joan, and across the arid plains of hell under a sky monotonously grey except where the sun, a bloody red, like a huge socket from which the eye had been torn, stared sightlessly at him. Even as he gazed at it it filled and became menacing with the eye of God.

'It was a vision of hell,' Bellingham said, wiping the moisture from his brow. 'And the eye of God was even there. O Lord, how can I escape from Thy presence !'

It did not seem to me a moment propitious

for argument, so I held my peace. He talked on about his doubts and his difficulties, his sin and his repentance; and at last I gathered that I was being invited to tell him whether he should stay with Joan or leave her.

'Oh, fling her into the streets,' I advised him, with furious irony, 'as her husband did.'

'Yes,' he said, mildly enough. 'You're right. Against all my religious convictions I feel you to be right. I have made her my wife, and I must be faithful to my choice, right or wrong.'

'It's as plain as day,' I assured him. 'Love and duty are pointing in the same direction for once. Why should you doubt it?'

'You see, Saunders,' said Bellingham, with sudden fire, 'it's all or nothing. She must remain my wife, or we must separate. There's no third way. I can't spend the rest of my life in the waters of Tantalus. I'm only a man, God help me!'

For a while we left it at that.

3

Saunders has an exasperating habit of stopping in the middle of a story, and behaving as though it were finished. He did this now. I reminded him that I was still listening. . . . No, I haven't done yet, he admitted. I thought

that was the end, but it was only the beginning of poor Bellingham's troubles. You must imagine me now as popping in and out of his home pretty often. Those two remote rooms, like a fantastic nest built among London chimney-pots, attracted me by the romance they symbolized, by their air of being an idyllic peasant cottage, exquisitely clean, stuck away in the heart of the metropolis. Bellingham sent another urgent summons to me. It was the first of a series of alarms. The haunting began. The dreams that, every few nights, made Bellingham's sleep a thing of terror began now to invade his waking life. The Watching Eye was upon him, the eye of God, he declared it to be, trying to subdue him to submission. He heard a voice that said to him, 'Put the woman from you.' In short, he exhibited all the signs of incipient madness. At the time I thought it was indeed madness which threatened him. With one of his frantic telegrams in my hand—'I have seen God' or 'He is come again in judgment'—what else could I think? Yet I still believed that together he and I, with the courageous co-operation of Joan herself, might fend off the danger. She, poor girl, was tearful but invincibly staunch. She would have sacrificed herself utterly for him, whom she loved with an unshakable devotion ;

but I persuaded her that her going away, as she suggested, would not ease the situation. You will think me fanciful, no doubt, but sometimes I felt that Bellingham was fighting for his soul against some usurping demon, and that anything—death or damnation—was better than base surrender. And Bellingham, though he took a very different view of the nature of the contest, came to agree with my conclusion. He rejected my proposition but embraced the corollary. He conceived himself fighting against impossible odds, with no less than God, the Might and Majesty of the universe, as his implacable antagonist. 'I tell you, Saunders,' he said to me, 'I saw Him plainly. He stood over there by my desk. He has incarnated Himself once more in order to crush my revolt.' I passed over the almost maniacal egoism of the conception, and asked for a description of the Divine Visitor. 'His body was all in strong shadow,' Bellingham answered, shuddering at the recollection. 'Only His terrible eyes were visible, and His accusing finger that pointed at me.'

I had respected Bellingham ever since I had come to know him ; and now, if I respected his intelligence less, I felt something more than admiration for the indomitable spirit of the man. His unshaken belief that he was defying

his Creator made fidelity to Joan a piece of titanic courage. Beset by horrors unspeakable, conscious that the citadel of his very reason was being stormed, he yet held doggedly to his determination. Doggedly at first, and afterwards with a sublime pride that I could not witness without an answering pride, a flaming exultation in the splendour of the human soul. Maniac or not, he extorted willing homage from me. You may say what you like about hallucination and the rest of it, but I tell you that to me, an eye-witness, the battle was lifted into the realm of cosmic drama where everything takes on a significance past mortal understanding but not past mortal apprehension. I thought of Job ; I thought of Prometheus ; and I thought of Bellingham as no mean third, championing life against death, championing youth, beauty, and all frail humanity, against the cruel bogey of the mind that menaced them. It goes without saying that his terrors derived all their power from his belief in their reality. He was blind to the plain facts of real religion, deaf to my rationalizing explanations of the horror that haunted him, obstinate in his conviction that God, and none other, was the author and agent of his persecution. Equally convinced was he that he had but to cast Joan out and he would save

his soul alive. Every week saw a change in his physical condition. That brief period of his second blooming, fostered by the sweet presence and the maternal care of Joan, seemed over for ever ; it was as if the seven years of spiritual famine were now to follow. He grew more gaunt, more haggard ; vitality shrunk into him like a pent prisoner and peered out through those fiery orbs, his eyes, as through the mean windows of a condemned cell. He was locked fast in an impregnable isolation, from which no one could rescue him, it seemed, certainly not I, either by force or guile. He distrusted his food ; he distrusted the men and women who passed him in the street. There were only two human souls he did not distrust : Joan herself was one, and I, by the mercy of heaven, was the other. He began to see a vast and sinister significance in all sorts of trivial events, all sorts of minor disasters that did not in the least concern any one of us, seeing in them the beginning of a cosmic disintegration that should engulf him in perdition. He was afraid yet defiant of these fatalities. He was both egomaniacal and illogical in his conviction that God, his implacable adversary, would behave like the veriest villain of melodrama rather than let him escape : tear the universe to tatters in order to compass

the death or the dishonour of this one rebellious spirit, like a man who should pull his own house about his ears in the pursuit of a solitary rat. I myself began to scan the papers anxiously for wars and rumours of wars. Different as were our intellectual convictions, there was the stark comradeship between us of those who face death together. He watched for signs of God ; Joan and I, with equal vigilance, watched him. And the stronger grew my affection for Bellingham, the shakier my own nerves became. Finally, with a kind of exultation, I threw up all my work—I was a curate at the time—and flung myself body and soul into this holy war. I found lodgings near Bellingham's, and visited him every day without fail. I felt that this fretting, this piling of horror upon horror, could not go on much longer. Sooner or later there would be a crisis ; the increasing tension would snap. Mingled with my fear for Bellingham's sanity was a fear for the safety of Joan, caged up with a maniac. For a week or more we worried and waited.

4

The end came with a sudden and sickening rush. And yet it was an end worth waiting and working for. In the street just outside his home, Bellingham was knocked down by a

passing cab. Joan saw the accident from the window. By the sheerest chance he escaped with nothing worse than bruises and flesh wounds, but his excitement and terror reached their climax as he was helped back, limp and bleeding, to his rooms. The policeman, with a kindly word, handed him over to Joan's care. She was all for summoning a doctor, but Bellingham would not hear of it. White-faced, hiding his rising tumult behind a mask of steely calm, he told her curtly to fetch me. She obeyed, poor child, in terror of her life and his own. I was with them ten minutes later.

'Saunders,' he greeted me, without preamble. 'God has flung down His last challenge.'

'You mean this accident!' said I, scoffing gently.

'Accident!' retorted Bellingham. 'Do you, a priest of God, talk to me of accident! Not a sparrow falls without God. No, it was no accident. It was the last warning. I feel in my bones that this is the end. At any moment now He will strike, and I shall burn in hell for ever more, where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched.' He had the true missioner's flow of quotations, mostly misapplied; but I knew better than to cross him then. Something of his own passion infected me.

We were standing in the bedroom, where he was at last submitting, with the most complete indifference, to the medical minis-trations of Joan. 'Let's go into the other room,' I suggested, 'and discuss this quietly and in comfort.' I led the way, and they followed. The living-room, as I fancy they called it, was more cheerful by a long way. There was a fire in the grate, and a lamp like a great harvest moon glowed yellow on the table.

'Listen to me, Saunders,' cried Bellingham, refusing to sit down. 'You are my best friend, my only friend ; and Joan is my wife, the finest wife that any man had. The All-Seeing Eye is watching me now, as always ; that street-accident, as you call it, was the plain speech of God telling me to desert this woman. I'm a doomed man, Saunders, and I can speak my mind now. I believe in God as firmly as ever I believed in Him, but I have learned something. He is not worth serving. I tell you, Saunders, that the God we have both worshipped is as evil as He is powerful. Almighty Evil sits upon the throne of the universe, and I will curse Him and die.' Poor fellow, he could not believe me when I told him that it was the God in himself that was speaking those wild words, the God in himself

that was fighting a heroic battle against the demon of fear that Joan by her woman's tenderness had cast out.

There came, suddenly, a crash of something falling in one of the lower rooms of the house. It jarred our tense nerves horribly. And then, for the last time, the terror came to Bellingham, as if in answer to his taunt. He alone saw it, and you will quickly interpose that it was his mind alone that created it. And in a sense I believe you are right, but you'll find it hard before I finish to maintain that the apparition was a purely subjective thing. Can an hallucination cause windows to rattle and doors to move? I believe for my part that in some unfathomable way the old Bellingham, or rather the riot of evil fancies about God that had victimized the old Bellingham, had woven for itself some external form. Language is crude and clumsy, crushing the truth at which it grasps; but it seems to me that in some sense—and a sense not too metaphorical—the man was, as I said before, cloven in twain, divided against himself. But your face warns me that I'm boring you.

'There it is,' shouted Bellingham, pointing towards a corner of the room. Joan, afraid of her lover, rushed to me, and my arms closed round her instinctively. We stared and saw

nothing. 'The same evil eyes,' said Bellingham, more quietly, 'the same accusing finger.' And then began an uncanny one-sided colloquy. Bellingham conversed with his invisible mentor. 'I will not leave her, God,' said Bellingham. 'I despise your dirty counsels. Kill me, damn me, burn me. Send me to hell, where I may see your hateful staring face no more.'

The windows began unaccountably to rattle. Joan clung to me, sobbing, on the verge of hysteria. Bellingham strode towards the table and with one swift gesture put out the light. 'I am not afraid of your darkness,' he flung out.

For a moment, silence; and a darkness made ghastly by bright moonlight. Then the windows rattled again, and then, quite without warning, Bellingham collapsed and fell against me. My body had broken his fall, and I now released Joan in order to turn my attention to her lover. The sight of him prostrate restored her to courage. She was always ready when needed. I left Bellingham to her care for a moment and turned again to that haunted corner. I have never known fear such as I knew at that moment, and yet I felt infinitely braced by the dramatic significance of this conflict with an unknown terror. It was as if hell had invaded earth, and that God had

left me as His sole witness. At such crises a man with religion turns to it. Your old-fashioned agnosticism will be shocked by my method of exorcising evil.

'In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, I charge you to leave this man in peace!' I made the sign of the cross.

And still I stared, and still I saw nothing. Joan was busy with Bellingham, who was beginning to shew signs of returning consciousness. I could not move my eyes away from the corner by the door. And while I stared, something at last happened. Thank Heaven that I alone saw it! The door leading to the bedroom, which had been left half-open, began closing. It closed, pulled to from the other side, and the knob moved and the catch clicked, as though released from the hand of the Unseen. I ran to it, opened it, and looked out. And saw—nothing at all.

SLEEPING BEAUTY

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I

HARRIET leaned across the scullery sink, where dirty plates were soaking, in order to get a better view of the moon. Her sleeves were turned up to the elbow. Her right hand grasped a ball of dishcloth from which slimy water oozed between her red fingers to float, in black spots, upon the surface of the water. Upon that water, through which projected a tureen, like the bows of a wrecked ship, the moonlight fell. The three and elevenpenny alarum clock in the kitchen began striking nine.

All Harriet's spiritual crises had had for their *mise-en-scène* this scullery, or so it seemed to Harriet herself. Seven years earlier she had stood where she was now standing and had wrestled with overmastering fear, to the accompaniment of that same ticking clock and to the drip-drip from the plate-rack upon already washed spoons. She had leaned then

across the sink, as she was leaning now, and stared in terror at an unearthly glow in the sky that could scarcely fail to mean the end of the world and the coming of God in judgment. She shuddered to picture the dead bodies, putty-coloured, rising in their shrouds to confront—with her and Mamma and Alice and Maud—an implacable Creator. 'O God, don't come yet!' It had been the most spontaneous of all her prayers. She had heard too much of this God to trust herself readily to His mercy; and she, the most wicked of girls, had little enough to hope from mere justice. She had too often deceived her teacher and been unsympathetic with her poor mother; and far too often had she resented having to drudge in the house—sweep and dust, make beds, empty slops, and wash dirty dinner-things—while still at school, and to the neglect of her home-lessons.

Whether in answer to her prayer, or from come other cause, God had stayed His coming on that occasion, and to-night, within a week of her twentieth birthday, she was thinking of quite other things: not of God, but of the moon. There was something placid and sisterly to-night about that celestial presence, and Harriet was deliciously aware of a bond between them. 'Because Geoff likes us both,'

she said in her heart. What had been his phrase, the phrase that had astonished her first to gladness? 'Gentle as moonlight, soft and gentle as moonlight.' The words haunted her memory like singing birds. Geoff's liking was in itself strange enough: the degree of his liking was scarcely credible. Why had he no eyes for Alice, the acknowledged beauty of the family?—or for Maud, with her brains? 'Cinderella and the Ugly Sisters,' Geoff had said. But Cinderella had been a pretty girl, and she, Harriet, was all too plain. It could only have been kindness or perverse obstinacy that had made him deny that. She glanced into the tiny mirror that hung from a nail on the pink distempered wall, and examined with some distaste the oval olive face, the fair hair, and the large brown eyes that looked out at her. Tears began to form in those eyes. 'Now don't start that silliness!' she admonished herself. And she returned to the practical world and to the washing of the things dirtied at supper. 'I do wish mamma wouldn't leave all her fat,' she thought, as with her scullery knife she sped three quivering fragments into the waste-pail.

There remained the undeniable fact that Geoff wanted to marry her: that is, he liked her so much that he wished her to share

his home, when he acquired one, and wash his dishes instead of her mother's. She could cook, too : she could make him nice things ; and she would indeed have cheerfully slaved for his comfort in gratitude for that pity which, as she supposed, had made his glance linger in kindness upon her. But that was not to be. Even in that wonderful moment when he praised her gentleness she had realized how impossible it was that she should leave mamma ; and her sisters had been not slow to emphasize that impossibility. 'Boy and girl flirtation,' said Alice with genial contempt—unaccountably, since Geoff was twenty-six and considered to be rather a clever young man. He was a poet—a bank-clerk in his spare time—and his knack of finding rhymes should alone have earned him some respect. To Geoff himself Alice had always been conspicuously friendly ; and as for Maud —he had been her friend in the first place (she had met him in the city), and it had always been assumed that it was Maud whom he came to see. But about Geoff's intentions now there could be no doubt at all. He had even wanted, the dear silly, to help Harriet wash up, but she had not dared to allow that, and he, making a virtue of necessity, was at this moment closeted with the family, per-

haps urging once more his extravagant claim.

The last dish dried, the last fork placed in its proper section of the plate-basket, she returned, rather shamefaced, to the sitting-room. As the door closed behind her an ominous hush fell. A smile upon the proud plump face of Alice froze hard and thawed suddenly. Maud swung round upon the revolving music-stool and began turning the pages of Mendelssohn's *Lieder*. Her mother, perched insecurely on the edge of her chair, visibly suffered. She was always visibly suffering.

'Girls!' said mamma plaintively . . . It was enough. Harriet's sisters rose without a word and left the room. Mamma looked at the young man, but he made no movement. 'Geoffrey!' she said, a world of pathos in her voice. But Geoffrey was deaf to it. 'This concerns me too,' he said. 'May I smoke?'

'Very well. Stay, if you wish to be cruel . . .' But this man, lost to all sense of humanity, only replied: 'I'm vulgarly persistent, no doubt, but you see I happen to want Harry.'

Harry's mother turned twin orbs of suffering upon her daughter, and began reciting the speech she had prepared.

'I'm sorry, Harriet, to disappoint you. I understand your desire to get away from a

troublesome invalid mother and your two bread-winning sisters. But you are God's charge to me and I must protect you.'

'From me?' inquired Geoffrey.

She did not heed the interruption.

'I say nothing against Geoffrey, but I can't consent to anything in the shape of an engagement between you. For one thing you are as yet a mere girl; you know nothing of life and nothing of marriage. And that isn't all. Geoffrey has told me something very sad. He has been very open and frank with me: I *will* say that for him. We all like Geoffrey. But he's told me that he would wish to be married in an office. He has queer views, my dear. He even tells me that he only goes to church to please his mother and father. I'm afraid he's let go of the Saviour's hand altogether. After that, I need hardly say more. I know my little Harriet too well to believe that she can wish to give mother pain. I already have my Cross to bear.'

'Very well, mamma.' Harriet's eyes were luminous with tears.

At that Geoffrey rose. 'Then I'd better clear off home at once.'

'My dear Geoffrey,' protested his hostess, 'I know you are thinking to spare my feelings

after this upset. You're very good to me always. But you'll please stay your week-end. We mustn't part in unfriendliness—and you know how I should hate you to travel on Sunday.'

He could not keep bitterness out of his smile, but he replied cheerfully enough :

'Well, Mrs. Mason, since Harry is not to be engaged to me there'll be no harm in my taking her out for half an hour before bed? Would you care to come, Harry? . . . Thanks awfully.'

2

Harriet went to her room in a trembling ecstasy, struggling against odds to believe that she was indeed beautiful, as he had said. While she moved about, within the pink beflowered walls of her very own room (as in her heart she was wont to call it), his voice still made music in her memory.

'Why will you submit to be boxed up in that prison? Can't you understand how I want you? Can't you understand how lovely you are?' He had never before been so passionate in his iterations. And she could only shake her head, elated, yet with secret misgiving. He had very queer ideas, mamma had said. Was this obsession by the thought

of beauty perhaps one of them? But there was worse to follow.

'Harry, are you determined to give me up?'

She replied miserably: 'I can't go against mamma. You wouldn't have me go against mamma. Oh, Geoff, I would do anything else for you.'

The words were like a match dropped in dry stubble. 'Then you do love me? You do! You do!'

His violence frightened and braced her. 'You know I like you tremendously,' she said, grappling with the unknown, 'better than anyone else in the world.'

'Except your mother,' he retorted bitterly, and then added in a changed tone: 'Harry darling, we've never kissed. Do you like me enough for that? We may never have another moment alone.'

'Of course, you funny boy!'

He bent towards her, and she kissed him, in friendly fashion, on the cheek. 'Happy now?' she asked, almost merrily, hoping to drive away his tragic air.

He smiled. 'Not exactly.' An odd smile it was. And at the bend of the road, under the shadow of Mrs. Lavender's lime trees, he took her face suddenly between his hands and kissed her mouth. Something stirred in her

but did not awake. She could not understand his emotion.

'Harry, you said you'd do anything for me. Did you mean it?'

'Yes.'

'You'll think me strange. Perhaps you'll be shocked. It's this: let me see you. If I'm to go away from you, as I must, let me see you just once, as you really are. Give me a memory to take with me.'

Was he indeed mad? Poor Geoff! 'But, dear, you can see me now.'

'Your face, your clothes. Let me see *you*, all your beauty. Venus Anadyomene . . .'

She burned with shame as something of his meaning dawned on her . . . and now, as she stood in her bedroom re-living the scene, the plan he had unfolded seemed both wild and wicked. Wild and wicked, yes: yet shot through with a flash of poetry. An illuminated 'Thou God seest me' gleamed at her from one wall, and a pledge to abstain by God's help from all intoxicating liquors as beverages, signed in childish caligraphy *Harriet Mason*, accused her from another. Wild and wicked; but in a passion of gratitude for being loved, and for the spark kindled within her, she had yielded her promise.

'Thou God seest me.' Blushing hotly, very

conscious of that inquisitive eye, she took down her hair. With a miniature clatter the pins fell from nerveless fingers on to the glass surface of the dressing-table. Slowly she undressed ; paused a moment, shyly stroking her slim nude body ; and then with a gesture of resolve slipped into her kimono. The eye of God was still upon her, but she had given her word.

Her woolly slippers made no sound on the oilcloth floor. She opened her door and stepped into the passage. Opposite her was Geoff's door, left purposely ajar. Tremblingly, but swiftly lest fear should make her false, she crossed and entered. Geoff made no sound. She stood, too ashamed to look up, pushing his door to with a nervous backward movement of the hand. It closed, not without noise.

Her lips moved, as in prayer. She lifted her arms high, and her garment, slipping from white shoulders, fell and clustered at her feet, a diaphanous shimmering mass.

'Lovely, lovely . . . O God !' The scarce-heard whisper made her heart leap in exultation. She raised her head and looked steadfastly at her love. He sat up in bed, still as an image of adoration, the moonlight making visible the worship in his eyes. She stooped, gathered up her gown, and went out into the passage . . . into the arms of Alice.

'I heard a door slam,' said Alice. 'What's the matter? Why, you've—— That's Geoff's room!'

Alice became pale and for a moment speechless with anger. When she recovered her tongue it was to use a language strange to the ears of Harriet.

'I don't know what you mean,' cried Harriet, starry-eyed, 'and I don't care. He loves me, Alice, because I am so beautiful, beautiful. Why didn't you tell me I was beautiful?'

She pushed past Alice and locked herself in her bedroom. Those bitter reproaches had no sting for her. Even had she understood them they would have been less than a feather's weight against the joy now born in her heart. For her the world was made new, clean and new. With beauty, seen hitherto through a glass darkly, she was now face to face. She fell asleep exhausted with happiness, and when in the morning mamma came to her room and sobbed, and raved, she could understand not a word of it.

'You've brought disgrace and shame upon us all, you wretched child!' And to this Harriet, in her profound innocence, could only answer: 'But we love each other, mamma. What harm have we done?'

'You shall leave my house as soon as that

man can be made to marry you, and never come back again.'

'Am I to marry Geoff after all, then, mamma?"

Yes, it appeared that she was, and that her daring to ask the question was further proof of her shamelessness. It was all very baffling.

THE ENCHANTED MOMENT

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MR. JOHN PARDOE was not an imaginative man, but—if the truth must be known—he had once been a child, and though, as Mr. Pardoe aged, the child grew smaller and smaller, it was not yet squeezed out of existence. The secret had been well kept. Plump, rosy, and forty-five years old, encased in patent-toe boots, doeskin spats, sleek morning coat, striped trousering, and silk hat—not to mention certain articles of underwear—Mr. Pardoe oscillated daily between his office in Cannon Street and his pleasant home at Putney, giving no cause to his dearest friend or his bitterest enemy to suspect him of having a secret hoard of youth. His waking mind was occupied exclusively by lighterage, freight duties, marine insurance, bus routes, time tables, foreign exchange rates, and the criminal ineptitude of the Government party; and his dreams, which rose only to the bait of cheese and spring onions for supper, reflected his general staidness of character with

a minimum of humorous distortion. For more than a decade he had lived within half a mile of the house that held Swinburne, and he was still unaware of having anything in particular to thank God for.

But in his forty-sixth year, when he had already begun to cherish some of the idiosyncrasies proper to a much older man and to regard with complacency his shining porcelain pate and his fringe of greying hair, something happened to Mr. Pardoe that was the beginning of a spiritual revolution. The something was named Miss Adela Simpson, and it had for many years typed his business letters with an enthusiasm and a generous disregard for pedantry in spelling which would have been hard to match in any other city office. Perhaps it was Mr. Pardoe's patience with these orthographical freedoms that won Adela's affection, or perhaps she alone of all his acquaintances had divined the existence of that child in him which I have felt it my duty to mention. Whatever the cause, she married him ; and, being herself a fluffy, golden-haired, and sentimental creature, with an unbounded capacity for enjoyment, she persuaded him that he was very happy with her. Had the matter ended there, all might have been well : Mr. Pardoe might have lived and died decorously,

a plain man with no nonsense about him. The youth in him might have remained bottled and out of sight for ever, had not Adela tampered with the cork.

But destiny, in the person of Mrs. Pardoe, chose to play tricks on this excellent man. Some eighteen months after that rational registry wedding, the fluffy girl insisted on giving birth to a boy. The local doctor assisted its entry, and the local vicar declared its name to be Timothy. I have already said that Mr. Pardoe was not an imaginative man, and this event was quite outside his calculations. Being both by instinct and training a gentleman of considerable delicacy, he was embarrassed—as who would not be?—and quite unable to assume, at short notice, the rôle of fond parent. But as the weeks passed by and the red squeaking pudding called Timothy began to shew some traces of its humanity, began even to bear a slight resemblance to himself, a change more subtle but no less real occurred in the feelings of the reluctant father. For one thing, the preposterous littleness of the creature attracted his notice and excited his wonder. Sometimes when he looked at Timothy Mr. Pardoe's face would break into a wholly irrational grin. Once or twice, when no one was near, he presented his index finger to

be enfolded in miniature hands of unparalleled clamminess, or played the fool with his watch ; and once, once only, he blushed to find himself making ridiculous noises, noises not unlike those emitted habitually by the child's agreeable but infatuated mother.

The translation of Mr. Pardoe from a serious man with business responsibilities and a taste for party politics into a kind of domestic pet, thinker of thoughts too deep for tears, and lover of children—this translation might have continued apace had not the cook suddenly, wantonly, left to get married. Adela, luxuriating in her new freedom, decided to manage without a cook ; but Adela's cooking was no more precise than her spelling. It played havoc with Mr. Pardoe's digestive apparatus, and—by that transmutation of matter into spirit which is the most disconcerting fact in life—Mr. Pardoe's digestive apparatus played havoc with Mr. Pardoe's temper. He became angry with the world and with the life that crawled upon its surface.

Nevertheless the world continued to revolve, and life was not extinct. Timothy, in particular, was far from extinct. For five years he flourished, and on his fifth birthday, at an hour well past his bedtime, he entered Mr. Pardoe's study and demanded to be told a story.

Mr. Pardoe, interrupted in the reading of his favourite periodical, *The Bondholder's Register*, was annoyed. Birthday or no birthday, this was an outrage: the sanctuary violated, the high priest disturbed at his devotions. Yet, in spite of his dyspepsia, he exhibited an admirable restraint.

'No, Timothy,' he said, holding up a cautionary finger. 'I shall not tell you a story. You know I do not like to be disturbed in the evening. You will go to bed, and at the proper moment I shall come to kiss you good night. But tell you a story I will not. I see your mother's hand in this—this act of rebellion. If you wanted stories you could go to your toy-cupboard, where you would find several volumes of stories: ridiculous enough, no doubt, but suited to your age. Although you cannot yet read with facility you could easily amuse yourself with the pictures. Really, Timothy, I can't imagine why you should suppose that I should tell you a story, a thing I have never done in my life.'

As a substitute for an applauding public meeting of the company's shareholders, Timothy was not a success. He clung to his simple thesis with the brutal tenacity of the very young. 'Mummy says *you* are to tell me a story.'

The fluffy girl appeared suddenly in the doorway. 'Yes, John, you really might, this once. He's tired of my stories. And it's his birthday, after all, poor little thing!'

'Poor little thing!' sneered Mr. Pardoe. This was sheer domestic tyranny: he wouldn't suffer it. 'Let me tell you, Adela,' he cried, pointing at her accusingly with *The Bondholder's Register*, 'you are spoiling the poor little thing, as you call him. It's eight o'clock, an hour past his bedtime. The way to bring a child up. . . .'

But here Mr. Pardoe was interrupted, and a valuable homily on the training of children thereby lost to the world. The clock began striking. Now it was one of Mr. Pardoe's nervous weaknesses, of which there were many, that he could never raise his voice above the sound of a striking clock. He disliked clocks. He resented their unmannerly habit of cutting his sentences in half and making him lose the thread of his discourse. And now he had to wait several seconds until that clock chose to let him proceed with what he was saying. Very well: he resigned himself to the delay. His face was that of a martyr too well-bred even to invoke his God. He mentally counted the strokes: 'One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. . . .'

'Why!' cried Mr. Pardoe, 'that clock's wrong. An hour slow. I'm sure it's eight o'clock. I set my watch this morning by Greenwich Time. . . .'

2

The words died on his lips, which remained open only because in his bewilderment Mr. Pardoe forgot to close them. He seemed to have stepped into the very heart of Spring. The sounds and colours and the rich earthy smell of the woods made him tingle with delight. Never before had he breathed such air. It was like strong wine in its effect, and that alarmed Mr. Pardoe, who dreaded nothing so much as to lose control of himself. For him the light of reason was the only legitimate light in the universe: moonlight, starlight, sunlight—these were merely decorative. 'No wonder the fruit is so fine,' he said to himself; and he plucked one of the golden apples from a laden branch that bowed towards him, and set his teeth in it with a disregard of the rights of property that was quite foreign to his principles. All round him tall grasses waved, and satin-skinned trees stretched out armfuls of treasure, their leaves luminously green, their fruit glowing like multi-coloured glass globes.

Mr. Pardoe began to revise his first impression. It could hardly be Spring with all this fruit already ripe for eating, and in such abundance, such astonishing variety ! Apple, pear, plum, greengage, lemon, pomegranate, quince— 'Why, with greengages at their present price, there's a small fortune here !' He wondered whether there was a market within easy distance. There was no sort of road within sight : there was only a long avenue of arched trees, in the branches of which birds sang with laughter as well as joy in their tumultuous music. At his feet, wherever he stepped, flowers sprang up as if to greet him : lilies lifted their pale faces towards him ; roses red and blue rioted in the grass ; pansies eyed him amorously. A sound that was like colour made audible, a deep golden sound, a singing dream, filled the forest till it brimmed over with loveliness. In the dim glowing air shot through by shafts of moonlight from the outer world, great dragonflies poised themselves, lost in trance. 'A trifle theatrical, perhaps,' said Mr. Pardoe, 'but undeniably pretty.'

Moving slowly on, he racked his poor brains for a rational explanation of these phenomena. Nature, hitherto so circumspect, was behaving in a most unbridled way. A voice dropped out of the sky, like a bell : 'Greenwich Time,

my dear sir? Good stuff, isn't it! Come and have some.'

'Thank you. But I never drink between meals.' The reply came from Mr. Pardoe's lips before he could check it. This was absurd—he of all men to have an experience like this! Indignantly he stared in the direction of the voice that had hailed him. A little golden star appeared to be falling through the sky. It lodged in the lower branches of a tree, writhed brilliantly for a moment, and resolved itself into a human being: a creature about the size of a foot-rule with a round red baby-face. It jumped to the ground and shook lumps of starshine from the soles of its wooden boots. 'Excuse me, won't you. I've been shopping. A fellow gets simply smothered with this stuff in the Milky Way.'

Mr. Pardoe bowed. 'It is for me to apologize, if you, as I surmise, are the proprietor of this valuable piece of orchard-land. I fear I am trespassing. I must have lost my way. To be perfectly frank with you, I've not the slightest idea how I got here; and let me hasten to add that I'm a strictly temperate man. I rather fancy that I've been made the victim of some clownish practical joke.'

The midget shed a scintillating tear, which made a circle of green light in the grass where

it fell. From his pocket he snatched a note-book. 'I must make a note of that,' he said.

'Of what?' inquired Mr. Pardoe.

'That tear. I've got only six to last the whole evening. I limit myself to ten a day now. It's bad to become a slave to pleasure.'

Mr. Pardoe coughed to hide his alarm and embarrassment. 'Yes, yes. Quite so. Did you read your paper this morning, my dear sir? What a disgraceful Budget again!'

'Ah,' cried the midget, turning up his eyes; 'what is there more enjoyable than a choking sob on a cold Wednesday morning before breakfast? And they ought not to have taken your clothes. I can't allow that.'

'My clothes!' Mr. Pardoe blushed from top to toe, and that blush was the only thing that covered his nakedness. 'Incredible! It had entirely escaped my notice. I really don't know how to apologize. I am more ashamed than I can say. This is a disaster that has never happened before. Whatever am I to do?'

'A happy encounter,' chuckled the midget, rubbing his hands together. 'I'm a tailor by trade. Fit you out in no time. Three yards of gossamer spun out of lovers'-dream. The finer the mesh the higher the price. Excuse

my speaking commercially, but business is business, you know.'

For the first time Mr. Pardoe's heart went out to this odd creature. 'I share your admirable sentiments. Business *is* business. But I deplore this rather fanciful talk about dreams and gossamer, this—ah—second-rate poetry, if I may call it so. But there, I'm only a plain business man.'

'Do you believe in God?' asked the midget surprisingly.

Mr. Pardoe looked revolted. 'A rather indelicate question, is it not? However, since you have seen fit to ask it, I will confess that I have never found any particular need for believing in the Person to whom you allude.'

The midget put out his tongue, looking inconceivably pert. 'I'm God,' said he.

'Pardon me,' Mr. Pardoe replied, with immense dignity. 'I cannot stand here and listen to blasphemy. I am a member of the Church of England.'

'Don't know the name,' said the midget. 'If it's an inn, take me to it, like a good fellow.'

'Before we continue this conversation,' said Mr. Pardoe, beginning to relish the sound of his own voice, 'I feel it only fair to say that I entertain the gravest suspicions

of you. I suspect you of being a figment of my imagination, perhaps a mere dream. I am not aware of having eaten anything calculated to disagree with me, but that is what has probably happened. It's a lesson to me, which I shall not easily forget, that one cannot be too careful about one's diet.'

'I don't know what you are talking about,' remarked the midget. He paused to draw three circles in the grass with the point of his foot. 'But if you want some Greenwich Time you've come to the right place. Slip these shoes on.' In the centre of the middle circle was a pair of loose-fitting shoes, rather like goloshes, made of the skin of a green reptile. It seemed to be covered with eyes. Mr. Pardoe, convinced now that he was dreaming, obediently slipped his feet into these shoes, which immediately began to dance. He found it impossible to control them. That didn't surprise him so much as did his enjoyment of the dance. 'Come along,' said the midget, kicking up his heels, and Mr. Pardoe, following in the wake of that preposterous figment of his imagination, danced down the avenues of Faery with a light heart. Something was released inside him. He felt himself shrink till he was scarcely bigger than his guide, and the loss of that frock coat and that pair of

nicely creased striped trousers distressed him no longer. Was it possible that the child he had secreted so long had at last broken out, and that the old John Pardoe, that bond-holding, cheque-endorsing animal, was no more? Was it possible that he had died, and that this was the glorious resurrection promised to the faithful? Mr. Pardoe's thoughts buzzed in his brain like a hive of bees when he remembered this little tailor-fellow's blasphemous claim to godhead.

Nothing more unlike Mr. Pardoe's conception of God can be imagined than the ruddy-faced mischievous creature who stood in the doorway of his house to welcome his guest. The house bore a striking resemblance to a country inn, the best kind of country inn, and Mr. Pardoe fell instantly in love with it. The sight of it induced in him a thirst such as he had never in all his life experienced before.

'You'd like to see my beard, I expect,' remarked his host, as they stepped across the threshold. 'Well, there it is.' He waved a careless hand towards the centre of the oak-raftered room, where, in a flower-pot that stood in the middle of the table, a grey beard flourished.

Mr. Pardoe scatched his head: sure proof

that he was feeling more at home. 'Now I can't quite place that,' he said, reverting to the idea that he was in a dream. 'The dancing shoes were from Hans Andersen, but this for the moment eludes me.'

'It's a good growth,' said the beard's owner. 'Never gives any trouble. Great advantage, not wearing it on the chin. Some of my clients don't care about a bearded tailor. And to those who do, I say: Step inside. A place for everything and everything in its place, and the place for my beard is the parlour. Very quiet and well-behaved, and drinks far less water than an aspidistra. If it sings too loud I just snip it down a bit with me scissors.'

'The Singing Beard,' mused Mr. Pardoe. 'That must be a public-house sign I've come across somewhere.'

'Now,' urged the genial tailor, 'what about a little refreshment. Or would you rather I set about that suit of clothes first?'

The eyes of the abandoned Pardoe sparkled. He visioned a wineglass, the size of a milking-pail, filled with champagne. He felt it against his lips, felt it slip down his dry throat, and sink into his innermost being like a benediction . . . He looked at his host with a little shamefaced smile. 'Well, if it's all the

same to you . . . if you'll excuse my rather unconventional appearance . . .'

'Come down to the cellar,' cried his friend, taking him by the arm, 'the Cellar of a Thousand Bottles.' Still gripping Mr. Pardoe, he stamped thirstily on the floor. A trapdoor opened. They shot into the cellar with lightning speed, and before he could remember his manners Mr. Pardoe was knocking the tops off bottles with a skill that in cooler moments would have astounded him.

'There you are!' cried the little tailor. 'Greenwich Time on every label. Look for our trademark and refuse imitations.' He drank copious draughts. He became confidential, even affectionate. 'Now that's the difference between you and me. Your name's Pardoe. That just shews the difference between you and me. Now my name's Dionysus,' he went on, with a radiant smile. 'It's a good name. And me father's name was Dionysus before me. But me grandfather—ah, that's another story.'

'And what, my little man, was your grandfather's name?' enquired Mr. Pardoe, waving his glass in air.

'Oh, me grandfather? Were you asking after me grandfather? Ah, *his* name, don't you see, was Dionysus. They distinguished

us one from the other by our trades. We were tailors, you know, all three of us.'

Mr. Pardoe rose to his feet. The performance was a credit to him. He made a last effort to exorcise the demon of levity that possessed him. 'My friend, you have had enough. More than enough. You are intoxicated.'

Dionysus paused in his drinking to fix a waggish eye on Mr. Pardoe. 'Drunk. Drunk as a god. Aren't you! Why the devil don't you drink? Imprison you for sobriety.'

He held a brimming glass to the lips of Mr. Pardoe, and, as he drank, the poor bewitched gentleman saw his host swell till the house could no longer contain that vast bulk. Himself a flame of exultation, Mr. Pardoe stared until the eyes of Dionysus became fierce seas, sparkling with unearthly light, towering in storm, and the glory of his sunset-face filled the sky.

3

'. . . eight.' The last stroke of eight o'clock. Mr. Pardoe, rubbing his eyes, saw that his wife's face still wore the expression of bored patience with which she was accustomed to receive his domestic sermons, and that Timothy, as before, balanced himself on one

leg and jerked his body backwards and forwards by way of passing time. They seemed to be waiting for him.

'What's this?' cried Mr. Pardoe, staring at the paper in his hand. He recognized *The Bondholder's Register*. An alarming idea visited him. 'Am I . . .?' He looked down at his legs, stroked his arms. Yes, he was. He breathed deeply in his relief. 'My dear, did you notice anything, anything unusual?'

Blank faces greeted him.

'Between the seventh and eighth stroke of the hour—did anything happen to me?'

His wife took a step towards him. Her eyes became anxious. 'No, dear. Are you feeling ill?'

'No, no. Perfectly well. Just a whim of mine. A mere fancy. Nothing at all. Nothing.'

'Oh, father!' said Timothy, for the fourth time, 'you *might* tell me a story.'

Mr. Pardoe turned to the boy with enthusiasm. He beamed paternal affection upon him. 'Yes, old man. Come along. A story before we go to bed, eh? . . . Once upon a time there was a tailor who lived in the forest and kept a beard, a grey beard, which sang pretty tunes. . . .'

THE MOLE

THE MOLE

CONVERSATION turned inevitably to the local tragedy that was agitating all the village. The little general store, the only shop the place boasted and a poor thing at that, had been burned down in the night, and nothing remained but the heap of ruins from which, not many hours since, two charred corpses had been removed. Our chessmen stood in battle array, ready for action, but unnoticed by either of us. Something in Saunders's manner held my attention. Sceptic though I am, I have always found him interesting. He pays me the compliment of divesting himself of his rectorship when he visits me, and it has flattered my vanity to believe that I see a side of him that is for ever hidden from those of his parishioners who assemble Sunday by Sunday to receive from him their spiritual ration. And I was the more intrigued because I divined depths in him still to be explored.

Perhaps I am over-fanciful, said Saunders, edging his chair nearer to the fire; but it

had always seemed to me that there was more in their marriage than the mere female domination so obvious to every one. And when poor Gubbins came to me last winter, with the story that I'm going to tell you, my guess was confirmed. Mrs. Gubbins wore the breeches—a vulgar phrase for a vulgar thing—but that wasn't all. I shall never forget my first visit to her shop. You've seen the woman scores of times, but I'll tell you the impression she made on me. Her face was leather ; her nose was pinched and pitiless ; her eyes—did you ever notice her eyes ? You'd expect her to possess the malignant dominating eyes of the shrew. No such thing. Mrs. Gubbins's eyes resembled those of a mask, or of a corpse : they were fixed, so it seemed to me, in a cold, everlasting, fishy scrutiny of a drab world. If they were the windows of her soul, they were windows made of frosted glass. Looking at them I seemed to see vacuity behind them. Looking again, I surmised a soul indeed, but a damned soul. A professional prejudice, perhaps, that you won't sympathize with. But it was not her eyes that most disturbed me. I have seen a variety of unpleasant eyes. But I have never seen on any human being so ugly a mole as was on that woman's chin. It was about the size of a pea, and growing from it

were three longish black whiskers. The thing looked positively feline. It became for me, as soon as I caught sight of it, her most significant feature. And that, too, proved a good guess.

I had gone to the shop ostensibly to buy a cake of soap, but really in the hope of catching a glimpse of a human soul, of two human souls. I had heard queer accounts of this couple, and I was curious.

'A cake of soap, please, Mrs. Gubbins.' I was then a stranger to her, as to all the village, but my use of her name evoked no sign of life in those glassy eyes of hers. She turned to her husband, that mild little man with dreaming eyes and a trim beard who looked just what he was, a lay preacher with a taste for fantastic prophecy. He was sitting at the back of the shop on a case of sugar, or something of the kind, engrossed in reading his pocket Bible.

'Run along,' said Mrs. Gubbins, in her flat expressionless voice. 'Soap, George! You know where it is!

The little man looked up with the air of one dragged unwillingly from a dream. In his small rabbit-eyes Christian patience did battle with resentment. I seemed to scent a crisis. Had the woman nagged him for his

idleness I couldn't have blamed her. But what interested me was not the rights and wrongs of the quarrel, but its method.

He blinked at her defiantly. There was a pregnant silence during which they stared at each other. Then the woman, protruding her chin, elongating her thin neck, bent a little towards him. I was dumbfounded with astonishment and a kind of morbid curiosity. For the moment it seemed to me that she must be mutely demanding a kiss in token of his submission ; but while I watched, fascinated out of my good manners, she lifted her hand slowly and placed her index finger upon the point of her chin. It flashed on me that she was directing his attention to that mole of hers.

Gubbins averted his eyes and slid off the seat. 'Yes, dear!' he muttered, and disappeared into the bowels of the shop.

2

Secrets of the confessional? Yes, in a sense. But Gubbins wouldn't grudge you the story now. It was during that phenomenally cold spell in November, fifteen months ago, that he came to me. That he came to me at all should tell you something of his anguish of

spirit, if you knew the man. Everybody knew him to be a deeply religious person, of the Bible-punching kind, but not everybody guessed how his particular conception of reality had eaten into his mind. He could prove to you by an elaborate system of Scriptural cross-references that the Day of Judgment was due to occur in the summer of 1950; and the geography of heaven was more familiar to him, and more concrete, than the chairs and tables in his own house or the streets of this village. Two-thirds of him lived among these precise humourless dreams of his, dreams that were the fruit not of mystical experience but of a laborious investigation, with rule and compass and a table of logarithms, extended over fifteen years. Two-thirds of him—that means he was more than a little unbalanced. He was a preposterous combination of arrogance and humility: we had many a friendly argument together, though the friendliness, I fancy, was rather on my side. Blandly certain of being the custodian of divine truth, he was yet pitifully dubious about his own chance of salvation and almost crazy in his forlorn pursuit of the love of God. Almost, but not quite: in the medical sense he was undoubtedly as sane as you or I. Me and all my kind he disliked because we receive payment for preaching

Christ. That is what makes his appeal to me so remarkable an event.

Well, he came to the Rectory and was admitted by the maid, loyal to her orders to exclude no one, but scared. I found him standing on my study hearthrug, his face ashen, his lean hairy hands clutching a cloth cap as though it were his only hold on safety. The white knuckles gleamed like polished ivory. I saw the fear that flared in his tiny eyes and guessed that he had come as a suppliant, that in some way his faith in himself was broken. And knowing of old the obstinate strength of that faith, I shuddered.

'In trouble, Mr. Gubbins?'

He appeared not to see my outstretched hand. 'I've had an escape from hell,' he squeaked. 'It's that damned monkey-spot, Mr. Saunders.'

The mild expletive, coming from Gubbins, astonished me no less than his statement. I asked him to sit down and tell me all about it, but he remained standing and his fingers twitched so violently that presently his cap fell to the ground unheeded. 'It nearly got me, sir, that monkey-spot.' A local expression, no doubt; but what did it mean? Gubbins saw at last that I didn't understand him. 'That

monkey-spot on her chin. My wife's chin. You must have seen it.'

Can you imagine two human beings, tied by marriage, devoting all their emotional energy to hating each other? Perhaps not; but that is, as near as I can tell it to you, the truth about the Gubbinses. Twenty years ago she was an unremarkable woman, and he no doubt a very ordinary youth. Mere propinquity, I imagine, threw them at each other. He, with little or nothing of the genuine affection that might have excused the act, took advantage of her, as the phrase is. Sin number one, the first link in the chain that was to bind him, the first grievance for her to cherish in her ungenerous heart. They were married three months before the birth of the child. It died within an hour. She chose to see in this event the punishment of the sin into which he, as she contended, had betrayed her. From that moment Gubbins was her thrall: not by virtue of love, or the legal tie, but by virtue of the hideous moral ascendancy that the woman had been cunning enough, and pitiless enough, to establish over him. Carefully she kept alive the memory of his offence. It was a whip ready to her hand. And when seeking for distraction from his domestic misery he turned to that intricate game of guesswork which was

for him religion, what he learned there of the significance of sin only served to increase his wretchedness.

He was evidently a man weak both in spirit and intelligence, or he would have realized at once that he was no more guilty than she was. But once she had succeeded in imposing her view upon him he could not shake it off. It remained, to poison his self-respect. Side by side with his conviction of unworthiness there grew up a hatred of the woman he was supposed to have wronged. And, being itself sinful, this very hatred provided a further occasion for remorse. It was a race between loathing and repentance, and loathing won. Never a personable woman, Mrs. Gubbins became daily more repellent, until at last the wretched husband found her mere presence a discomfort, like an ill-fitting shoe or a bad smell. In particular, he detested—as well he might—that mole on her chin with its three feline hairs. And she, fiendishly acute, found it all out. She caught his sidelong glances of distaste, and pondered them long ; and that distaste became another weapon to her hand. She accused him of harbouring cruel thoughts ; taunted him with first robbing her of youth and then despising her for lacking it ; flung out wild and baseless charges of infidelity. To

propitiate her he made the most fantastic concessions : allowed her to turn him out of the shop, and consented to do all the housework in her stead. It became patent to the world that she was master.

You'll ask why he was fool enough to put up with this treatment ? But, given his weakness, the explanation is credible enough. She attacked him at his most vulnerable point, his conscience. Religion, as he conceived it, taught him to submit to circumstances, not to master them. In his darkest hour he could still kneel at his bedside and say, 'Thy will, not mine, be done.' And he really believed for a while that God's will and Mrs. Gubbins's were in mystical accord, that she, in fine, was the rod with which, for his own soul's good, heaven was scourging him. To aid this grotesque delusion there was the spectacle of her formal piety. For she was a prayerful woman, scrupulous in her speech, and of unquestioned honesty in her commercial transactions.

If only he could have cursed her and stood by his words, she might have mended. But he, who believed he had unravelled the ultimate secrets of destiny, dared not pit his moral judgment against hers. He was ever ready to sit on the stool of repentance. A day came

when hatred rose to a frenzy in him. He cut short her complaints with an oath, poured out the gall of his heart upon her. She seemed quelled, and in his triumph he added a taunt, banal and indeed puerile : 'You whiskered old cat !' It was a fatal mistake. She stared at him mutely for a moment, no doubt in sheer astonishment. Then her eyes narrowed and something like a smile twisted her lips. 'Cat and mouse,' she remarked coldly. And—call the man a fool, if you like—that reply terrified Gubbins as nothing else could have done.

He had betrayed himself once more into the hands of the enemy. He had provided her with a new and a bitter grievance. Worst of all, she knew his secret, knew that his loathing centred on that monkey-spot of hers, as he called it. From that moment I imagine her cherishing that mole with the solicitude that Samson, had he been a wiser man, would have lavished upon his hair. It was the source and the instrument of her power. So far as I understood Gubbins, it was as much nausea as hatred that the thing inspired in him. His soul sickened at the sight of it. It became a poison, a torture. All this she knew and exulted in . . . Curious that an æsthetic sense, together with a weak stomach, should suffice to work a man's downfall.

And so I come back to that night of fear the events of which drove Gubbins, twenty hours later but still electric with terror, to the refuge of my study.

3

Saunders paused to relight his pipe. One disconcerting thing about the affair, he resumed after a while, is that in Gubbins's account of his wife I can discover no human qualities at all. I fancy he himself had begun to regard her as an agent, not of God this time, but of the devil. Characteristic of him to jump from one pole to the other. And that theological fantasia, his imagination, may have coloured everything. That is as it may be. I can only tell you what he told me.

You know how quickly some noxious weed will overrun a flower-bed. Well, something of the kind happened in the ill-disciplined mind of Gubbins. He was pitifully susceptible to suggestion. An idle fancy presented itself to him : 'Many a woman has been murdered for less than that monkey-spot.' And the fancy became a fear which walked with him night and day, a fear lest he should be betrayed by sheer force of suggestion into murdering his wife. You realize what that would mean :

it would mean damnation for his soul, or so he believed. The gallows had but few terrors for him. I think he would have welcomed death, could he have been sure of his salvation hereafter.

The seed was sown. The idea took root. And the more passionately he struggled against it, the more persistently his imagination envisaged the crime. At last one night, after a hundred sleepless hours, he reached the end of his tether.

He jumped noiselessly out of bed. Moonlight flooded the room, imparting a ghastly pallor to the face of the supine Mrs. Gubbins. In sleep she had something of the chill dignity of a corpse lying in state. The thin lips curled back a little on one side of the mouth, and in the gap gleamed a gold-crowned tooth, a tiny yellow fang. On the point of her chin was that at which the wretched man tried not to look : itself not very offensive, but rendered hideous by the three black jealously-guarded hairs depending from it. Gubbins swears that as he stood staring at his wife's face those hairs were moving to and fro like the long legs of a spider, or the antennæ of an insect seeking prey.

Having gazed long, he forced his fascinated eyes away, and padded across the room. The

door clicked, in spite of him, as he opened it. He experienced all the alarms of a guilty man. Yet his intention was innocent enough : it was even, in its grotesque fashion, comical. He had determined to shear this female Samson of her power by cutting off those three hairs.

But when he returned to the bedside, and stood again by the sleeping body of his wife, he was overcome by nausea. Distaste for the task paralysed his will. He felt as a sensitive man would feel if he were forced to crush a beetle with his naked finger. As an excuse for delay he began examining the instrument in his hand, which was a perfectly ordinary pair of household scissors having, as all scissors have, one sharp end and one blunted. The sharp end interested him most. He scrutinized its point and pressed it against the ball of his thumb ; and the thought flashed to him, as though the devil himself had whispered it : 'This is sharp enough—one thrust under the left ear.' He shuddered, recoiled from the idea, and burned with shame and fear for having ever had it. And, while still suffocating with the sense of his own guiltiness, there crept into his consciousness the nightmare conviction that he was being watched. He could not see his wife, his gaze being fixed on

the scissors, but he knew that she had opened her eyes.

Gubbins couldn't explain to me the horror of that moment. He merely bowed his head on my mantelpiece and closed his eyes as if to shut out an evil vision. For when, after an age of immobility and silence, he forced himself to look at the face on the bed, he saw the cruel lips curled in a smile of final triumph ; and even the opaque eyes seemed for once to shine. And what, for Gubbins, gave the last turn to the screw of terror was that the woman was not looking at him at all. Her gaze, full of evil beatitude, was fixed on the ceiling. For several minutes, minutes that throbbed with his agony, she neither moved nor spoke ; and at last, very slowly, she moved a little higher on to the pillow and, still smiling insanely, bared her throat for him to strike. Gubbins was convinced that she ardently desired him to stain his soul with her blood.

Well, as you know, he didn't murder her : not that time, at any rate. He escaped, as he said, from hell. But I think I would as soon go to hell as have to live through those last fifteen months of his. For now she had completed his enslavement ; now she had got his miserable little soul between her finger and thumb. Added to all her old grievances, those

daggers with which to stab at his conscience, she had another and a more sensational one : this terrible sin, this attempt upon her life. Spiritual blackmail prolonged for twenty years. No wonder he set fire to the place.

A SENSITIVE MAN

A SENSITIVE MAN

THE sight of Elsie's drawn face, that pallid mask of desolation, moved Wyvern to a self-pity that savoured exquisitely on the tongue. To watch suffering and to be unable to relieve it was a cruel experience. He hardly dared to conjecture how much she had suffered during the last few days of suspense while he, the only man in the world for her, had been trying to make up his mind on a matter affecting the destinies of three persons. He could not dislike Elsie: she had a certain fragile winsomeness and she was still, though her first bloom was gone, pathetically young. Everything she said tonight did but strengthen his conviction of her intellectual immaturity. Between his mind and hers there was a great gulf fixed. Now Marion—Marion was so different. That did not mean that he had no pity left for Elsie. Not at all. His heart was wrung for the one no less than for the other. That was his tragedy: he had a threefold burden. From

that point of view he had to admit himself the most luckless of the three.

'I know my little wife will understand. Her Jim has been quite frank with her.'

Elsie leaned forward, chin in hands, staring fixedly at distance. Only her extreme pallor showed her to be suffering. For the rest, her brow was knitted as though she concentrated all her power upon some problem that as yet baffled her.

'Yes, Jim, I understand. I understand that you're so much more sensitive than other men, and can't resist beauty. Your gift carries penalties with it, and acute susceptibility is one of them. But . . .'

He glowed in appreciation of her. She was really unique. 'Only one woman in a thousand could see that,' he said warmly. 'And my little wife is that one. She is the dearest . . .'

Elsie winced. 'I was going to say there's something I *can't* understand. I always thought you were the soul of honour, and you were once. Yet you were going away from me without a word of explanation.'

Sorrow looked out at her from his eloquent brown eyes. 'My dear Elsie, don't disappoint me. You've always been so understanding and helpful. How many men would have

confided to their wives all that I have confided to you about my love for Marion?'

'But, Jim!' She frowned again, struggling to believe the best of him. 'Jim, you didn't tell me anything until other people had begun to make scandal.' The idea hardened her. 'I don't believe you'd ever have told me. You would just have gone on deceiving us both.'

A gesture of impatience, and that was all. He did not give way to anger. 'My dear, I realize how hard it is for you to listen to the voice of reason in a crisis like this, but you will try, won't you? It all began in the most innocent, the most human way. I was overwhelmed by my compassion for the poor child—virtually imprisoned, as she is, with a husband she can't even respect, let alone love. And then the affection ripened. She stimulates me wonderfully. She is an inspiration, just the inspiration that I need. Our minds are so beautifully attuned.'

And still Elsie was not satisfied. 'You know I don't grudge you anything, Jim. It's the deceit that worries me. She ought to know about me. You ought not to take her under false pretences. It's not like you, Jim, to be content with a vulgar intrigue.'

'There is nothing vulgar in love.' He

softened the rebuke by taking her hand, which she instantly withdrew. 'And nothing guilty,' he added, with a note of sternness.

Her laugh was of a kind that could not but shock him. 'How clever you are at putting me in the wrong!' she remarked, when her bitter mirth had subsided. 'But I'm not wrong.' Emotion induced in her a vitality that made him almost admire her. 'I'm not sticking up for Respectability or any of the seven deadly virtues, as you call them. You dethroned these gods for me long ago. But there *is* something I believe in. I do believe in honour, and I hate a liar . . . You've deceived her as well as me.'

Wyvern sighed. It was sometimes hard to be patient with women. 'Elsie, why do you say things which you know to be untrue?' His tone was still gentle.

'Well, isn't it true?' she retorted. 'Have you told her about me? Have you explained that a man so many-sided as yourself needs the love of more than one woman? Have you told her that the human heart is capable of almost infinite expansion? You know you haven't.'

'I respect you too much,' he replied, cold with a new dignity, 'and I respect myself too much ever to discuss you with another

woman. I thought you understood me better, Elsie.'

The fire in her seemed to die down. Vitality vanished, leaving her limp and listless. She rose, a frail slip of a girl with colourless skin and a halo of light brown hair like a dim mist —items so negligible compared with the lilies and roses of Marion's robuster person, the flaming glory of her hair, the seductiveness of her brimming youth. Wyvern could not resist making a mental comparison even in this moment. He hated himself for making it, and he recorded it to his credit that he hated himself. It was so like him to be merciless to his own faults. He watched Elsie narrowly, from behind a curtain of cigarette smoke.

'Very well, Jim. I shan't stand in your way; you know that. To-morrow I'll go away somewhere. Good night.'

He was pained and yet elated. She would go away to-morrow. Fortunately she had plenty of friends and, thank heaven, he had long ago settled an adequate income upon her. He had nothing to reproach himself with. She would go away to-morrow. They would meet again—oh, frequently. They would always be friends. He felt more warmly towards her than he had done for months, and

yet he was dissatisfied. The victory he had won didn't seem so good to him as it had seemed in prospect. He shrank from the suspicion that he had, in some inexplicable way, sunk in her esteem. The idea was unbearable.

'We'll discuss that another time. You're not angry, darling?' he said. 'You see how inevitable it all is?'

With her hand on the door knob she turned to say: 'Yes, Jim. I'm not blaming you.' And she went out, closing the door softly behind her.

So that was all right. He smoked his cigarette out in something like peace of mind. Not perfect peace, however; the thought of losing something—even something for which he didn't care—was distasteful. Old associations would cling. It was an insufferable social order that pressed this cruel alternative on a sensitive man, ordaining that he must release one woman before he could take another. 'It's all so niggardly, niggardly!' said Wyvern, as he stepped out into the sweetness of that June evening. He felt the need, as he had never felt it before, of Nature's soothing touch, her sunset's balm for his eyes, the caress of her delicate breezes on his brow.

For the sake of the walk he set out in the

direction of his studio, a walk that would take him away from suburban houses into little lanes surrounded by open fields. There one could get close to Nature and to Beauty. He had often been grateful to his own foresight for having provided him with a studio not only separate from his residence but distant from it by many miles. Only in solitude, he murmured to himself, can the human spirit grow to its full stature ; and he knew that the rather recondite art whereby he supplemented, or failed to supplement, his substantial private income could never have flourished in the vicinity of Elsie, who was, when all was said, 'a dear little woman, but no artist.' In his studio he could work undistracted ; and once or twice, when the tide of his inspiration had been at the full, he had stayed there for several days, sleeping at nights upon a little canvas folding-bed. There was something Spartan about the practice that appealed to him. Elsie exhibited a suitable distress at these absences, but she encouraged his painting and applauded the results, though without revealing any real critical understanding of them. James Wyvern professed allegiance to no school, and to that fact attributed his failure to obtain recognition. He dealt too exclusively in subtleties to be able to please the multitude,

even the multitude of art-critics. It was his declared purpose to demonstrate by his work a familiar French aphorism : *La verité consiste dans les nuances*. 'The Boot Cupboard' and an unnamed picture representing amethyst-blue houses were perhaps his most successful productions. 'Representation, no. Symbolism, if you like. Representation is an artistic vice.' Yet he had his lapses and was deliciously conscious of them. 'My dear, I am daring. I am taking the gravest risk. What do you think—a ploughed field ! Positively a ploughed field ! The danger is simply colossal.' To his artist-friends he was in the habit of saying : 'Fundamentally, I suppose, I'm a novelist.' Just as, three years before, during his literary period, he had fended off praise by murmuring : 'I'm happiest, after all, with my palette and brush . . . Oh, that little box of paints ! '

Striding along between fragrant hedges, he luxuriated in the joy of the open air and in his new sense of freedom. Everything had been explained to Elsie, and she had taken it, on the whole, beautifully. He was really grateful to Elsie. And now he was a free man. 'Freedom, the deep breath ! ' he quoted in rapture. He was free now to rescue Marion, his imprisoned princess, from her dungeon of despair. He would take her away, far away. Away

from censorious England to the magic air and blue skies of Italy, where life should become an exquisite indolent dream. 'Ah yes,' he said. 'Como! Como shall be the *mise-en-scène*.'

Dreaming of Como, he entered the studio. 'What the devil——!' There she was, Marion herself, in his wicker-chair. 'My darling, *you*!' He was amazed to find her there, and amazed by the unearthly beauty of her. She rose to meet him, excited fear shining in her large eyes.

'Hullo, Jimmy! You won't be glad to see me.' How the deuce did she know that? 'John has found out about us. He made a scene. He's dangerous. I've fled the house.'

'Marion, what a wonderful girl you are! What a study in contrast—your fragrant English girlhood, and your exotic chintz dress!' He enfolded her in arms of solicitude. 'My dear, tell me it all.'

'That's all. People have been talking to him. He threatened me. So I came here.'

He could see her nostrils dilate and her breasts flutter in the intoxication of the danger. 'Like netted fish they leap,' he quoted to himself. Aloud he murmured: 'Darling, you came here. Yes, of course. But how . . .'

'Oh, I found out where it was and just came. There was a woman here——'

He was startled. 'A woman? . . . Oh, Mrs. Phillips, perhaps, the woman who cleans up.'

'Yes. I told her I was a friend of your wife's, and she let me stay. Cheek, wasn't it! Invented a wife for you. Just bluff, but it came off. . . . Do give me a cigarette.'

But this would never do. Here they were alone together, in a most compromising situation, while her husband—positively a dangerous fellow—raged round the countryside looking for her, perhaps with a pistol. At any moment——

'But, my darling girl, is it wise?'

With no sign of having heard the question, she rested her head on his shoulder. 'Darling Jimmy, what shall I do?'

It was surely the most beautiful moment of his life. He was touched almost to tears by her perfect trust in him. All her dewy freshness, all her passionate beauty, all her vital young womanhood, was his for the taking. He had but to say: 'Come with me now . . . Como!' and she would come. But was it wise to act so hastily? He plunged into a delirium of pleasurable emotion only to emerge with that question in his mind. With his lips clinging to hers he asked it. Was it wise?

They would go away sooner or later : that was inevitable ; but to go now, would it not be precipitate ? To take a woman from her husband was a serious matter, involving unexampled responsibility. He would be bound to her more surely than by any legal marriage. And the scandal, the hateful publicity, the dragging of one's name through the divorce courts—it was all so intolerable to a sensitive man. He would incur the enmity of many people, and he would lose Elsie. Elsie would divorce him, would perhaps forget him and re-marry . . .

He released Marion from that mad embrace.

'What am I to do, darling ?' she repeated.

'Let me think, dear,' he said, stroking his troubled brow. 'Let me think. Above all we must listen to the voice of reason. So much depends on this. Don't you think it would be best for you to go back ? Only for a while, of course.'

She stared as though he had spoken in an unknown tongue. 'Go back ? Go back to John ?'

'Only for a few weeks, darling, until I can see daylight, and make all arrangements.'

She stepped back from him a few paces, as if to survey him the better. Her eyes had

the surprised and stricken look of a child unaccountably hurt.

'I don't think I understand. Are you telling me to go back to my husband? *You*, are you telling me *that*?'

'My darling girl, don't you see . . .'

'Do you understand what that means? Go back to my husband who, when I last saw him, was raging like a beast. Go back to him and, if he doesn't kill me, be his woman.'

'Dear heart, for a few weeks only.'

She trembled violently for a moment, and then became rigid with scorn. 'I agree with you perfectly. I had better go.'

The door slammed behind her before Wyvern recovered his wits. He ran forward a few steps as if to pursue her . . . and stopped. 'My God, I shall never see her again!' He buried his face in his hands. 'Perfect harmony, complete understanding, all lost. That was the moment, the moment of my life, and I let it pass. Como . . . I shall never bear to look on Como again.' Painful as his sensations were, they were undeniably interesting. If ever he wrote a novel he would make that incident the pivot of the plot, the crisis, the turning-point. 'There is a tide in the affairs of men . . . By Jove there is!' Why had he not taken it at the flood? It was all

too sudden—no arrangements made, and a picture half-finished. Marion—he must forget Marion. Perhaps he had been mistaken in her. Her scorn for him had been so undeserved; he writhed at the recollection of it. He yearned now for some haven of refuge. Bruised and broken by life, his heart cried out for comfort. Ah, Elsie—she did not scorn him. A stab of fear lest the impossible had happened, lest he had alienated his wife's love, sent him flying out of the studio and on the road for home. Forsaken by both women, he would be homeless indeed, and with no balm for his wounds. What if it were his fate to be misunderstood again? He began rehearsing the speeches he would make to Elsie. He conjured up the scene: Elsie in her nightdress, sitting up in the rumpled bed, just disturbed out of sleep. Perhaps she would be a little cruel at first: women were like that. 'If my little wife is not kind to me now I shall go mad with the pain of it all.' At that she would relent, and weep upon his breast. And she would love him more dearly than ever for having been so near to losing him.

MISS LETTICE

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NEEDING some stakes for my new fruit trees, I called on Saunders, who knows everything, to ask him where they could be obtained. Saunders is something more than a rector : he is a shepherd of souls. He has an extraordinary capacity for listening, and listening, he tells me (without any irony), is the most important of his duties—far more important than preaching church doctrine Sunday by Sunday. This is fortunate, for in my belief Saunders's orthodoxy would not survive a very minute scrutiny. The villagers go to him with their most secret troubles, their most lurid sins, and come away with hearts eased, comforted by a platitude or two or by wordless sympathy. His mind must be quite a filing-cabinet of what are called human documents. With so much silent listening to do, perhaps he finds me as useful as I find him interesting ; for I am always willing, when he is with me, to keep my ears open and my mouth shut. He is a good talker but not a

garrulous one : it is the things he leaves unsaid, or half-unsaid, that interest me most in his discourse.

As I had expected, he put me at once in the way of getting my stakes. 'Bowers, of Yew Tree Farm, is the best man. He's a good fellow, Bowers. For your own soul's sake you'll have to keep an eye on his charges : they're generally much too low. Yew Tree Farm—you know the place ? It's not really a farm at all : it's a ramshackle wooden house standing by the side of a timber-yard. Near poor Miss Lettice's cottage.'

'Why do you call her poor ?' I asked. For Saunders was not in the habit of using that epithet without cause.

'Ah, haven't you heard ? She has been taken away, you know. You spend too much time among those books of yours, my friend. Why, it happened over a week ago. Pitiful affair. She lapsed suddenly into a kind of grotesque babyhood.'

I can never hear of such an event without shuddering. 'But she wasn't an aged woman !' Already one spoke of her in the past tense as of the dead.

'She was fifty-eight,' said Saunders ; and though genuinely shocked by the disaster I couldn't help being amused for a moment

by the exactness of his information—it was so characteristic of him that he knew the woman's age to a year. 'No,' he added, 'it wasn't the sort of thing that should happen in the ordinary course of nature.'

'She had some shock,' I suggested.

Saunders nodded. 'The most cruel shock.'

'And you no doubt were in her confidence,' I insinuated.

Observing the curiosity that I tried politely to dissemble, he looked at me for one silent moment and smiled. 'There's no reason why you shouldn't know. You're a discreet fellow, and if you weren't such a misguided heretic I could find it in my heart to like you. Well, the cause of Miss Lettice's collapse was a psychological phenomenon that has a very old-fashioned name.'

I waited for him to go on.

'A broken heart,' said Saunders. 'Miss Lettice is the victim of a hopeless passion.'

'A hopeless passion,' I protested, 'at fifty-eight!'

Saunders drew his left hand from his jacket pocket and with it a pouchful of tobacco, which he tossed into my lap. 'You're not in a hurry for ten minutes?'

I am never in a hurry when Saunders settles down into his chair with that air of pensive

reminiscence ; so, when we had both got our pipes going, he told me the story.

I

You are surprised (said Saunders) at being asked to associate Miss Lettice with the idea of passion, requited or unrequited. And, if you recall her small plump figure, and the nun-like pallor of the face that peered placidly from under her black bonnet, you will readily believe that hers was no ordinary passion. But it was passion : let there be no mistake about that ; I'm not going to fob off some remote mystical ecstasy upon you under that name. It's hard enough to credit that the heart of that staid, quaint, curtseying old spinster was aflame with a hunger that ultimately destroyed her, but the evidence is overwhelming. It is twofold, that evidence : there is the evidence of her words and the evidence of my own eyes.

My interest in Miss Lettice was first roused by a disquieting rumour that reached me, by a devious route, from a neighbour's wife who was employed by Miss Lettice to come in and do the rough housework for her. According to this rumour Miss Lettice was, for no stated reason, afraid of me. This puzzled me, as well it might, because at that time I didn't

even know who she was : if we had met in the street I could not have recognized her. But it was more than puzzling : it was distressing. I knew that if I were to be of any use to the parish at all, fear was the very last emotion I must inspire. I examined the few sermons I had preached, for there, I thought, since they were the only communications I had had with the lady, the solution of my problem must lie. I looked for unsound doctrine, or for traces of hell-fire, or for anything else that could have alarmed a timid soul ; and I found nothing. You must remember that I was new to the job, and totally without experience, and altogether too disposed to take trifles seriously. To-day I should soon find a summary method of dealing with such a situation, but at that time it baffled me. I accepted it for a while as a permanent minor discomfort.

I had promised myself to make friends, if I could, with every member of my congregation, and with as many others as I could contrive to visit—no small undertaking in this wilderness of scattered dwellings. Miss Lettice had to wait her turn, of course, but it was a point of honour with me that she should not have to wait beyond it. Nervous, but also curious, I knocked at her front door.

She received me, rather sternly, I thought,

but without discomposure. I was shewn into a tiny mottled room, which she called, I believe, the parlour. It was rather crowded by furniture, but the furniture itself was good and old and the mantelpiece was laden with less than the usual cottage assortment of bric-à-brac, though, of course, there was the inevitable lustreware glittering on each side of a marble clock, and, equally inevitable, a pair of china dogs. The pink beflowered walls were hung with very bad pictures, in the Marcus Stone tradition, most of them from Christmas annuals; but there was not a photograph to be seen anywhere. I remembered having heard Miss Lettice described as 'a real lady in reduced circumstances,' and I knew that she supplemented a tiny inherited income by giving music lessons.

For half an hour we talked of indifferent things, and I began to fear that I should never succeed in breaking through her armour of frigid politeness. But in those days I was an obstinate young mule and determined to get at the truth behind that rumour. At last she gave me my chance.

'You have been in the parish three months, have you not, Mr. Saunders?'

I chose to regard the remark as a challenge. 'Three very busy months,' I answered, loading

my words with all the weight they would carry.

'Too busy, I'm sure, to visit middle-aged nobodies,' she retorted. And then, taking sudden pity on my youthful confusion—I was nearly twenty years her junior—she smiled in a way that seemed to betoken forgiveness.

It was a smile almost maternal, and it emboldened me. 'Miss Lettice,' I said, smiling in return, 'why do you dislike me?' Placidly she shook her head. 'Then why *did* you dislike me? Oh, never mind how I know. Things soon get about in a little community like ours.'

She seemed startled. 'What do you know?' Her eyes narrowed to gimlet points. The abrupt change in her manner disconcerted me. 'What do you know?' she repeated defiantly, and, finding me silent, she flung another question at me, this time a veritable challenge: 'Do you know about my son?'

Her son! So that was the cause of all the misunderstanding. 'Nothing at all,' I assured her. 'Upon my word this is the first I've heard of him. Did you think . . .'

'Yes, I did. I thought you disapproved of me, as your predecessor did, or maybe

his wife. I thought you were never going to call.'

'But why,' I protested, 'why should I or anyone presume to disapprove of you?' And I wondered what travesty of religion had been current in this parish before my coming.

She looked unaccountably severe. 'I think you don't understand.'

'I think I do,' said I, with cheerful arrogance.

'Mr. Saunders, I am an unmarried woman, and I have a son.'

'Yes?' I said, simulating polite interest when in truth I was burning with curiosity. But if I hoped to win her sympathy by this unconventional attitude I was to be woefully disappointed. 'You don't seem to realize the gravity of what I tell you,' Miss Lettice rebuked me. 'It is mistaken kindness to treat a sin so lightly.'

'I want to be a friend to the parish, not a judge.' Priggish remarks rise readily to the lips of a young man such as I was then. 'Besides,' I added, 'if your son was a child of true love there was no worse a sin than indiscretion.'

But the confessed sinner would not hear of such wickedness. 'You, the vicar, to say a thing like that! That's not the kind of teaching we want in this parish. Why, I've

done penance all my life for that indiscretion, as you dare to call it. I forfeited marriage and sent my lover away. Not even for the child's sake would I condone our sin by marrying. And do you tell me that all my bitter repentance was unnecessary?'

What could I say? It would have been cruel to convince her that she had thrown away her happiness in sheer waste, sacrificed her life on the altar of a false god. I hadn't the heart to attempt it, so I fell back, I'm afraid, on Scriptural quotations, and left it at that. The familiar words seemed to comfort her and to reinstate me in her eyes as a moralist. None the less she was sufficiently assured of my sympathy to speak of her love, and as she spoke I began to wonder whether after all my pity had not been misplaced. Sin or no sin, the memory of her golden youth was dear to her. She was repentant enough, no doubt, when she remembered to be; but she did not live by morality alone. The woman in her still exulted, the woman's eyes still shone, in the knowledge that she had, however long ago, been found beautiful. 'We were very young,' she said, with disarming simplicity, 'and we loved each other very much. He was all the world to me.' Her cheeks flushed; her meagre bosom rose and fell tremulously—

and in that moment I saw her as she had been, young, fresh, adorable, alight with limitless ecstasy, the incarnation of a man's desire. The transfigurement endured only for a flash, and flickered away, leaving me desolated with the stabbing poignancy of life. From that to this, I thought, we must all pass. To hide my emotion I led the talk back to her son. 'And where is he now?' I asked. 'Does he often come to see you?'

She smiled wanly. 'He's all I've got. You see there's a place set for him. You'll take a cup of tea with us?'

The lid of the kettle that stood on the fire was already palpitating. Miss Lettice made the tea and enclosed the pot in a knitted cosy of green wool. For the next few minutes we exchanged only tea-table talk. But afterwards, when I made gestures of going, she confronted me wistfully, her eyes lit up once again. But this was a new light, and one more consonant with her years.

'Would you like to see his room?' she said, almost in a whisper.

I expressed eagerness, and she led me to the threshold of a room so tiny that it made one think of a monastic cell. It was just large enough to contain a small single bed, ready for use, a wash-stand, and a miniature dressing-

table. The furniture was all of childish dimensions. In the further corner, under the window, stood a cricket-bat. I glanced round with the vague smile of politeness. 'So this is Bernard's room. A snug little place. And I see it's all ready for his return.'

After a silence Miss Lettice sighed. 'He would have been eighteen this coming April,' she murmured.

I stared at her a moment in stupid wonder. 'He would have been . . . do you mean . . .?'

'He was stillborn,' she confessed, and her glance dropped before my stare. 'It was silly not to tell you at once. But Bernard's all I've got. He'd be a fine big fellow by now.'

To avoid those glistening eyes I turned away, only to encounter a sight but one degree less pitiful : Bernard's cricket-bat—symbol of lusty young manhood, white flannels, sunlit turf—which no cricketer's hand had ever grasped. What could I say or do ? I was angered as well as touched by the wanton sentimentality of that room, and having murmured words of conventional comfort I hurried back to the vicarage. Not until many hours had passed did I succeed in hustling away my mood of melancholy ; and as I entered my own bachelor bedroom I shuddered to hear, in imagination, the Good-night uttered by that

fond impossible woman to the ghost with whom she shared her home.

2

Saunders got out of his chair, as though the story were finished, and stood with his back to the fire warming the palms of his hands. There was a moment's silence, which I saw no reason for breaking, and then he began talking again. After that, he said, Miss Lettice and I were quite good friends. I became a constant and welcome visitor at her cottage: constant because her solitude was something of a pain to me, and welcome because she knew that to me she could talk about Bernard to her heart's content. And that, by Jove, was a privilege she lost no opportunity of exercising. How many times have I piously lied to that woman assuring her that my interest in her Bernard was insatiable ! Often, as you'll readily understand, I was bored beyond expression, though I never lost my sense of the grotesque pathos of her life. But I must be careful not to let you suppose that she was a mere monomaniac. She knew, as well as I did, that she was playing a game of make-believe : she was not the victim of any sort of delusion, and her obsession never became pathological or threatened to become so.

Things went on like this for ten years or so. She lived untroubled among her dreams until some few months ago. During the war Bernard led an existence even more shadowy than usual. Of course he enlisted, and was wounded, and won decorations for his valour ; and Miss Lettice, knitting socks for more substantial soldiers, continued to play her secret game by fancying that they would comfort the feet of her son. The change came, as I've said, not many months ago, and it shewed itself first of all in our conversations. From those conversations Bernard was painlessly excluded, and his place taken by a young man weighing twelve stone or more. You'll know the name well enough—Jack Turnbull, the stationmaster's son. Jack began to loom so large in the hopes and fears of Miss Lettice that I became uneasy, the more so because I had been the instrument of bringing them together. It was this way. During the latter part of the war, and ever since, Miss Lettice had found it increasingly difficult to manage on her extremely modest income, and music pupils were more in request than ever. I did what I could for her by dropping a recommendation here and there, and among others I enlisted the active sympathy of old Turnbull. Together we hatched a little conspiracy, the

upshot of which was that Jack, a big hulking fellow approaching thirty years, was fired with a sudden ambition to become an amateur pianist. Jack had done well in the army, and finding himself in mufti again, at a loose end, and with a captain's gratuity standing to his credit at Cox's, he lent himself very readily to the amiable fraud. His three hours tuition a week was very useful to Miss Lettice ; but it proved her undoing. For now we come to the hopeless passion I spoke of. And I needn't stop to assure you that there's nothing scandalous in this tragic affair. Miss Lettice fell in love with Jack, but the love she yearned to lavish on him was maternal love. If you think me perverse in calling that love a hopeless passion I must disagree with you. It was passion, and it was, in part, physical passion, as all human love must be. Why do we shrink from admitting that maternal love is as deeply rooted in the body as any other ? Miss Lettice loved Jack Turnbull for his strength, his masculinity, his youth, and because, by a fatal coincidence, he was born in the same month of the same year as her Bernard. In a sense it was the calendar that killed the Miss Lettice we knew and set in her stead a witless child. No doubt Jack seemed to her a gift from God, a wonderful consolation prize, a token

of the heavenly forgiveness. Indeed she told me as much when, with the air of imparting to me her dearest secret, she said that Jack was coming to lodge with her. She had bought some pretty things for his bedroom, worked ornamental bolster-slips with her own fingers, and replaced the dressing-table by a chest of drawers dragged in from her own room. I hardly dared to hint my misgiving. 'Are you quite sure he is coming?' I ventured. 'I fancied he would soon be looking out for a job. Young men can't remain idle for long nowadays, you know.' But she wouldn't hear of my doubts. Jack would get work at the station under his father. He hadn't exactly promised to come to her, but she had urged it and she knew he would humour an old woman.

I was by no means so sure, and I made up my mind to tackle Master Jack at the earliest possible moment. I called at his father's house and left a message asking him to make a point, if he could, of calling at the vicarage. He came the same evening. 'Well, Turnbull,' I said. 'I hear you're thinking of changing your quarters?'

He looked as guilty and uncomfortable as though I had surprised him with his hand in somebody's till. 'Has it got round already?

Why, I've told no one outside the family. Why can't people hold their tongues!'

'My dear fellow,' I said. 'I'm sorry if I've annoyed you. But I really don't see why you should be so secretive about it. And it wasn't your father who told me.'

'Who was it?' He spoke curtly. Four years as an infantry officer hadn't improved his manners.

'It was Miss Lettice herself.'

I have never seen a man more astonished. 'Miss Lettice! Miss Lettice told you! Damn it, sir, she doesn't know!' After a moment's stupefied silence he added, with an air of apology, 'But perhaps we're at cross-purposes. What was it that Miss Lettice told you?'

'Only that you're going to lodge in her house. Nothing to get excited about.'

He began striding about the room. 'We are certainly at cross-purposes all right. I thought you meant Canada. I'm leaving next week for Canada.'

'For a holiday?' I ineptly inquired.

'For keeps,' said Jack. 'Mounted Police, with a commission soon, I hope. This country's gone to the dogs, sir.'

Here was a pretty mess! 'But look here, Turnbull, Miss Lettice has got it into her head

that you're going there as a lodger. Have you given her any cause to believe such stuff?'

At that the swagger dropped off him. 'That woman, I'm sorry for her, but she gets on my nerves. She gushes too much for my taste. She wants to mother me, if you ever heard such rot. And I won't be mothered.'

'That's all very well,' I cut in. 'But why say this to me? Miss Lettice is the person you should complain to. Are you content to let her go on living in a fool's paradise?'

Well, you can pretty well guess how the conversation proceeded. We argued for the best part of three hours. Jack was determined not to yield to her devouring maternal affection, but he hadn't pluck enough to tell her so outright. He preferred to save his own feelings by equivocation. The coward does it with a kiss, you know, the brave man with the sword. But I must do him the justice to admit that, short of brutal explicitness, he did all he could to disabuse her mind of its fond fiction. I was aghast when I realized that the secret of his departure was being kept solely in order that he might slip out of the country without bidding her good-bye. After long battle I wrung from him a reluctant promise that he would spare her that culminating cruelty.

And that is the end of the story. I too was a coward, for I did not dare to visit Miss Lettice until Jack had gone. In point of fact I watched him off the premises and then stepped in, unwillingly enough but hoping to afford the wretched woman some comfort, if only the comfort of distraction. The front door yielded to my push : it was seldom locked. I tapped at the door of the sitting-room. There was no sound from within. Gently I turned the handle and looked in.

'Good morning, Miss Lettice,' I said, with a cheerfulness that was idiotic, I dare say, but what was one to do ?

Miss Lettice sat staring at the wall in front of her, staring fixedly, motionless. Whether she heard my voice or not I don't know, but she neither moved nor spoke. I became very anxious and called to her again, offering such dry crumbs of comfort as came to hand. 'Don't grieve, my dear Miss Lettice. There's still Bernard left to you.' Something of that sort I said to her, but it made no difference at all. She was struck down, struck worse than dead, by the colossal and cruel power of love. And while I continued to stare at her with pity and horror, she slowly turned towards me, as though on a swivel, a face marred out of recognition by a smile. . . .

Saunders winced. His lips had hesitated in releasing those last words. Lifting one hand to his eyes, he turned away from me towards his bookshelves. There, with a book in his hand, he shrugged his shoulders as if to shake off the grip of a memory.

'If it's standard trees you're having,' he remarked, 'you'll want light six-feet stakes. Bowers is your man.'

WEDDING-DAY

WEDDING-DAY. It was curiously unreal. His own face grimaced back at him as he struggled to adjust his tie, a face that no man could feel satisfied with. 'I sometimes wish Uncle Edgar hadn't died after all,' he confided to the looking-glass. Round and pink, with a wisp of light brown moustache that didn't seem to belong to it, that ghost of himself continued to agonize. Funny, what women could see to admire in men. As for Florrie's devotion to himself, the unreasonableness of it, the obstinacy, positively vexed him. If it hadn't been for that little legacy they would have had to wait another five years. Not that he wanted to wait, but still—five years was five years, time to turn round in. That fifty pounds a year had made just the difference; it had brought this day within his immediate reach; his heart's desire, glowing like luminous fruit upon an inaccessible tree, had bent suddenly towards him, and his hand was already poised to grasp it. Fateful moment.

It didn't bear thinking about. The old man ought not to have sprung it on him like this.

'Cheer-O, Bert!' There was a bang upon the bedroom door, and before it could be answered the attacking force entered tumultuously. It was a large red-headed man, dressed unmistakably for the approaching ceremony, tall, clean-shaven, possessing hands a size too big for his body.

'Hullo, elephant!' He resented the fellow's entry, and yet in some vague way he was glad of it. He wanted to be alone with his dreams, but he feared to be alone with his doubts. Well, in a few hours solitude would be a thing of the past indeed. Florrie and he would be together, sleeping and waking, in sickness and in health, till death them did part. Forty years, perhaps, and never alone. Breakfast with Florrie, the eight-thirteen to town, the six-five back, a late tea with Florrie, conversation with Florrie, supper with Florrie; and week-ends spent going to church or digging in the garden. There was no escape now. Escape! Who wanted to escape? Not he, anyhow. And that was fortunate, for here was Maurice, the jubilant best man, and Florrie's brother to boot. No escape.

'You'd better pull your socks up, old feller,' said Maurice, his face bisected by a

grin. 'You haven't got as much time to spare as you seem to think. Cab's at the door.'

It was fortunate, he knew, that the tide of events was sweeping him along, or he would have stood for ever staring at himself in a dream of indecision. Yet he hated to be bustled. He was still a free man, and there leapt to life in him a spark of anger against the man who sought to wrest that freedom from his grasp before the hour had struck. It would strike soon enough, but until then . . . it seemed suddenly necessary that he should assert his independence of Maurice. His toilet was already completed, but he would delay a while yet.

'All right. I won't keep you a minute.' He spoke with an affected coolness, as though addressing an importunate commercial traveller. And, without haste, he picked up from the dressing-table a small pair of nail-scissors. With these he began cutting off his moustache.

'Hullo, what's the game?' asked Maurice.

'Time that thing came off,' replied Bert, still plying the scissors. 'Pour me out a spot of water for shaving, there's a good chap . . . No, cold'll do.'

The world without was ablaze with summer, a beacon in the grey waste of infinity, a fire-ball flung into the darkness. The sky flamed beauty down upon the responsive pavements. But he, stubbornly, remained shut in his cold introspection. It was as if he alone of all created things was able to resist the infection of gladness that the warm air held. Forty years, forty years. The dailyness of life terrified him. The amiable Maurice became for him the symbol of all-conquering circumstance.

It was a new Florrie who joined him at the altar, a Florrie veiled, mysterious, and therefore seductive. 'Therefore' was the word stressed by the devil in his brain. But she was undeniably pretty, and so fragile, so like a piece of exquisite china, that he held his breath in awe when she yielded her hand to his. This was the lovely ingenuous child that life, day by day, year by year, would bend and break, and finally cast aside. His was to be the dubious privilege of watching that process, of watching the hair go grey, the face wrinkle, the child-dreams die one by one. His heart beat with a profound pity. Poor little devil, they were both in the same boat. She too was swearing her freedom away, taking the veil of everlasting monotony. And, irrationally, he blamed not

himself, not her, but the officiating clergyman, the guests, and most of all that fellow Maurice. He was glad that he had not allowed himself to be bustled by Maurice, glad to feel that soreness of the upper lip which bore witness to his not having been bustled.

The clergyman at whose feet he knelt was tactfully gabbling words about the procreation of children. Some one in the pews behind was sniffing tearfully. That would be Florrie's mother, no doubt, that angular female version of Maurice. He became almost bemused by the drowsy noises, like bees in a bottle, emitted by the priest. The sunlight, pouring through the stained-glass window, cast a luminous many-coloured pattern across the chancel floor. The colours entered him—his eyes, his nostrils, his very veins—and made his blood tingle in tune with their brightness. A faint purple, like wine stains ; a rich yellow, like harvested corn—they rang their little bell-melodies in his consciousness till he lost count of time.

'And I hope you'll be very happy. Now we'll go to the vestry.'

With Florrie clinging to his arm he went to the vestry ; and there a swarm of relations, like honey-seeking bees, descended upon them. 'Florrie, you look too sweet !' 'Bert, you dear old thing !' And so on.

Florrie's younger brother approached, fresh from school. 'Gratters, old horse. She's a good girl. I've trained her well. But what's happened to the cricket teams?'

'The what?'

'Cricket teams. Eleven a side, you know.'

Florrie translated. 'He means your moustache, Bert. Why did you shave it off? I wish you hadn't.'

He experienced a pang of compunction. Curse it, why had he shaved it off? 'Oh, I don't know. Thought I'd feel freer without it.'

Maurice, the omnipotent Maurice, bore down on them. 'Off we go!' he said briskly. Why was he always in such a devil of a hurry? Bert and his bride began marching down the aisle. He wanted to dance: not with joy, but because it was so difficult to walk against the tempo of Mendelssohn's Wedding March.

Outside, the world still blazed. And a hundred eyes stared. He handed Florrie into the waiting cab, and leaped in after her, with grains of rice trickling down his back. Maurice, the gaoler, shut the door behind them, and then, with incredible agility, thrust his head through the open window-space, elongated his neck, and kissed his sister on

the cheek. 'Best of luck, both.' He withdrew. The taxi moved on, gobbling like a turkey. 'I'm glad I had that shave,' said Bert viciously. The forty years began.

DEARTH'S FARM

DEARTH'S FARM

IT is really not far : our fast train does it in eighty minutes. But so sequestered is the little valley in which I have made my solitary home that I never go to town without the delicious sensation of poising my hand over a lucky-bag full of old memories. In the train I amuse myself by summoning up some of those ghosts of the past, a past not distant but sufficiently remote in atmosphere from my present to be invested with a certain sentimental glamour. 'Perhaps I shall meet you—or you.' But never yet have I succeeded in guessing what London held up her sleeve for me. She has that happiest of tricks—without which paradise will be dull indeed—the trick of surprise. In London, if in no other place, it is the unexpected that happens. For me Fleet Street is the scene *par excellence* of these adventurous encounters, and it was in Fleet Street, three months ago, that I ran across Bailey, of Queens', whom I hadn't seen for five years. Bailey is not his name, nor Queens'

his college, but these names will serve to reveal what is germane to my purpose and to conceal the rest.

His recognition of me was instant ; mine of him more slow. He told me his name twice ; we stared at each other, and I struggled to disguise the blankness of my memory. The situation became awkward. I was the more embarrassed because I feared lest he should too odiously misinterpret my non-recognition of him, for the man was shabby and unshaven enough to be suspicious of an intentional slight. Bailey, Bailey . . . now who the devil was Bailey ? And then, when he had already made a gesture of moving on, memory stirred to activity.

'Of course, I remember. Bailey. Theosophy. You used to talk to me about theosophy, didn't you ? I remember perfectly now.' I glanced at my watch. 'If you're not busy let's go and have tea somewhere.'

He smiled, with a hint of irony in his eyes, as he answered : 'I'm not busy.' I received the uncomfortable impression that he was hungry and with no ordinary hunger, and the idea kept me silent, like an awkward schoolboy, while we walked together to a tea-shop that I knew.

Seated on opposite sides of the tea-table we

took stock of each other. He was thin, and his hair greying; his complexion had a soiled unhealthy appearance; the cheeks had sunk in a little, throwing into prominence the high cheekbones above which his sensitive eyes glittered with a new light, a light not of heaven. Compared with the Bailey I now remembered so well, a rather sleek young man with an almost feline love of luxury blossoming like a tropical plant in the exotic atmosphere of his Cambridge rooms, compared with that man this was but a pale wraith. In those days he had been a flaming personality, suited well—too well, for my plain taste—to the highly-coloured orientalism that he affected in his mural decorations. And co-existent in him with this lust for soft cushions and chromatic orgies, which repelled me, there was an imagination that attracted me: an imagination delighting in highly-coloured metaphysical theories of the universe. These theories, which were as fantastic as *The Arabian Nights* and perhaps as unreal, proved his academic undoing: he came down badly in his Tripos, and had to leave without a degree. Many a man has done that and yet prospered, but Bailey, it was apparent, hadn't prospered. I made the conventional inquiries, adding, 'It must be six or seven years since we met last.'

'More than that,' said Bailey morosely, and lapsed into silence. 'Look here,' he burst out suddenly, 'I'm going to behave like a cad. I'm going to ask you to lend me a pound note. And don't expect it back in a hurry.'

We both winced a little as the note changed hands. 'You've had bad luck,' I remarked, without, I hope, a hint of pity in my voice. 'What's wrong?'

He eyed me over the rim of his teacup. 'I look a lot older to you, I expect?'

'You don't look very fit,' I conceded.

'No, I don't.' His cup came down with a nervous slam upon the saucer. 'Going grey, too, aren't I?' I was forced to nod agreement. 'Yet, do you know, a month ago there wasn't a grey hair in my head. You write stories, don't you? I saw your name somewhere. I wonder if you could write my story. You may get your money back after all . . . By God, that would be funny, wouldn't it!'

I couldn't see the joke, but I was curious about his story. And after we had lit our cigarettes he told it to me, to the accompaniment of a driving storm of rain that tapped like a thousand idiot fingers upon the plate-glass windows of the shop.

2

A few weeks ago, said Bailey, I was staying at the house of a cousin of mine. I never liked the woman, but I wanted free board and lodging, and hunger soon blunts the edge of one's delicacy. She's at least ten years my senior, and all I could remember of her was that she had bullied me when I was a child into learning to read. Ten years ago she married a man named Dearth—James Dearth, the resident owner of a smallish farm in Norfolk, not far from the coast. All her relatives opposed the marriage. Relatives always do. If people waited for the approval of relatives before marrying, the world would be depopulated in a generation. This time it was religion. My cousin's people were primitive and methodical in their religion, as the name of their sect confessed; whereas Dearth professed a universal toleration that they thought could only be a cloak for indifference. I have my own opinion about that, but it doesn't matter now. When I met the man I forgot all about religion: I was simply repelled by the notion of any woman marrying so odd a being. Rather small in build, he possessed the longest and narrowest face I have ever seen on a man of his size. His eyes were set exceptionally wide apart, and the nose, cul-

minating in large nostrils, made so slight an angle with the rest of the face that seen in profile it was scarcely human. Perhaps I exaggerate a little, but I know no other way of explaining the peculiar revulsion he inspired in me. He met me at the station in his dog-cart, and wheezed a greeting at me. 'You're Mr. Bailey, aren't you? I hope you've had an agreeable journey. Monica will be delighted.' This seemed friendly enough, and my host's conversation during that eight-mile drive did much to make me forget my first distaste of his person. He was evidently a man of wide reading, and he had a habit of polite deference that was extremely flattering, especially to me who had had more than my share of the other thing. I was cashiered during the war, you know. Never mind why. Whenever he laughed, which was not seldom, he exhibited a mouthful of very large regular teeth.

Dearth's Farm, to give it the local name, is a place with a personality of its own. Perhaps every place has that. Sometimes I fancy that the earth itself is a personality, or a community of souls locked fast in a dream from which at any moment they may awake, like volcanos, into violent action. Anyhow Dearth's Farm struck me as being peculiarly

personal, because I found it impossible not to regard its climatic changes as changes of mood. You remember my theory that chemical action is only psychical action seen from without? Well, I'm inclined to think in just the same way of every manifestation of natural energy. But you don't want to hear about my fancies. The farmhouse, which is approached by a narrow winding lane from the main road, stands high up in a kind of shallow basin of land, a few acres ploughed but mostly grass. The countryside has a gentle prettiness more characteristic of the south-eastern counties. On three sides wooded hills slope gradually to the horizon; on the fourth side grassland rises a little for twenty yards and then curves abruptly down. To look through the windows that give out upon this fourth side is to have the sensation of being on the edge of a steep cliff, or at the end of the world. On a still day, when the sun is shining, the place has a languid beauty, an afternoon atmosphere. You remember Tennyson's Lotus Isles, 'in which it seemed always afternoon': Dearth's Farm has something of that flavour on a still day. But such days are rare; the two or three I experienced shine like jewels in the memory. Most often that stretch of fifty or sixty acres is a gathering-

ground for all the bleak winds of the earth. They seem to come simultaneously from the land and from the sea, which is six miles away, and they swirl round in that shallow basin of earth, as I have called it, like maddened devils seeking escape from a trap. When the storms were at their worst I used to feel as though I were perched insecurely on a gigantic saucer held a hundred miles above the earth. But I am not a courageous person. Monica, my cousin, found no fault with the winds. She had other fears, and I had not been with her three days before she began to confide them to me. Her overtures were as surprising as they were unwelcome, for that she was not a confiding person by nature I was certain. Her manners were reserved to the point of diffidence, and we had nothing in common save a detestation of the family from which we had both sprung. I suppose you will want to know something of her looks. She was a tall, full-figured woman, handsome for her years, with jet black hair, a sensitive face, and a complexion almost Southern in its dark colouring. I love beauty and I found pleasure in her mere presence, which did something to lighten for me the gloom that pervaded the house ; but my pleasure was innocent enough, and Dearth's watchdog airs only amused me.

Monica's eyes—unfathomable pools—seemed troubled whenever they rested on me : whether by fear or by some other emotion I didn't at first know.

She chose her moment well, coming to me when Dearth was out of the house, looking after his men, and I, pleading a headache, had refused to accompany him. The malady was purely fictitious, but I was bored with the fellow's company, and sick of being dragged at his heels like a dog for no better reason than his too evident jealousy afforded.

'I want to ask a kindness of you,' she said. 'Will you promise to answer me quite frankly ?' I wondered what the deuce was coming, but I promised, seeing no way out of it. 'I want you to tell me,' she went on, 'whether you see anything queer about me, about my behaviour ? Do I say or do anything that seems to you odd ?'

Her perturbation was so great that I smiled to hide my perception of it. I answered jocularly : 'Nothing at all odd, my dear Monica, except this question of yours. What makes you ask it ?'

But she was not to be shaken so easily out of her fears, whatever they were. 'And do you find nothing strange about this household either ?'

'Nothing strange at all,' I assured her. 'Your marriage is an unhappy one, but so are thousands of others. Nothing strange about that.'

'What about him?' she said. And her eyes seemed to probe for an answer.

I shrugged my shoulders. 'Are you asking for my opinion of your husband? A delicate thing to discuss.'

'We're speaking in confidence, aren't we!' She spoke impatiently, waving my politeness away.

'Well, since you ask, I don't like him. I don't like his face: it's a parody on mankind. And I can't understand why you threw yourself away on him.'

She was eager to explain. 'He wasn't always like this. He was a gifted man, with brains and an imagination. He still is, for all I know. You spoke of his face—now how would you describe his face, in one word?'

I couldn't help being tickled by the comedy of the situation: a man and a woman sitting in solemn conclave seeking a word by which to describe another man's face, and that man her husband. But her air of tragedy, though I thought it ridiculous, sobered me. I pondered her question for a while, recalling to

my mind's eye the long narrow physiognomy and the large teeth of Dearth.

At last I ventured the word I had tried to avoid. 'Equine,' I suggested.

'Ah!' There was a world of relief in her voice. 'You've seen it too.'

She told me a queer tale. Dearth, it appears, had a love and understanding of horses that was quite unparalleled. His wife too had loved horses and it had once pleased her to see her husband's astonishing power over the creatures, a power which he exercised always for their good. But his benefactions to the equine race were made at a hideous cost to himself of which he was utterly unaware. Monica's theory was too fantastic even for me to swallow, and I, as you know, have a good stomach for fantasy. You will have already guessed what it was. Dearth was growing, by a process too gradual and subtle for perception, into the likeness of the horses with whom he had so complete sympathy. This was Mrs. Dearth's notion of what was happening to her husband. And she pointed out something significant that had escaped my notice. She pointed out that the difference between him and the next man was not altogether, or even mainly, a physical difference. In effect she said: 'If you scrutinize the features more

carefully, you will find them to be far less extraordinary than you now suppose. The poison is not in his features. It is in the psychical atmosphere he carries about with him : something which infects you with the idea of horse and makes you impose that idea on his appearance, magnifying his facial peculiarities.' Just now I mentioned that in the early days of her marriage Monica had shared this love of horses. Later, of course, she came to detest them only one degree less than she detested her husband. That is saying much. Only a few months before my visit matters had come to a crisis between the two. Without giving any definite reason, she had confessed, under pressure, that he was unspeakably offensive to her ; and since then they had met only at meals and always reluctantly. She shuddered to recall that interview, and I shuddered to imagine it. I was no longer surprised that she had begun to entertain doubts of her own sanity.

But this wasn't the worst. The worst was Dandy, the white horse. I found it difficult to understand why a white horse should alarm her, and I began to suspect that the nervous strain she had undergone was making her inclined to magnify trifles. 'It's his favourite horse,' she said. 'That's as much as saying

that he dotes on it to a degree that is unhuman. It never does any work. It just roams the fields by day, and at night sleeps in the stable.' Even this didn't, to my mind, seem a very terrible indictment. If the man were mad on horses, what more natural than this petting of a particular favourite?—a fine animal, too, as Monica herself admitted. 'Roams the fields,' cried my poor cousin urgently. 'Or did until these last few weeks. Lately it has been kept in its stable, day in, day out, eating its head off and working up energy enough to kill us all.' This sounded to me like the language of hysteria, but I waited for what was to follow. 'The day you came, did you notice how pale I looked? I had had a fright. As I was crossing the yard with a pail of separated milk for the calves, that beast broke loose from the stable and sprang at me. Yes, Dandy. He was in a fury. His eyes burned with ferocity. I dodged him by a miracle, dropped the pail, and ran back to the house shrieking for help. When I entered the living-room my husband feigned to be waking out of sleep. He didn't seem interested in my story, and I'm convinced that he had planned the whole thing.' It was past my understanding how Dearth could have made his horse spring out of his stable and make a murderous attack upon a

particular woman, and I said so. 'You don't know him yet,' retorted Monica. 'And you don't know Dandy. Go and look at the beast. Go now, while James is out.'

The farmyard, with its pool of water covered in green slime, its manure and sodden straw, and its smell of pigs, was a place that seldom failed to offend me. But on this occasion I picked my way across the cobblestones thinking of nothing at all but the homicidal horse that I was about to spy upon. I have said before that I'm not a courageous man, and you'll understand that I stepped warily as I neared the stable. I saw that the lower of the two doors was made fast and with the more confidence unlatched the other.

I peered in. The great horse stood, bolt upright but apparently in a profound sleep. It was indeed a fine creature, with no spot or shadow, as far as I could discern, to mar its glossy whiteness. I stood there staring and brooding for several minutes, wondering if both Monica and I were the victims of some astounding hallucination. I had no fear at all of Dandy, after having seen him; and it didn't alarm me when, presently, his frame quivered, his eyes opened, and he turned to look at me. But as I looked into his eyes an indefinable fear possessed me. The horse

stared dumbly for a moment, and his nostrils dilated. Although I half-expected him to tear his head out of the halter and prance round upon me, I could not move. I stared, and as I stared, the horse's lips moved back from the teeth in a grin, unmistakably a grin, of malign intelligence. The gesture vividly recalled Dearth to my mind. I had described him as equine, and if proof of the word's aptness were needed, Dandy had supplied that proof.

'He's come back,' Monica murmured to me, on my return to the house. 'Ill, I think. He's gone to lie down. Have you seen Dandy?'

'Yes. And I hope not to see him again.'

But I was to see him again, twice again. The first time was that same night, from my bedroom window. Both my bedroom and my cousin's looked out upon that grassy hill of which I spoke. It rose from a few yards until almost level with the second storey of the house and then abruptly curved away. Somewhere about midnight, feeling restless and troubled by my thoughts, I got out of bed and went to the window to take an airing.

I was not the only restless creature that night. Standing not twenty yards away, with the sky for background, was a great horse. The moon-

light made its white flank gleam like silver, and lit up the eyes that stared fixedly at my window.

3

For sixteen days and nights we lived, Monica and I, in the presence of this fear, a fear none the less real for being non-susceptible to definition. The climax came suddenly, without any sort of warning, unless Dearth's idiotic hostility towards myself could be regarded as a warning. The utterly unfounded idea that I was making love to his wife had taken root in the man's mind, and every day his manner to me became more openly vindictive. This was the cue for my departure, with warm thanks for my delightful holiday ; but I didn't choose to take it. I wasn't exactly in love with Monica, but she was my comrade in danger and I was reluctant to leave her to face her nightmare terrors alone.

The most cheerful room in that house was the kitchen, with its red-tiled floor, its oak rafters, and its great open fireplace. And when in the evenings the lamp was lit and we sat there, listening in comfort to the everlasting gale that raged round the house, I could almost have imagined myself happy, had

it not been for the presence of my reluctant host. He was a skeleton at a feast, if you like! By God, we were a genial party. From seven o'clock to ten we would sit there, the three of us, fencing off silence with the most pitiful of small talk. On this particular night I had been chaffing him gently, though with intention, about his fancy for keeping a loaded rifle hanging over the kitchen mantelpiece; but at last I sickened of the pastime, and the conversation, which had been sustained only by my efforts, lapsed. I stared at the red embers in the grate, stealing a glance now and again at Monica to see how she was enduring the discomfort of such a silence. The cheap alarum clock ticked loudly, in the way that cheap alarum clocks have. When I looked again at Dearth he appeared to have fallen asleep. I say 'appeared,' for I instantly suspected him of shamming sleep in order to catch us out. I knew that he believed us to be in love with each other, and his total lack of evidence must have occasioned him hours of useless fury. I suspected him of the most melodramatic intentions: of hoping to see a caress pass between us that would justify him in making a scene. In that scene, as I figured it, the gun over the mantelpiece might play an important part. I don't like loaded guns

The sight of his closed lids exasperated me into a bitter speech designed for him to overhear. 'Monica, your husband is asleep. He is asleep only in order that he may wake at the chosen moment and pour out the contents of his vulgar little mind upon our heads.'

This tirade astonished her, as well it might. She glanced up, first at me, then at her husband ; and upon him her eyes remained fixed. 'He's not asleep,' she said, rising slowly out of her chair.

'I know he's not,' I replied.

By now she was at his side, bending over him. 'No,' she remarked coolly. 'He's dead.'

At those words the wind outside redoubled its fury, and it seemed as though all the anguish of the world was in its wail. The spirit of Dearth's Farm was crying aloud in a frenzy that shook the house, making all the windows rattle. I shuddered to my feet. And in the moment of my rising the wail died away, and in the lull I heard outside the window a sudden sound of feet, of pawing, horse's feet. My horror found vent in a sort of desperate mirth.

'No, not dead. James Dearth doesn't die so easily.'

Shocked by my levity, she pointed mutely

to the body in the chair. But a wild idea possessed me, and I knew that my wild idea was the truth. 'Yes,' I said, 'that may be dead as mutton. But James Dearth is outside, come to spy on you and me. Can't you hear him?'

I stretched out my hand to the blind cord. The blind ran up with a rattle, and, pressed against the window, looking in upon us, was the face of the white horse, its teeth bared in a malevolent grin. Without losing sight of the thing for a moment, I backed towards the fire. Monica, divining my intention, took down the gun from its hook and yielded it to my desirous fingers. I took deliberate aim, and shot.

And then, with the crisis over, as I thought, my nerves went to rags. I sat down limply, Monica huddled at my feet; and I knew with a hideous certitude that the soul of James Dearth, violently expelled from the corpse that lay outside the window, was in the room with me, seeking to re-enter that human body in the chair. There was a long moment of agony during which I trembled on the verge of madness, and then a flush came back into the dead pallid cheeks, the body breathed, the eyes opened. . . . I had just enough strength left to drag myself out of my seat. I saw

Monica's eyes raised to mine ; I can never for a moment cease to see them. Three hours later I stumbled into the arms of the station-master, who put me in the London train under the impression that I was drunk. Yes, I left alone. I told you I wasn't a courageous man. . . .

4

Bailey's voice abruptly ceased. The tension in my listening mind snapped, and I came back with a jerk, as though released by a spring, to my seat in the teashop. Bailey's queer eyes glittered across at me for a moment, and then, their light dying suddenly out, they became infinitely weary of me and of all the sorry business of living. A rationalist in grain, I find it impossible to accept the story quite as it stands. Substantially true it may be, probably is, but that it has been distorted by the prism of Bailey's singular personality I can hardly doubt. But the angle of that distortion must remain a matter for conjecture.

No such dull reflections came then to mar my appreciation of the quality of the strange hush that followed his last words. Neither of us spoke. An agitated waitress made us aware that the shop was closing, and we went into the street without a word. The rain was

unremitting. I shrank back into the shelter of the porch while I fastened the collar of my mackintosh, and when I stepped out upon the pavement again, Bailey had vanished into the darkness.

I have never ceased to be vexed at losing him, and never ceased to fear that he may have thought the loss not unwelcome to me. My only hope is that he may read this and get into touch with me again, so that I may discharge my debt to him. It is a debt that lies heavily on my conscience—the price of this story, less one pound.

THE GHOST

THE GHOST

SEVEN days leave—how exhilarating! Freedom was wine in the mouth. And though of those seven days only three remained he was still enjoying a delirious intoxication. He had learned the art of squeezing the present moment dry, of living with all his heart in a happy now, when he reached one, regarding the long intervals of wretchedness as unmeaning parentheses.

'I was a silly fellow not to get here earlier. But you know what relatives are.'

'You were both silly and horrid,' answered his hostess. But her eyes danced with pleasure as they met his, and the two friends exchanged a smile of understanding. This was their good time, and they would make the most of it, wasting no regret on the past and admitting to their hearts no fear of the great black future that loomed, like a beast of prey, ready to shatter their happiness with a blow of its paw. It was a most delightful friendship, and that it depended on mutual liking alone, and on

no sort of conventional tie, constituted not the least of its charm. Dressed in a white tub-frock, her small face from under a drooping sun-hat flushing with excitement, Betty—publicly known as Mrs. Charles Cowley—looked exquisitely cool and fresh and young, younger even than her years, which numbered twenty-seven. It did Arnold's eyes good to look at her, and it sent a warm thrill through his romantic heart that he was able to enjoy that comforting sight, able to bask in her jolly friendliness, without a thought of disloyalty towards her husband, his old friend Charles. So far as he could feel sorry for anyone this morning he was a little sorry for Charles : not because Charles was an ill-paid clerk, nor because Charles's was a retentive firm conspiring with medical officers to defeat his patriotic ambition, but merely because on this day of all days he had to remain cooped up in the city, poor devil.

He put his head out of the kitchen window and inhaled the summer air in long rapturous draughts. Jove, what a day for picnicking !

'Hullo !' cried Betty, at his back. 'What do you think you're achieving by that ? You can't stop to do your breathing exercises now. Why, you haven't packed the sandwiches yet !'

Arnold wheeled round and saluted her in

military fashion—a form of humour then in vogue. 'Sorry, sir! . . . . Anyhow, have you finished washing up your dixies?'

Betty regarded him with severity. 'Yes, of course. Haven't I got my hat on and waiting for you!'

He repeated the question reflectively. 'Haven't I got my hat on and waiting for you? . . . In what sense is your hat waiting for me, Betty? As the dear general said in Bernard Shaw, I'm only a silly soldier-man. Don't harass my poor intelligence.'

'Oh, grammar!' She annihilated grammar with one pout. Her quick fingers stacked the sandwiches, and wrapped them in grease paper snatched from the table drawer. 'Come along. . . . No, *I'm* going to carry the haversack. You bring the thermos.'

They stepped out of the bungalow and into rural Buckinghamshire. It was certainly a unique morning. Earth had never before been so fresh, breathed such fragrance; never before had the sky bent so intimately over her. After an hour's walking down narrow lanes between sweet-smelling hedgerows, and over hills bordered by pinewoods, the two friends turned into a field-path. Tall feathery grasses, red-brown dock-flowers and yellow charlock trembled ever so slightly as in a trance of

ecstasy ; clover and ladies'-fingers, buttercups and celandine seemed to Arnold's imagination to be so many mute faces, absurdly knowing, wonderfully content. When they reached their second stile he paused, and Betty with him. The meadow beyond was a symphony in green and yellow : a curving sweep of long grass and buttercups, dazzled with sunlight ; and on the far side, by a pond, black-and-white cows were browsing in the shadow of tall elms, some dreaming over a celestial cud, some stooping to the water, some cropping the jade-green grass with soft enfolding lips.

'How still it looks,' said Betty.

He nodded, drowsed by beauty, yet stabbed by beauty's pain. He wondered if he were seeing this vision of England for the last time. 'And how alive,' he answered. 'It's as if the whole field were breathing and feeling. Dare we go into it? It's like walking over some one's face.'

Perhaps in that moment that three-days-hence future thrust its ugly face into Betty's. Perhaps she recalled Arnold's solitary lapse from soldierly reticence, when he had said : 'It's not the actual fighting or the danger. It's the filth. And chance sights. A decaying human hand sticking out of the side of a trench—things like that.' Perhaps she recalled

this, for her face grew unaccountably tense.

'Come along, Arnold, that's where we're going to have lunch. By that stream.' She scrambled over the stile before he could offer to help her. He followed in a more leisurely fashion, a little disappointed that she had broken the spell of that meadow's loveliness.

They sauntered across the field, and climbed another stile. Then, skirting the hedge to the left, they followed the brook until they found an agreeable resting-place on the sloping grassed bank. They sat down a few yards from the pond where, as in a picture, the cows were grouped, knee-deep in cool grass. Into that little lake, which reflected the sky's blue and gold, the brook ran clear over a pebbly bed. Arnold, embracing his knees, rested his chin on them and stared into the water, admiring the contours and colours of the smooth, delicately-enamelled stones, and straining the imagination to share the lives of the minute creatures that were borne past in the stream. Betty watched him with a covert sidelong look.

A unique morning, yes; and a unique friendship of which Arnold was immeasurably proud. Beautifully at peace, he found delight in contemplating their relationship. He and Betty were the most staunch of comrades. There was implicit trust between them, unshak-

able fidelity, and never a thought of love. He could not believe that ever before had a man and a girl achieved such intimacy without being betrayed into a wish for a more passionate symbol of that intimacy than mere talk. But to Arnold, who was still in his earliest twenties, talk was the best thing in the world. And what talks he had had with Betty! With what glorious candour she had disclosed to him the secret places of her mind, places to which even her mother and sisters had never been admitted! For Arnold it was a fascinating and a sacred experience; and if Betty's respect for his intellect was exaggerated, her absolute trust in his honour was at least well-founded. It was this absolute trust that added to their friendship the delicious flavour of romance. They exchanged ideas—on life, on religion, on sex, especially on sex—with utter unreserve, and with no hint of concession to vulgar notions of propriety.

'Look at those jolly little red worms,' said Arnold, pointing to the water. 'I used to dote on those things when I was a kid.'

'They're lovely.' Betty paused before adding, a trifle consciously: 'Childhood's the best time, isn't it? I wish I had a baby.'

He glanced up with quick interest. 'Well, why not?'

'Ah, why! I've been married five years. At first we couldn't afford it, and now—well, something's wrong. For two years or more we've been hoping for a child.'

'Rotten luck!' Arnold looked back at the stream.

'Yes. I wanted to tell you. You see, there's something wrong with Charlie.'

Arnold became alarmed. 'Something . . . physiological?'

'Yes. The doctor told him. Nothing very dreadful, I believe, in the ordinary way. But it makes it improbable that he'll ever have a child.'

'And he wants one?'

Betty turned her head away for one moment. '*I* want one; I want one bitterly. And he too, in his way.'

Arnold kept his gaze steadily upon the moving water, lest he should see her tears. He was shocked to think that this girl, so robust, so affectionate, so ripe for motherhood, should be cheated by the accident of marriage of a tremendous experience. And why must it be so? In a sensible society would it be so? Before he had begun to work out all the implications of that challenge, Betty spoke again.

He was amazed to hear her phrasing his

own thoughts. 'If people were decent-minded, it wouldn't so much matter,' she said. 'There could be a temporary marriage with someone else.'

Arnold was delighted with this proof of her emancipation. 'Exactly. Nothing simpler. But society won't change in a hurry. No use waiting for society. It rests with you and Charlie.'

'He would agree, of course. He would do anything for my happiness.'

Arnold glowed in agreement. Charles was a good fellow, the best fellow in the world; he had a level head and a wonderfully rational outlook. Nothing niggardly about Charles . . . And then an extraordinary thought presented itself. Why could not he himself give Betty her heart's desire? Could she possibly have any such notion in her mind? Was it possible that she liked him enough for that? The dream blossomed in his imagination. He saw the baby laughing up at him from its cradle; saw it growing up as the son of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Cowley. He himself would see the boy—for a boy it would be—only occasionally, and he would be known as 'Uncle Arnold' or some such nonsense. The situation would be quite impossibly romantic, like something in a novel, and yet a

triumph of decency and good sense over vulgar middle-class morality. Betty and he would resume their friendship unchanged and desiring no change. His respect for her was invincible. She was the wife of his friend, and that she would always be. He conceived the whole episode dispassionately, an act of pure friendship. Was it possible that she . . . ? No, it was not possible. Talk was all very well, but confronted with the need for action she would falter. His thoughts had been mere presumption. Some other man, perhaps, but he—he could not expect so great an honour, and certainly he could not seek it. If she had meant that she would have said so. Of that he was sure. He dared not make a suggestion that might be repellent to her : she would be so cruelly embarassed, and the perfection of their comradeship would be marred for ever.

And yet, in a situation so excessively delicate, he must venture something if he wished to be her friend. He tried to say : 'You know I too would do anything to make you happy.' But the words as they formed in his mind frightened him. How could he make her realize the utter purity and loyalty of his desires ?

Despite his bewilderment he felt the moment to be exquisitely rich in beauty and in destiny.

The pause lengthened. At last he stammered, 'In that event, of course, you would ask . . . some friend.'

'Yes.' Betty's tone was cold. 'Forgive me for boring you.' She jumped up. 'I'm getting stiff. Shall we move on?'

Something had gone wrong. Arnold grappled feverishly with the incomprehensible. Had he said too much? No, too little. Betty was already walking away. He could see only her back. When he caught her up, the sight of her pride made him angry with himself; yet he felt tongue-tied. He knew that he had failed her in a supreme crisis. Could he have had that opportunity again he would for her sake have risked all, and said, 'Let me be the father of your child.' But she was talking now, rather volubly and consciously, of indifferent things. Nothing would ever be the same again. Anger, jealous anger, flamed in his heart against the child, never to be born, who stood like a ghost between them, severing their friendship.

THE HOUSE AT MAADI

THE HOUSE AT MAADI

PART THE FIRST

An Afternoon in April

'UGLINESS, squalour, is only a nuisance, he told himself. 'It is beauty that hurts.' Even in the house at Maadi, the house that held Rosemary Fairfield, he could lose himself in musing ; and he remained lost until he became aware that a tall elderly woman with fine eyes and silvering hair moved across the room to greet him.

'You're Mr. Redshawe, of course. I'm Rosemary's mother. It was so good of you to come.' The young man's evident shyness moved her to add, 'You *have* met Rosemary, haven't you ?'

'Thank you.' He found his voice at last. 'Yes, I had that pleasure three days ago in Cairo. She was in the company of Mr. Bunnard, my chief.'

'My brother-in-law,' said Mrs. Fairfield. 'You like your work ?'

'Well,' began Redshawe, 'an Irrigation Company . . .'

His hostess smiled. At ease now, and reposing in the charm of her Irish voice and the kindliness of her speaking eyes, he smiled in return. As he looked into her lined face he felt that by holding himself very still he could almost hear the silken rustle of beauty's vanishing skirts.

'Tell me,' Mrs. Fairfield said, leaning forward a little, 'does my brother-in-law do any work, or do you and the rest do it all?'

He stared a moment at the dubious crease in his trousers. When he looked up, with a slight smile, 'I've a tremendous respect for Mr. Bunnard,' he assured her. 'More than respect, if it's not presumptuous to say so. But of course he's a very big wig indeed, don't you see? It's only natural that he shouldn't *do* very much.'

Mrs. Fairfield glowed maternally at the sight of his blushes.

'How very nice you are,' she surprised herself by saying, with the shadow of a tremor in her voice. 'I'm so glad you came.'

He blushed again as he answered: 'I'm most amazingly glad. I was terrified at first.'

Her smile was friendlier than ever.

'Not of me, I'm sure. Of Mrs. Bunnard,

perhaps. She is a very positive person—always has been.'

He wanted to blurt out : 'No, it was your daughter that I was afraid of' ; but he could not shake off the grip of his reticence.

'So are all of that cult,' he said. 'They teach one their entertaining guesswork as though it were an exact science . . . And Miss Fairfield—is she too a believer ?'

'Rosemary is rather a baffling girl,' replied Rosemary's mother. 'She spends a lot of time with her aunt, and listens, listens. Yes, that is almost all there is to be said about Rosemary : she listens. At this moment she is no doubt at the Cairo Lodge, hearing about Yoga and Prana and Kamaloka.'

'And other patent breakfast foods,' said Redshawe, with a cadence so bitter as to bring wonder into his new friend's eyes.

'It would be a pity, don't you think,' he answered the question in her glance, 'if she took all that stuff seriously ?'

'Aren't *you* a little positive ?' she quizzed him . . . 'Ah, here is Mr. Bunnard.'

Almost boyishly diffident, the spare familiar figure of Redshawe's chief sidled towards them. Mr. Bunnard was rather above medium height, but his earnest concentration on the pattern of the carpet made him seem smaller. When

he raised his head a pair of ingenuous wondering eyes peered, through the circular lenses of his gold-rimmed spectacles, upon a new world.

'Ah, Redshawe,' said Mr. Bunnard, focussing his mild radiance upon the young man as they shook hands, 'you've come then. How very nice.'

'You're just in time to tell us about the Atlantians, Dick,' Mrs. Fairfield greeted him, with the air of having been discussing the Atlantians all the afternoon.

'*Very* nice,' repeated Mr. Bunnard, peering from one to the other.

'Yes, I've come, sir,' said Redshawe, 'and I've brought every one of my seven bodies with me.'

Mr. Bunnard considered this remark with a smile that revealed for the fraction of a second an excellent set of artificial teeth.

'Ah, you haven't forgotten our little talk then. . . . But you've got a lot to learn yet. Seven planes and all interpenetrating. Is Hypatia at home, Sheila?'

'My dear Dick! She is at the Lodge, of course, and Rosemary is with her. I expect we had better not wait tea for them. They'll probably have something in Cairo.'

'Perhaps Hassan will get us some tea,' ventured Mr. Bunnard, 'if we ask him.'

As though to his cue, the white-smocked, red-tarbooshed Hassan, the Berber servant, appeared at this moment in the doorway bringing tea on a large tray. In response to Mrs. Fairfield's nod he shuffled noiselessly into the room, bowing and smirking in his expansive Oriental fashion, and set out the tea-things on an occasional table.

'Seven planes and all interpenetrating,' said Mr. Bunnard, appearing to extract a peculiar comfort from the idea. 'We generally take tea in the French manner—or is it the Russian? —with lemon juice instead of milk. By the by, I've got some Thought Forms up in my den, Redshawe, that might interest you. Angry, affectionate, ambitious, pure, envious, sensual, and so on: all accurately coloured, you know. I've spent a lot of time on them. You're not eating anything. I can recommend the shortbread: it came all the way from Scotland.'

Mrs. Fairfield, roused by a sound outside, turned in the act of filling Redshawe's cup for the fifth time, to look out of the window.

'Here are the truants,' she said, 'and we've nearly finished.' And Redshawe, following her glance, saw the miraculous Rosemary standing on the gravel path outside. To his excited imagination it seemed that she was but for an

instant poised lightly upon this globe before flying back to the paradise from which she had descended.

Then indeed came the whirlwind followed by the still small voice. Mrs. Bunnard, tall, angular, and, though quiet, masterful, with conscious power invaded the room : power which, however, broke like a spent wave on the adamant rock of Redshawe's absorption in Rosemary Fairfield.

'Mr. Redshawe, how are you?' said Mrs. Bunnard, grasping his hand. 'We have never been introduced, but I know you perfectly. This is my niece.'

'We have met already,' fell like a benediction from the lips of Rosemary, as she gave him her hand.

'Now let us take our things off,' said Mrs. Bunnard with ferocious good humour. 'Come, Rosemary!'

A moment later Redshawe was conscious of having stared at the departing vision. The exodus completed by Mr. Bunnard, he turned to find the thoughtful eyes of Rosemary's mother upon him. Divining that she had read some of his mind he became confused.

Mrs. Fairfield rose to ring the bell : an action so startling to the disordered nerves of Redshawe that he breathed deep relief when,

a moment later, he heard her ask Hassan to make some fresh tea for the ladies. His hostess came back into the bay of the room and stared out at the clustering purple masses of bougainvillea that hung from the white house, her hands playing listlessly with a fly-whisk.

'This is the coolest part of the house till the sun goes down,' she said, in a tone so void of expression as to fix his instant attention. 'Afterwards we will sit out on the piazza, and perhaps Rosemary will play to us.'

'That will be delightful,' he answered, politely acquiescent; but his mind was asking: 'What is the matter? What is she going to say?'

He became agitated with the expectation of hearing something momentous about Rosemary. But, after a pause, Mrs. Fairfield did but add the commonplace remark that his was an uncommon name.

'Yes.' Disappointment and relief strove together in his tone.

'Are you the son of a certain Stephen Redshawe, I wonder?'

'Yes,' he said again, with quickening interest.

'You have his eyes,' she assured him with a smile, and turned quickly to the window.

'By Jove, you knew my father?' He got

out of his chair in his astonishment, and found himself, with a sense of shock, face to face with an old woman who smiled at him wanly.

'Yes, many years ago.'

'He never mentioned——' he began ; and stopped, blushing for his gaucherie. As if in atonement, 'Please talk to me about my father, if it won't distress you,' he pleaded.

After a long silence, 'Not now,' she said. There's a story I can never tell you. But we're going to be good friends, you and I, and some day we'll have a long talk about your father.'

Embarrassed, he murmured lame thanks.

'There's forty years between us,' she added, half to herself. 'So we shall be good friends.'

The door was slightly ajar and in the contracted doorway flashed the smile of Mr. Bunnard.

'Come along, Redshawe,' chirped Mr. Bunnard. 'The ladies are coming down to their tea. Slip away while you can and have a look at my Thought Forms.'

Redshawe, obeying this unwelcome summons, mused deeply on the story that he was never to hear.

PART THE SECOND

Sheila Dyrle

I

SOMEWHERE, no doubt, in Sheila's personality, the story was written down ; and she could have turned for young Redshawe the pages that she so seldom and so reluctantly turned for herself. She was an emotional but not a sentimental woman, and retrospect was a melancholy luxury that for the most part she denied herself. So far as she could she denied it to herself now, although the young man had troubled the deep waters of her mind. If for a moment she looked back her life appeared to her as a fruitless quest for something—who knows what ?—for beauty, for happiness, for an absolute and harmonious intimacy, for everlasting fulfilment in a love that is the answer to all questions. Intimations of such a reality had again and again quickened desire within her. But, even in the

moment of stretching out the hands to clasp it, 'beauty vanishes, beauty passes' . . . .

Half a century before, in her early teens, Sheila had emerged from her sister's bedroom into the green distempered corridor of the school infirmary, hotly denying in her heart that Helena was dying. She wondered at the obtuseness of these people who had seen the sweet bloom of Helena's cheeks and the lustre of her eyes, and yet drained their vocabulary of euphemisms hinting at death. Weak and wasted indeed she was, but full, still, of the serene joy that was her peculiar gift to the world. God couldn't be so foolish or so cruel as to let Helena die. That would surely have been too sorry a joke even for the deity of Aunt Hester's imagination.

'Why is every one so silly?' she complained to Aunt Hester, who had waited in trembling silence till her coming. 'Helena's getting better. Of course she is.'

'Yes, dear,' agreed Aunt Hester submissively. 'Did you have a nice talk?'

'We couldn't let her talk much. She's still so weak. But she said she would soon be out and about again.'

Tears began trickling down the lined leathery cheeks of Aunt Hester: cheeks that had sud-

denly the grotesque air of having been corrugated for the sole purpose of being wept upon.

'Poor darling! Did she say that?'

'Oh, aunt, why will you believe those silly people?' Sheila's voice rang out. 'She must get well—she *must*!'

'We must hope on,' quavered Aunt Hester, furtively dabbing her eyes with a little sodden ball of handkerchief.

Sheila, alone in her faith, succumbed to the fear that tried to hide itself in anger. 'It's too bad,' she said. 'It's a beastly shame . . . to give up hope. Think how *well* she looks! She's been making plans for the summer holidays.'

At that Aunt Hester turned away her head, hunched up her back, and frankly sobbed, leaning against the back of a chair. All her prim dignity had vanished, and for the first time Sheila saw in her aunt an old frail woman. The shock of that discovery passing, she stared for a moment in sullen misery at the queer-shaped convulsive figure; then turned abruptly away and went, dry-eyed, into their bedroom.

In bed she thought she could hear her sister's voice in delirium, although she knew that there were two walls and a passage between them: it muttered interminably until she had to bite her lips together to prevent herself from

screaming. Aunt Hester soon came into the room, undressed herself by moonlight, and tumbled on to her knees. She remained kneeling, with her face and arms lying limply across her bed, for what seemed hours ; and Sheila stared stupidly at the ceiling and strained her ears at every trivial sound. For a moment she closed her eyes . . .

And when she opened them again, birds were chattering outside her window and pale dawnlight, like a ghost, was in the room. 'Like a ghost,' Sheila said, and shuddered. Aunt Hester was not there ; her bed had not been slept in.

Sheila got quickly out of bed, a dry sob of fear breaking from her, and ran barefooted into the green corridor. She stood quite motionless for a while, one hand resting on the door handle, and listened ; tiptoed a few steps up the passage, her eyes fixed dreadfully on the room that held Helena ; and drew back again. Time became a throbbing agony. Her thought dizzied itself by ceaselessly revolving round the glazed white door that had brass figures, 17, screwed upon its middle panel, but her eyes steadily stared. 'Seventeen,' said some chattering thing in her brain : 'that's her age. Is that why they put 17, or is it a coincidence ?' But she was not to be dis-

tracted by silly questions. The door began to open.

Slowly the glazed white door that had stared back at her for so long, mutely reiterating ' 17,' began to open, as though it had come to life. ' A big white waistcoat,' said Sheila's chattering brain. Like a silly flat face it moved aside to make room for something that with funereal step passed out : a bent figure in black tight-fitting bodice and white lace cap. Aunt Hester's right hand drew the door to behind her, and with an abrupt resolute gesture she flung up her head and stood, regally tall, a black figure of doom framed in the white doorway. In a silence like death itself the eyes of these two stricken creatures met.

That meeting of eyes was an icy blast in the green twilit corridor. It froze the running water of Sheila's thought and made her catch her breath. Gradually, while they looked at each other, Aunt Hester crumpled and shrank again to the meagre dimensions of a bent old woman ; she stumbled forward to meet her niece with feebly gesticulating arms. The next morning she had answered the mute question of Sheila's eyes and was enfolding her rigid passive body.

The single word she saw forming on her aunt's lips released the locked flow of Sheila's

thought. Her mind became once more almost insanely active. One dry gasp escaped her, and no other sound. The springs of pity were barren in her : this sobbing woman was a stranger. Helena was dead. She turned away from her aunt and went slowly back into the bedroom. Helena was dead. 'Very well,' said Sheila's mind, and she, ignoring that, suddenly thought that if God were to appear to her at that moment she would strike him with her hand. And that would have been how silly ! He would only laugh. Helena was dead. She stared, dry-eyed, out of the window and saw the sun newly risen in his glory. The leaves of the acacia were a luminous green ; a thrush in its branches poured out bubbling melody. All the universe was alive with a stabbing futile beauty. Helena was dead.

No tears came to release the pent grief. Why was that ? 'Like the woman in the poem,' muttered that mental chatterbox and began iterating 'Home they brought her warrior dead. Home they brought her warrior dead.' It was in a little red book. 'Rose a nurse of ninety years.' Was it ninety or eighty ? And Rose was a girl's name, but it wasn't the nurse's name. Rose a nurse. A nurse rose. Rise, rose, risen. And on the

third day he rose again from the dead. Who was it did that? The little red book had an odd name on its cover . . . And suddenly Helena came before her, alive, alive, and happy as she had always been. What nonsense. Helena was dead. . . . Like a city besieged Sheila fought against the cruel memories that invaded her.

Aunt Hester came with food on a tray, and urged her to try to eat something, just a morsel, just a sip. What was the good of it all? And the voice of Aunt Hester stayed with her interpolating dull remarks about funerals, trains, Penlington, nice to be home again, poor dear mother, make a friend of Jesus, try not to brood, into Sheila's busy thought. But Sheila pushed them all from her. She was eager to brood. Without brooding, life was empty: a dry husk. She surrendered herself now, opened her heart to that host of memories: they tumbled in, a looting rabble. She lived over and over again her days with Helena: her thought sped through the years ever more quickly, until in a sickening rush it reached the dead wall of the present. Helena was dead. God had stupidly killed her. And would they have to try to sing a hymn about—what was it?—each within his narrow bed, safe home at last, Jesu's breast, blend the living

with the dead . . . Aunt Hester was back again, urging her to cry. 'You do the crying, aunt.' Had she said that or only thought it? She wished Aunt Hester would go away with her talk of the kind nurse, just a sip or two, quite a peaceful passing dear, try to pray, home again soon, take her with us. What was the sense in saying 'take her with us' when Helena was dead? There was nothing to take home. There was nothing to take home except what was in the white room, number seventeen. They'd put it in a box . . . not Helena; Helena was gone away . . . Sheila was jealous of anything that came to thrust itself between her and her memories; but she could not still the almost febrile activity of her aching brain: her random thoughts danced on dizzily over the bottomless black pit.

Back in the house at Penlington. A locked room now, with It, shut up in a shiny coffin, on trestles. And to-day, at noon, It was to be taken away.

Noon. The long-tailed black horses trampled on Sheila's heart. Six men entered the house and mounted the stairs—tramp, tramp, tramp—and stopped. . . . They returned more slowly, their breathing more noisy, their footsteps less regular. Sheila

turned her face from the window lest she should find horror made visible.

She stood in the stuffy room, waiting for the others to come downstairs. Although the windows were wide open the atmosphere was stiflingly hot. The drowsy hum in which all summer sounds were merged floated in oppressively, and the clock's ticking was a burden.

She was very uncomfortable and wretched in her black clothes; her gloved hands perspired. She caught sight, through the trees in the garden, of the waiting carriage. . . . Why were all these things necessary?

Uncle Peter came downstairs, followed by Aunt Hester and a school chum of Helena's. Other draped figures came, including a strange girl-cousin with her husband; but none was of the slightest consequence.

In the crawling carriage now; and idiot birds were singing happily outside. Sunshine, dusty roads, blue cloudless sky, hot air, silly singing birds, the window-fittings in the carriage, Uncle Peter with his expanse of waistcoat and great gold chain and perspiring face, the split in the third finger of her black glove, the ill-repressed sniffling of the cousin, a scratch in the paint over Uncle Peter's head, the houses and hedges moving slowly past them, people

at the side of the road with raised hats, a team of cricketers in a distant field and the gleam of their white flannels in the sunlight : of all these things she was conscious, and of the black pit, Helena dead, and the slow miserable rumble of wheels.

She wondered why God would not speak to her. A new hope flickered. She would listen for His voice, that still small voice in the soul. But the only voice she heard, whether within or without, was Uncle Peter's. 'It really *is* hot,' he said conversationally, as they got out of the carriage.

And now added to the horror and the heat was the sight of the coffin being borne into that squat evil building, that house of death, the cemetery chapel, and, presently, a dull droning voice in melancholy monotone :

'*In the morning it is green and groweth up ; but in the evening it is cut down, dried up and withered. For when thou art angry all our days are gone ; we bring our years to an end as it were a tale that is told. The days of our years are three score years and ten.*'

And Sheila, a tiny girl again, was having happy romps with Helena in a garden full of flowers and sunshine. Helena was clapping her hands and laughing ; Helena was lifting her, shoulder-high, to kiss a very tall rose that

was really a princess imprisoned by black magic. . . . And then she was going to Helena for her music lesson, and Helena pretended she was just an ordinary pupil (for that was part of the game) named Linda Smith. 'And what are you going to play this afternoon, Linda?' . . .

'*The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.*'

The man was still there, the long-faced cadaverous man droning out his words. And now they were out again in the scorching sun, standing, the men bare-headed, round an open grave. She heard the women sobbing; she saw Uncle Peter with bent head, a great red boil peeping over his collar from the pink folds of neck. And now the coffin was being lowered. Something seemed to clutch her by the throat; but the tears would not come.

'*For as much as it hath pleased Almighty God of His great mercy . . .*'

'Come along, dear,' said Aunt Hester, taking her arm. And Sheila, waking as from an evil dream, saw compassion looking out of the eyes of Uncle Peter. She was the centre of this tragedy. For an instant she luxuriated in the emotion of her position; enjoyed the accession of self-importance; rolled mourning like syrup on her tongue. She caught herself in the

act ; and her heart turned sour and said to her, ' How hateful you are ! '

2

Helena's death is of signal importance in the history of Sheila because it was the occasion of her first serious quarrel with God. And though, as the years went on, she did in a measure make it up with Him, the reconciliation was never complete. She never ceased, from that day, to relish Mr. Hardy's gestures of contempt for the President of the Immortals. The name of God, none the less, resumed something of its old majesty. She depersonalized Him, disembodied Him, transmuted Him from solid substance into a kind of immanent gas, a presence that disturbed her with the sense of elevated thoughts. She dabbled in the literature of popular mysticism, deriving comfort from its comfortable abstract phrases, its Cosmic Urges, its Universal Self. She read a text-book on Hegel ; and the Hegelian paradox, ' Being and not-being are identical,' she rolled on her tongue until it assumed the flavour of truism. While she was on the crest of this enthusiasm Kay Wilton came, to renew the promise of a transcendental happiness.

But let us turn the pages more quickly until we come upon a Sheila of nineteen years, with the Kay adventure past but still fresh in her mind. With her school-friend Hypatia Fairfield she sat in a coign of the cliff at Selborne and gazed musingly at sea and sky. Sheila was too busy with her dream to be very interested in Hypatia's talk about her clever brother who had just gone to Cambridge : his profound knowledge of history, his intellectual honesty, and his sarcasm poured so liberally on a certain Paley whose *Evidences of Christianity* he had been forced to study for the Little Go. Slightly bored by the recital of this brother's deeds and sayings, Sheila began a little to scorn her friend's sisterly partiality. Even the severe, the rational, the proudly unconventional Hypatia was not immune from that human weakness.

'Have you ever liked anybody very much, Hypatia?'

'Liked anyone?'

'A boy, I mean.'

'Why, of course, Edward——'

'Oh, not your brother.' Sheila waved an impatient hand. 'Have you never been . . .'

'Do you mean in love?' asked Hypatia, in some surprise.

'Well, yes, in love.'

'No.' Hypatia shook her head, firmly, but without the scorn that Sheila had half expected to see. 'I never have. Why do you ask?'

'Oh, I just wondered.'

For a moment Hypatia contemplated a distant ship. 'Look at the sun on that sail,' she said. . . . 'Have *you* ever been?'

Sheila nodded, scrutinizing closely a smooth white stone she had dug up with her fingers from the chalky soil.

'Yes.'

'Did he know?'

'Yes. There was a kind of engagement. It was while I was at St. Margaret's.'

'Do you mean it's over now?'

Sheila began trying to explain everything. The effort took her away for a moment to the first dim beginnings of love, four or five years back, and then brought her swiftly to the greater glory and deeper pain of the year just gone. Hypatia listened with quiet attention to the rambling, shy, and inadequate narration.

'It was at a Band of Hope that I first saw him,' began Sheila.

'What*ever* made you go to a Band of Hope?' asked Hypatia.

'I had a friend, Sophie Dewick. She used to go. And they used to have lantern lectures and concerts and things. It wasn't bad.'

The lantern slides had been a disappointment, being concerned almost entirely with graphical statistics about alcohol. The only picture worth while was that of a flea, magnified some thousandfold, happily reminiscent of the *New Geology Reader* and of Poe's stories. This was an inadequate sugar coating to the pill of chemical analysis. But Mr. Beak made everything worth while—Mr. Beak, with spare figure, polished pate, and black bushy eyebrows. When he rose, lifting his hand for silence in order that he might announce 'Hymn Number twenty-thwee—the twenty-third hymn,' he seemed like a military commander admitting defeat but determined not to surrender ; he seemed, to himself perhaps as to his sympathizers, the last champion of sobriety in a drunken world. This sense of desperate purpose pervaded the whole proceedings of which Mr. Beak had the conducting : the religious service had always this invincible air of being held round an open grave—the open grave of one who, without doubt, had sipped claret-cup at some festival in his youth and in riper years had taken to wife-beating, smoking, swearing, and the other vices incidental to dipsomania. Mrs. Beak, plump, rosy, and smiling, chatted pleasantly to every one and made optimistic secretarial announcements.

'And that was where I met him,' Sheila told Hypatia.

'Did you lose your heart at once?'

'Not a bit. There was something about him: I don't know how to express it—a sort of mute poetry in his face. But I didn't really give a thought to him then. He seemed a nice boy; nothing more.'

Later she discovered that he had sad grey eyes, a submissive mouth, untidy light brown hair. He wore his high double collar and his black tie with an incongruous effect, like a cherub masquerading as a clerk. Sheila's interest in Kay, her urgent desire to protect him, led her into strange places; for he was a youth of inscrutable impulses. The Band of Hope was good fun; and to accept sometimes the hospitality of Sophie's pew in a strange chapel full of green gloom was a defection from Wesleyanism that Aunt Hester found it easy to forgive: the easier when she reflected that it was a further step from the dreaded Popery. But the Seven Days' Mission was something that taxed Sheila heavily. A new humility was growing upon her; the beatific vision of Kay drew her with a power she found irresistible. So innocent, so shy a boy, so unaware of his own attractiveness, he seemed to be crying out for sympathy. She read an

unspoken appeal in his big eyes ; she discovered a pathos of inexpressiveness in his lame confused speeches. That he admired her was a gradual revelation that at first she hardly dared to face : that she longed to know him and to be his friend she admitted to herself at once with her usual candour. Why then did this young prince, this strayed denizen of the celestial meads, choose such odd ways of spending his time ? What force impelled him to attend that curious orgy of emotion, the Seven Days' Mission ? She found the riddle hard to read. Humbly and patiently she set herself the task of trying to understand these religious fervours.

Sheila and Kay talked rarely, and never of matters more deep than the Band of Hope, *Pickwick Papers*, the weather, the oddities of common acquaintances, and the mock-tragedy in blank verse that Clive Bunter had written for the Social Evening. The rehearsals for this play drew them together every Tuesday for four weeks ; but the play was never presented to the public, for the dress-rehearsal was attended by Mr. Beak and Mr. Turley, and these gentlemen, deacons both, were seized with alarm at the prospect of theatricals, however innocuous, taking place in a lecture-hall so near the sacred precincts of the church.

Gloomily the actors dispersed to their several homes.

'What rot it is!' said Kay.

'But they were awully funny, those two,' Sheila remarked. 'People so comic must have a spark of goodness in them somewhere.'

'Goodness!' said Clive Bunter, 'Gallons and gallons of it. It ought to be put a stop to, this monopoly of goodness. But as for brains —all the brains in the Band of Hope wouldn't fill a pin's head.'

'You're not including your own, are you?' asked Kay.

Sheila, who considered Clive rather conceited, laughed with relish. She was at some pains to show her appreciation. Perhaps it was this that encouraged Kay to ask, when, later, she turned to leave the others: 'May I come a little way with you?'

She said 'Please do,' and pointedly refrained from calling out 'Good night' to Sophie, who was walking some yards ahead with the Hero of the doomed play, a gentleman by whom of late she had been rather engrossed.

Sheila and Kay walked for a while in silence down a broad avenue of trees bordered on one side by dark woods, and on the other by scattered houses. A yellow strip of moon hung, glowing in the blue, above the woods.

She began telling him that she was to be sent away to St. Margaret's, a school in Selborne; that the term was thirteen weeks long; and that her aunt talked of going to live in Selborne permanently. This meant that she and Kay might never meet again.

Kay surveyed this prospect dismally. They discussed it in elaborately casual tones. And all the while she was thinking how delicious were the stillness and the moonlight and this unspoken love. Even the impending separation was beautiful, tragic, uplifting. When at his suggestion they sat down on a borough council seat facing the woods, she caught her breath and trembled at the exquisite beauty of his shy avoidance of her eyes.

'Frightfully thick those woods are,' he said.

But that was said to gain time, she knew. A feeling almost of fear came over her. He was going to try to put into words this wonderful, this unutterable love . . . If only it could remain unspoken, and they sit here for ever in silence!

'I say, Sheila,' he burst out. 'I wish you weren't going!'

'Do you?' She stared at the dark gravel path.

'Dash it all—I'm awfully fond of you.'

She turned to him with flushed cheeks and fluttering heart, trying to speak.

'I think . . . I think you're a perfect dear,' she said. 'Oh, Kay!'

His eyes filled with light. Rather awkwardly he put his hand on her shoulder.

They kissed shyly, hesitatingly, as though afraid lest by doing so they should break the spell of beauty that bound them.

Hypatia listened, slightly frowning.

'After that dress-rehearsal,' said Sheila, 'he told me.'

'Told you?'

'Told me that he . . . liked me. I knew before, but he told me then.'

Her voice died away into silence.

'Nothing can ever come near that,' she said, in a low tone. 'Nothing, ever.'

She resumed her story after a pregnant silence. The sound of the sea soothed her with its rhythm.

'A few days afterwards I came to St. Margaret's. And then . . .'

She stopped speaking. Hypatia looked up to find her gaze fixed upon the horizon.

'Well?' said Hypatia gently, after a long pause. 'Did he forget all about you or something of that sort?'

'No,' answered Sheila, 'he didn't forget. He kept writing me letters.'

'Why, of course! Didn't you want him to?' . . .

The first letter made her eyes moist with tenderness; but every one that followed came with a whisper of impending tragedy. He wrote always of the church, of the office, of the garden, of the Band of Hope: round these things his immortal soul revolved.

Next Sunday fortnight I am to give a paper at the Young People's Bible Class. Mr. Dewick asked me if I would and he said he would be very pleased if I would say yes and I could not very well get out of it as I had no excuse ready. I have chosen for my subject Sunday Observance; it is a good subject but I find it hard to put many thoughts down on paper about it. I will write and tell you how I get on. We had a really broad-minded sermon last Sunday on the text 'By their fruits ye shall know them,' it upset some of the very strict people I fancy but Mr. Dewick liked it and so did I. The preacher, whose name I forget, he was from Barnet, said that there had been some quite good atheists, but I thought he took a very extreme view when he said that some atheists lived much better lives than the average christian. It seemed to me that he put that bit in just so as to sound paradoxical and daring. Father has been very busy in the garden, pruning his roses, as the weather has greatly improved these last few days. There is a new fellow now at the office, but I cannot say I like him much, he is a bit of a rough diamond; rough anyhow, I am not so sure about the diamond. I think he drinks and he certainly uses

bad language, but if one tells him of it he only gets more offensive. By the by, isn't it funny that you should be still at school while I'm at business when we are both seventeen and within a few months of each other?

Passages like this frightened Sheila by indicating a gulf of mental disparity fixed between Kay and her. 'It's only superficial,' whispered her love. 'He's not like that really. He's not a good letter-writer: that's all.' And she tried to silence her own critical spirit with tender memories of his wooing. 'Can love be scared away by a bad literary style?' she asked herself. But her mind worked on against her: by no manner of violence could she prevent its probing into the substance of Kay's frequent letters. In spite of her protests it coined for her a new word, Kayesque, to express a certain indefinable quality, a taint, manifest in his way of thinking and writing. Indefinable or not, it was undefined, for she dared not define it. To have confessed even to herself that it meant complacency, mediocrity, total absorption in the commonplace, would have precipitated disaster.

And to quicken her faculty for detecting the Kayesque there was the constant companionship of Hypatia Fairfield. From the moment when Sheila woke, one midnight, to

find Hypatia sitting up in bed reading by candlelight *The City of Dreadful Night* the two girls were fast friends. This was but one book from the secret hoard of five that Hypatia discovered to Sheila on that exciting night. She found the school library altogether too prim, too like Miss Fry the head, to suit her taste.

'They starve you here, don't they?' she said, opening her locker and exhibiting her treasures one by one.

Each one had a brown-paper cover bearing in large block letters a title specially designed to propitiate the eye of Authority, should Authority happen to come round some day with a master-key. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* clothed with righteousness the impious pages of Spencer's *First Principles*, and *The Life of Livingstone* invested *Monte Cristo* with a garb of sanctity. Shelley beat his luminous wings behind the broad back of Robinson Crusoe.

'It's a pity Miss Fry is such a frump,' said Sheila, when they had got into their beds and Hypatia had blown the light out.

Hypatia agreed. 'I'm awfully glad you woke up. We might never have got to know each other if you hadn't caught me reading.'

'I don't expect we should,' responded

Sheila, glowing with the excitement of a new friendship.

'I was absolutely isolated,' Hypatia said. 'Oh, why ever didn't you come to St. Margaret's before?'

Sheila laughed. 'I would have done it if I'd known, perhaps. And yet I was sorry to leave my other school.'

'Was it decent there?'

'Well, they didn't teach us much, but it was very comfortable and homelike. I'd practically grown up there. It was a day school. They didn't worry me much. Two or three of us in the Sixth used to spend a lot of our school hours producing a school mag.'

'Unofficial, I suppose?'

'Very. We wrote it out by hand and handed it round.'

'Did you write stories, or what?'

'Oh, things, you know,' said Sheila. 'It was only a lark. A kind of skit on the official journal.'

'They're too ladylike here for anything so vulgar as journalism,' complained Hypatia to the darkness.

'I expect so.'

'Miss Fry with her Ministering Children!' added Hypatia scornfully. . . . 'By the way, are you church, chapel, or what?'

'The last,' said Sheila. 'I'm rather keen on Edward Carpenter just now. Have you read him?'

'Yes. Whitman and water,' replied Hypatia. 'I'm an agnostic personally. So are my people.'

'Your people too!' exclaimed Sheila. 'I thought one's people were always orthodox.'

Hypatia laughed. 'Are you Irish?'

'Part of me is.'

'The voice part,' said Hypatia.

'Mother was Irish, and father had some Irish blood—just a drop or two.'

'Your voice is lovely.'

Sheila heard Hypatia's bed creak, and then the sound of a match being struck. Hypatia bent over her.

'And you've Irish eyes too,' she said. The match flickered out, and she went back to her bed. 'They're blue. Blue eyes and dark hair.'

She struck off at a tangent.

'You'll like Spencer. He makes your brain simmer. I said that before, didn't I? Especially on the Unknowable. Funny, some people think there's nothing unknowable.'

'Beautiful people,' said Sheila. 'The salt of the earth. You'd think, to hear them talk,

that they were present at the Creation of the world taking shorthand notes.'

There was silence for a few minutes.

'I believe I'm too excited to sleep,' said Sheila presently. 'But I suppose we ought to. . . .'

For weeks together, in defiance of Kay's letters, Sheila abandoned herself to her dream of love, and the Kay of her imagination was a lover beyond criticism. It was become an article of her faith that it was this perfect lover, not the author of the letters, whom she would meet again on her return from school. Him she had indeed seen on the night of their love's visible flowering. They had but to be together again, and she would know him for what he was, master of a speech more eloquent than words. And while she dreamed of this blissful reunion a letter came that rent her heart.

DARLING SHEILA.—Do not be surprised if I don't write for several days. Dad died suddenly yesterday.

Your loving KAY.

She recalled Helena's death, re-living some of that agony; and compassion for Kay wrung bitter tears from her. Into her letter she poured a torrent of love and pity and passionate

protest. She yearned for the moment when she would see him face to face and offer for his comfort the balm of her lips.

'You see,' explained Sheila, 'I couldn't tell you then, Hypatia. It would have been disloyal. I didn't admit even to myself that there was anything to spoil our happiness. I thought that as soon as I saw him again, and touched him, that horrible doubt would vanish.'

'And didn't it?'

'Yes, for a moment or two. Then it came back . . . and grew and grew . . . to a hateful certainty.'

'Yes?'

'The separation had lasted for the best part of a year, because I didn't go home for the long summer holiday: Auntie came here instead. And during that time we'd both developed, he and I.'

'He was more Kayesque than ever?'

Sheila flinched.

'Oh, don't remind me of that detestable invention of mine,' she begged . . . 'He'd changed—oh, incredibly! Even his appearance. There were still wonderful moments—sometimes when the light fell on his hair . . .

and he was slightly freckled, you know,' she added.

'But he was changed.'

'He was just like his letters. And when he was saying certain things—stuffy things—he even *looked* like his letters.'

'And the mute poetry?' asked Hypatia presently.

Sheila stared miserably at her own feet.

'I don't know what became of that,' she confessed. 'It was there, you know,' she added, seeing a gentle incredulous smile flit over her friend's face. 'Hypatia, it was, really. I *saw* it.'

'And then——' suggested Hypatia after a silence.

'Well, as soon as I was certain,' said Sheila simply, 'I had to tell him, of course.'

'That it was hopeless?'

Sheila nodded.

'We lived in different worlds . . . And of course he didn't understand.'

'No,' said Hypatia. 'He wouldn't. That was the whole tragedy, wasn't it?'

'He thought—' Sheila began, with a little bitter laugh . . . then stopped, and looked at Hypatia with pain in her eyes. 'He thought I had stopped caring, Hypatia!'

She rose to her feet.

'It must be getting on for teatime,' she said. 'Shall we go?'

3

Seven years later, on the platform of Penny's Heath station, Sheila discovered a new Hypatia Fairfield: tall, dark, severe, with thoughtful eyes and aggressive chin; by everyday standards a plain young woman, but redeemed from unattractiveness by an air of absorbed interest in some vision of her own. Since leaving school the two girls had exchanged letters of prodigious length. Once or twice they had visited each other's homes, but these visits had provided an intercourse less intimate, less real, than that of their letters. Into the bubbling pot of that correspondence was poured all the raw egoism, all the shy solemn discoveries, of two active minds passing through the adventure of adolescence. Their knowledge of each other at school had been a mere passing acquaintanceship compared with this new intimacy that only distance and the postal service had made possible.

Recently they had begun to drift apart. Aunt Hester's disapproval of normal life made the house at Penlington something of a prison; Aunt Hester's friends were anæmic, uncongenial. 'Nothing ever happens to me,' she

said to herself. 'I never meet anyone or do anything. Things just go on, every day alike.' She began to indulge herself in pessimism. Compared with the soothing syrup of Aunt Hester's religion, despair was almost intoxicating : she tasted it eagerly, as though it had been wine. In those days she and Hypatia had echoed each other rapturously enough, agreeing—with what delight—that life was but a dry husk and death a fit ending to a witless scheme. But now Hypatia, with a fatal instinct for novelty, had subsided into the arms of a new religion, a religion that made summary end of all problems by denying their existence. It was this, Sheila divined, that had put that look of assured calm into her eyes.

'So here you are then,' said Hypatia, shy, as ever, of demonstration. 'Where's your trunk ? I've got the trap in the station-yard.'

With Sheila and her belongings safely in the trap Hypatia took the reins between her capable fingers and drove away.

'It's very jolly here,' said Sheila.

'Yes. Much the same as before. Why, it must be a year since your last visit !'

'It is.'

'Scandalous !' Hypatia smiled reproof. 'Well, has your quest succeeded yet ?'

'My quest ?'

'You wrote some months ago saying that you could never rest until you had found a philosophy that would hold water?'

'I'm still seeking,' admitted Sheila.

'You'll never find it,' remarked Hypatia, with calm certainty, 'in the direction you are looking in.'

'No?' said Sheila good-humouredly.

'Well, you'll have plenty of chance here of inspecting every fad,' said Hypatia. 'They're a lively set, our neighbours. There's almost every shade of belief and unbelief possible to the human mind represented here, you'll remember, and every shade has its club or church or soap-box.'

'Even your shade?' interposed Sheila.

'Yes. Though that's altogether different,' Hypatia retorted. 'Still I can understand that you think it just one more little sect and nothing else. When you are in science you will see everything more clearly.'

'I shall see that there's nothing to see at all,' said Sheila. 'Isn't that your fundamental doctrine?'

'True, matter does not exist, if that's what you mean,' said Hypatia. 'That is perhaps Our Leader's greatest discovery. God is All-Good, the very Principle of Goodness, and man is His reflection. Sin, disease, and death——'

'Exist in the reflection but not in the reflector,' remarked Sheila. 'Are your people of the same way of thinking?'

'Oh no.' Hypatia shook her head. 'Mother's *trying* to understand, but Father's making no attempt at all.'

'What about your brother?'

'Of course, Edward's hopeless. He's utterly absorbed in his precious book.'

'I thought he was going in for law,' said Sheila.

'So did I. So did everybody. He got a good first in his Tripos. But he doesn't really care for law. History's his great subject.'

'What's the book about?' Sheila was excited by the thought of meeting in the flesh this maker of books.

'I believe he calls it *A History of the Religious Idea*, but he's very reticent about it. It's a very proud exhibition of ignorance, no doubt.'

'Hypatia!' protested Sheila. 'How very unkind of you!'

Hypatia sniffed.

'Not at all. You misunderstand me. Edward, you see, is an agnostic. *Tout ce que je sais, c'est que je ne sais rien*, you know. He professes to know nothing about God and so

on, and is just as proud of his ignorance as I used to be of mine.'

'It must be nice for you to know all about it now,' said Sheila.

'It is,' agreed the seer. 'But it's knowledge anyone can share who will try to understand.'

From the field they were passing *Fairfield's Hygienic Corsets* blazed in letters of red above the hedge. The factory chimneys blotted out the horizon.

Hypatia's father was a spare, bullet-headed man with mutton-chop whiskers of a sandy hue and an indomitable nose that he had followed faithfully *per aspera ad astra*. The stars of Mr. Fairfield's attainment were commercial prosperity and for his son the education that he himself had been denied. It became more and more apparent to Sheila, during that drive from the station, that for Hypatia's parents Edward, the firstborn, was the being round whom the world revolved. For him the sun shone and the little stars clapped their hands. Fairfield senior, at first indifferent to Edward, had been trained in son-worship by his wife. Behind a brusqueness that passed for eccentric humour Mrs. Fairfield concealed power. Worshipping her son, for his advancement she

had used her husband unsparingly, guiding his energy consistently in the direction of most commercial gain, and curbing his desire to spend himself, a prophet in the wilderness, in fruitless public advocacy of freethought. Her subjugation of her husband, himself a being of great though erratic energy, was the gradual achievement of twenty-five years.

'Well, Miss Dyrle,' said Hypatia's father briskly. 'Here you are again! We're glad to see you. You know that.'

He looked at Sheila kindly, but as if to say: 'Deny it if you can.'

'Ah,' he added, 'here's my wife. The honoured guest's arrived, me dear, and I'm just extending to her, in the name of the family, a hearty welcome.'

The arrival of Mrs. Fairfield displaced a lot of air.

'Now this *is* a treat,' she said, holding out both her hands. 'My dear Sheila! I may still call you Sheila, mayn't I? You are so *often* in our thoughts!'

Sheila murmured her pleasure.

'Must take us as you find us,' admonished Mr. Fairfield. 'We're homely folk with no airs. No education to speak of. Couldn't afford it. And now that we can afford it—it's too late.'

'Not too late for Edward, father dear,' Edward's mother reminded him.

'Ah no. One scholar in the family at any rate.'

'One scholar, three agnostics, and a religious crank, eh, dad?' remarked Hypatia.

Her father laughed.

'Heard the news?' He turned to Sheila. 'Hypatia's saved. Got a new religion. Mine wasn't good enough for her.'

'What is yours, dad? I didn't know you had one.'

'When you and Edward were nippers I told you my religion. Be afraid of nothing except doing wrong. That's mine. Everything in the garden's lovely: that's yours.'

'Well, stop arguing all of you, and come to tea,' said Mrs. Fairfield. 'Sheila must be ready for hers, I'm sure. Have you met Bunny, Sheila?'

'No. Who's Bunny?'

'One of mother's young men,' explained Hypatia. 'Quite an acquisition. Aristocratic by birth, democratic in sentiment. Isn't that it, mother?'

At tea they were joined by Edward, rather reluctantly, and by the Honourable Richard Bunnard, *alias* Bunny. Bunny was a fair freckled youth, with sleek hair brushed straight

back from his forehead and well plastered to the head. His blue eyes followed Hypatia's every movement with patient doglike devotion, except when recalled from this dereliction by the voice of Mrs. Fairfield.

'Now then, Bunny! I want to hear what you think about this minimum wage question. Is thirty-two shillings enough for a skilled worker like a plate-layer?'

Bunny, very nervous, began opening and shutting his mouth soundlessly like a gold-fish.

'Well, Mrs. Fairfield, I hardly think so. A fellow could hardly live on such a mere pittance, could he? Forty-two or fifty-two or even . . .'

'Sixty-two,' murmured Hypatia.

'Yes, sixty-two,' he said, catching eagerly at a straw. 'Or say three guineas, sixty three. Not much more than a hundred and fifty a year, you know.'

'There, father!' cried Mrs. Fairfield. 'What do you think of that?'

'Of what, me dear?'

'Why, the plate-layers are to have a minimum of sixty-three shillings a week?'

Bunny laughed.

'Oh no, Mrs. Fairfield. It doesn't follow. I only said they ought to have that.'

'Well, you must see to it,' retorted Mrs. Fairfield. 'You young people, that's your work in life, to stir things up. I think you must go into parliament, Bunny. Yes. I shall send you to parliament to put things right for us.'

'But perhaps Bunny would rather not be sent to parliament, mother?' suggested Hypatia.

'Indeed,' said the young man, 'I'd much rather not. Edward would make a much better politician than I.'

Mrs. Fairfield proudly surveyed her son. 'Ah, we must see about Edward. We're not quite ready for parliament yet, are we, Edward?'

Edward smiled. 'For my part, I never shall be ready.'

'Mother ought to go there herself,' said Hypatia. 'She'd put the world straight in ten minutes.'

Her mother listened indulgently.

'Do you know, Sheila, my children are very lucky children. They've been brought up in perfect freedom. They've got the habit of freedom. They do and think just as they like, have never known what compulsion was. Here's Hypatia now, with her religion: she's never been taught it by me; I've never forced anything down her throat. I believe that

everybody has a right to follow his own bent.'

'It must be very nice,' said Sheila, 'to be brought up in an atmosphere like that.'

'It would be,' Hypatia murmured, but Mrs. Fairfield did not take up the challenge.

'I wish you'd teach me your New Thought,' begged Bunny of Hypatia.

'Which is it, New Thought or Higher Thought?' asked Sheila.

'Neither,' answered Edward. 'It's something newer and higher than either. Unfortunately you have to believe it implicitly before you can understand it to be anything but nonsense.'

'You can be quiet, Edward,' said his sister, 'even if you can't be just.'

'But, really,' protested the scared Bunny. 'I am quite in earnest, Hypatia. I would listen respectfully to anyone's religion, especially yours. Won't you tell me about it?'

Hypatia relented. 'I will, some time. It's useless with Edward about.'

'It was founded by a woman,' said Edward, 'and she's written a book that is the beginning and end of all Truth. Read it, Bunny, read it and live.'

'You see.' Hypatia smiled patiently. 'That's what I have to put up with.'

'It's too bad,' Bunny reproached Edward.
'Oh, don't sympathize with me, *please*!'
said Hypatia.

Sheila thought: 'How hard she has grown!' and, having already tasted of her friend's sublime certainties, she felt some relish for Edward's mockery.

Edward seemed the most likeable person in the room, except perhaps Bunny. Edward was for the most part very quiet and self-contained. He possessed rather an impressive dome of forehead, but he maintained an impenetrable reserve without assuming that air of learning and distinction in which his mother sought so earnestly to invest him. Mrs. Fairfield's maternal glance conveyed unmistakably to the rest: 'We must not trouble Edward with our trivial talk. His thoughts are not our thoughts; neither are his ways our ways. He has taken his degree, and he is writing a book.' Sometimes she referred questions to him, as to an authority; it was as though she was continually thrusting upon him his bachelor's hood, he as continually repudiating it with a confession of ignorance or indifference. His anxiety to avoid oracular authority kept him more silent than the rest; and this very silence gave him in Sheila's eyes a distinction that was almost fascination. She

guessed him to be modest, unassuming, and clever. The mystery of his inner life drew her interest towards him.

But Bunny, too, was interesting ; for Bunny had good looks and that air of trustfully appealing for affection to which Sheila was so susceptible. There was something pathetic about his obvious devotion to Hypatia. Except the commanding Mrs. Fairfield he seemed to look at no one else. He deferred to Hypatia constantly.

'I suppose you would say that a headache is essentially unreal, Hypatia? If we knew the truth about ourselves we shouldn't have headaches, should we?'

'We shouldn't have even heads,' said Edward. 'I see you've already had a dose, Bunny.'

'Shut up, Fairfield!' said the Honourable Richard. 'Give your sister a hearing. Am I right, Hypatia?'

'Certainly,' agreed Hypatia. 'Our failure to apprehend the truth is the root of all so-called evil and pain.'

'I see,' said Bunny, wrinkling his brow.

Sheila was touched to see the poor boy falling so easy a pray to the dominating Hypatia. But Mrs. Fairfield thought it was time to look after her property.

'You don't, my poor Bunny,' cut in Mrs. Fairfield. 'Nor does anyone else. No sense, anyhow. Don't fill your mind with such stuff just to please Hypatia. . . . You must be a good boy,' she added, 'and do as I tell you.'

'Mother means that, Bunny,' said Hypatia. 'She means every word, although she tries to make a joke of it. If you want to please mother, obey her in all things. It is the only way.'

Mrs. Fairfield became pale and distressed. Signs of an approaching fainting-fit were perceptible. Observing them, her husband broke in sharply. 'Hypatia, hold your noise!'

So there was a feud, thought Sheila, between the young woman and the old: a duel for the soul of Bunny. Since he had apparently no brains of his own worth considering, the scalp would no doubt fall to Hypatia, who had youth as an ally. And then what terrible vengeance would fall upon him? Could nothing save him from them both? A highly dangerous pity awoke in Sheila's heart.

'You shall all go to the Folk Dancing to-night,' announced Mrs. Fairfield.

The lure of Folk Dancing led them across

two fields to a turreted eccentric stone building known as the Summer School, which was at once a gigantic advertisement and a place of mental and physical recreation for Fairfield's factory hands. He had spent thousands of pounds on this long-cherished scheme, and only a well-timed fainting-fit of his wife's had prevented his spending thousands more.

Fairfield's Summer School was as hygienic as his corsets. It was a curious horseshoe-shaped building enclosing a large well-kept lawn in the middle of which, on festive occasions, a maypole was erected ; a tower and belfry loomed at the back. To these cloisters the factory hands were wont to repair for free instruction in the theory and practice of arts and modern languages, for lectures on history, sociology, science, for concerts and dances on the green. It claimed to be, and was, a local centre of liberal popular culture. Anything and everything could be discussed there save one thing : it was a point of honour with the founder that Fairfield's Hygienic Corsets should never be mentioned.

Dusk had already fallen when the Fairfield party reached the green, and the dancing had already begun. Someone began lighting the lamps.

'This is jolly !' said Bunny with infectious

good spirits. 'Won't you dance with me, Hypatia?'

'I've never been taken for Hypatia before,' Sheila answered.

'Oh, sorry! It's Miss Dyrle. Do dance with me, Miss Dyrle. It's a waltz this time, without trimmings.'

They whirled away among the dancers.

'I don't know these old dances, do you?'

'No. But what does it matter? They stick in a few ordinary things now and again specially for Philistines like us.'

Her heart danced with the music.

'You brought your violin, didn't you, Mr. Bunnard? When are you going to play for us?'

But Bunny did not answer. Sheila was rather chilled to observe his abrupt change of mood. He had caught sight of Hypatia dancing with her brother.

They finished the set in silence, and Sheila was immediately claimed by Edward. She felt bitterly alone in the world. She and Hypatia had come to a definite parting of the ways; and she had no other friend.

After a few moments she complained to Edward of giddiness. He led her to a seat.

'Feel better now?'

'Quite, thanks. But I'd rather not begin again just yet.'

He studied the ground.

'It's a year since you were here.'

'Yes.'

'I've often thought of that visit.'

'Have you?' said Sheila. 'I live with my aunt, you know, and she doesn't approve of my visits to a home of free-thinkers.'

'But you are not of her persuasion?'

'Obviously not. Hypatia was my best friend.'

'Was?'

He seemed to be offering a far from unwelcome sympathy.

'Yes, I'm afraid so. I wouldn't have you tell her for the world. But we've drifted away from each other.'

'Yes? I fancied so.'

'I suppose it's this religion of hers,' said Sheila. 'Of course I don't care a rap what she believes, but she's grown so . . . so remote.'

'I agree with you entirely. I'm glad she hasn't converted *you* anyhow. My friend Bunny is doomed, I fear. Hypatia begs the whole question. If matter is only an appearance it is none the less real to our minds: it exists mentally. The whole philosophy

is nothing but a silly quibble about terms.'

'How is your book getting on?' asked Sheila.

'Slowly, but it *is* getting on. Writing a hundred thousand words is a great labour. The mere pen-pushing alone is a bore.'

'It must be. Couldn't you dictate it?'

'That would be difficult for me and very dull for the unfortunate secretary. I'm afraid I should be too self-conscious to work well.'

'At first, perhaps,' said Sheila. 'But that would wear off. And it would be a privilege for the secretary, I should think.'

'A privilege!' He laughed. 'Why, the book is scandalous and atheistical.'

'That's why to help would be a privilege,' she answered with a nervous smile. 'Would it really help you to be able to dictate to someone?'

'That would depend, I expect.'

She summoned her courage.

'Well, to me, for instance?'

'*You!*'

'Yes, me,' she said humbly. 'I *can* spell, you know.'

'You would do that for me?' he exclaimed in amazement.

'I'd willingly do it—for the cause,' she added rather mischievously.

'How astoundingly decent of you!'

'It's not very polite to be so surprised to find me decent,' she said, laughing at him.

He looked with undisguised admiration into her Irish eyes. 'By Jove, what things we could do together!'

A flame of comradeship leaped to life in Sheila. The word 'together' made an echoing music in her mind.

Mr. Fairfield stood before them.

'Miss Dyrle, give me the honour. A real old-fashioned dance this time instead of these new-fangled folk things. Sir Roger de Coverley. And after that Bunny's going to give us a tune on the fiddle.'

Later, feeling rather breathless and crumpled, she listened to Bunny's 'tune on the fiddle.' She could see the violinist's face, with a new expression in his eyes, spangled grotesquely with a red light from a fairy lamp. The moon was rising in a pale green sky. Two tall feathery trees, swaying in the gentle wind, seemed to caress each other as they merged for a moment and drew apart again. The music spoke—spoke to Sheila intimately. It seemed to have for her a secret message. It communicated a tremulous half-sobbing ecstacy of pain and beauty: it drew her, shuddering with

delight, through divers moods. Now she was in a moonlit forest of tall poplars, walking, walking, alone in the universe. Now there was a flowered field, full of white and green, yellow and red, made glad with the twinkling feet of dancing shepherds and shepherdesses.

As if in response to the music, stars began tremblingly to peer through the luminous green curtain of the sky.

The next morning Edward invited her into the holy of holies where the book was being written.

It was a small room having some of the austerity of a monk's cell. Two of the walls were lined with books, classified under such headings as Ancient History, Mediæval History, Modern History, Sociology, Science, Philosophy.

'I do everything on a system,' remarked Edward in a rather satisfied tone; but Sheila only laughed at his labels.

'I could never read here,' she said. 'I should put a ticket on myself and stand in the corner all day. What a dreadfully orderly room!'

'Don't you like it?' There was disappointment in his tone.

'Yes, very much. It is little and quiet and studious. There's no cabbage pattern on

the wall and no Jorrocks pictures. There are no pictures of podgy children stroking big dogs, and no family photographs. . . . I'm sure that gentleman over there isn't in the family.' She pointed to a photograph of a Greek statue.

'No, that's Euripides. And yet there's something about the room that you don't like. What is it?'

'Well, you do everything on a system, you said. I think that's what's wrong. You've done this room on a system. *Ars est celare artem*. Isn't it the same with systems?'

'Do you read Horace much?' he enquired.

'Not at all,' confessed Sheila. 'I found that tag at the end of a dictionary.'

He laughed. 'You're delightfully honest.'

A shaft of sunlight falling on his face made visible the little downy hairs over his cheek-bones. Sheila caught her eyes involuntarily looking at them.

'Well,' she said. 'Aren't you going to work now?'

'There's no hurry.'

'Come, come, I'm sure your system doesn't permit loitering! Can you provide me with pen and paper?'

'Do you really mean me to dictate to you?'

She felt a sudden twinge of embarrassment

lest she was pressing unwanted assistance upon him.

'You said I was honest just now. Will you be equally honest with me? If my presence would disturb you, please turn me out.'

He considered gravely for a moment. 'One can hardly tell—save by experiment.'

'You wouldn't mind telling me, would you?'

'No. I would tell you at once. You have sense enough not to be offended.'

She was absurdly elated by this curt compliment.

'Besides,' he added, 'the book comes first with me always. Nothing else matters.'

She ruminated upon that thought for several seconds. The bluntness, the ungraciousness of it at once repelled and attracted her. She could not but admire Edward's capacity for impersonal enthusiasm; it made him great; and she found something fascinating in his indifference to lesser things. Among those lesser things she was content, for the moment, to include herself. To be his tool, to help him in his work: such service, she felt, would be its own sufficient reward.

Noting her silence, 'That seems to you inhuman?' he asked.

'It seems to me superhuman,' answered

Sheila. 'Perhaps that's the secret of fine living: to subordinate all personal things to some great impersonal passion.'

'That's just how I feel,' he said.

Sheila continued. 'Unless we're content to be miserable and useless, we must have a consuming passion, if it's only for collecting beetles: something that doesn't depend on anybody else. . . . Persons change,' she added sadly.

'You're thinking of Hypatia,' he suggested.

'Hypatia, yes. And someone else. It's like building your house on sand, you know, ever to rely on persons.'

'Still,' said Edward, 'if a person's rational and consistent—and there *are* consistent persons.'

'Yes, and there are clockwork toys. A perfectly consistent person must be very much like them, I should think.'

'But surely you agree that man *is* just that: a mechanical toy in the hands of Necessity. The illusion of freewill is only disguised mechanism.'

'How dreadful!' Sheila exclaimed. 'Then Henley's lines:

> I am the master of my fate;
> I am the captain of my soul—

are meaningless to you?'

'The man who thinks that he is master of his fate is the most enslaved of all persons,' said Edward. 'For he is not even master of the facts.'

'That's a quotation from your book, I believe,' said Sheila. And the young man blushed.

This was the beginning of a long and animated discussion, the first of many. In Edward Sheila discovered that reliability which she had thought could be attributed to no person. His mind was keen and critical : it worked with a certain deadly precision that was as impressive and at times almost as terrifying as a piece of gigantic machinery. He had doubts and hesitancies indeed : the hesitancies of one aware of the subtleties, the baffling complexity, of problems which less careful minds deemed simple ; but once he had reached a definite decision, nothing short of overpowering ratiocination, no consideration of comfort or sentiment, could shake him from it. And while her sense of poetry revolted against a certain aridness in his philosophy, the very magnitude and the shattering presumption of his attempt to rationalize the universe overpowered her imagination and thrilled her with a sense of great adventure.

4

In sharp contrast with this austere enthusiasm for Edward Fairfield and his work, there flickered up in her heart a secret romantic compassion for the Honourable Richard Bunnard, that fair-haired, frank-eyed, simple-minded young man, whose nickname, Bunny, appeared even to the eye of affection so entirely suitable. For his youth and good nature, for his docility, for the irresponsible levity that even the Fairfield atmosphere could not entirely inhibit, and still more for the less definite charm he unconsciously exercised over her, Sheila conceived a liking that trembled sometimes dangerously on the verge of tenderness. She was stirred by his voluntary surrender of his personality into the grasping hands of Hypatia, the high-priestess of a new oracle, and trembled at the thought of his being immolated, a blood sacrifice, upon that godless altar. But, most of all, the memory of his music troubled the deep cool waters of her mind. She sought in him often, and sometimes for a fleeting instant found, the transfigured face of the violinist who had once laid his spell upon her.

She swayed for a while between these two magnetic points : Edward's intellectuality and

Bunny's manifest need for being looked after ; but if the one's self-sufficiency sometimes repelled her the other's comparative vacuity of mind no less tried her patience. With such an alternative, perhaps her womanhood would have urged her irresistibly towards Bunny, in spite of discouraging precedent, had not that youth remained unaware of her claim to be anything more exciting (and that was exciting enough, no doubt) than Hypatia's friend.

'If only he had Edward's brains as well as his own niceness,' Sheila said to herself ; and humour compelled her to add, self-scornfully : 'Well, what if he had? He'd perhaps be even more indifferent to me than he is now.' And that would have been hard; for his absorption in Hypatia was so complete that he could even sing her praises in little solitary interviews with Sheila contrived for that very purpose.

'Don't you think she's very clever?' he said one day, incredulous of a hint of criticism.

'I know she's got wonderful brains,' Sheila assured him. 'But at present I believe they're under a cloud. That sounds horribly dogmatic, I expect. But I really think Hypatia's a little bit of a fanatic nowadays.'

He rebelled against that. 'She's an enthusiast, if you like.'

Sheila smiled. 'Perhaps that's all. I suppose fanaticism's only the name we give to the other person's enthusiasm.'

'I must say she often puzzles me,' admitted Bunny. 'You know her very well, don't you?'

'Not so well as you do, I expect.'

'Oh, but you were at school with her,' he urged.

'That's five, six, seven years ago.'

'Still. . . .' He ached to believe that Sheila out of the fulness of her knowledge of Hypatia could help him. 'Do you think she's capable of liking anybody?'

'Liking?' The clear inadequacy of the word arrested her.

'Liking very much, I mean, don't you see? It's this way: supposing you wanted . . .' He waited as if for her to help him out. But she rather pointedly didn't. 'She seems so aloof very often, don't you think?'

To this mild proposition Sheila assented. 'A little cold, you think, perhaps?' She guided his stumbling feet thus far.

'Cold, but not,' he hoped, 'incapable of—well, affection, as it were.'

Sheila agreed gravely that 'incapable' would be too absolute a word.

'She is very fine-looking.' He had the air of submitting this idea for her acceptation.

'Fine is quite the right epithet,' Sheila assured this incredible youth. 'She has always been fearless; you can see that in her face. And she had a sense of humour once.' To herself she added: 'Am I so very maternal that he must confide in me?'

After a brief transitional hovering, when he was neither quite in Sheila's company nor definitely out of it, he went away, no doubt to treasure all these things in his heart, leaving Sheila in a state that oscillated between amusement and a half-ashamed regret. And that night Hypatia, joining her friend in the spacious bedroom that they shared, displayed unwonted animation. Whether it was Bunny or the stirring in its sleep of old friendship that loosened her tongue, Sheila patiently waited to have revealed to her.

Hypatia was in a reminiscential mood. She sat on Sheila's bed and talked of Selborne days, of feuds with Miss Fry, of Sheila's Aunt Hester, and of what little she knew of Kay. She appeared rather to dwell on Kay. She called up once-familiar faces from the pit of oblivion and set them again speaking forgotten parts. And presently, without preamble, she remarked:

'There's more in Bunny than he allows to appear, don't you think?'

'Very likely,' Sheila said, sleepily. 'But you know him so much better than I.'

'He's ductile,' said Hypatia, rather consciously selecting the word.

'Too much so,' Sheila ventured. 'How beautifully he plays the violin. That night at the Folk Dancing he was wonderful.'

'Yes. In his way he's quite a genius. Though of course this musical glamour is not really healthy. It's a kind of delusion, a magnetism. In Real Knowledge it doesn't exist.'

'He's rather marvellous, your friend Bunny,' Sheila said tritely, chilled by Hypatia's eternal prosing.

'He's a very nice boy. But under mother's thumb at present. I shall change that.'

Sheila shivered. 'You! How?'

'He proposed to me to-night.'

Sheila was dumbstruck for a moment. Then, 'You're very calm about it,' she said. 'Did you . . .?"

'Not yet. But if I do accept him there'll be a fine tussle with mother.'

'Doesn't your mother like him?'

'Immensely. But mother has an inordinate

appetite for affection. She's like a spider with a fly. She won't share him.'

'How bitterly you speak!'

Hypatia loftily repudiated the suggestion. 'Not at all. I'm merely stating a fact. You will see, if you're here long enough.'

'Poor Bunny!' said Sheila.

'Oh, don't worry about him. I shan't let mother gobble him up, you may be sure.'

'I'm sure you won't,' Sheila replied, biting her lip. 'You'll marry him sooner than that.'

But irony was lost on Hypatia. 'Mother shan't have him,' she reiterated.

5

Edward found the presence of another person distracting. The dictation of his book was soon abandoned, and he pursued his solitary way. Yet not solitary, for he was not unconscious that his solitude had been invaded, destroyed; and he was not yet sure whether he liked or resented the invasion. In spirit another walked by his side. For Sheila this book, child of his brain, became a living thing to be thought about with a reverent excitement. She was still enough of a child to find this making of books miraculous: it was like that creation of something out of nothing

which the church attributed to God. The best of Edward went into his book, and Sheila was quick to remember this in his defence when vitality or humour seemed lacking in him. He worked with clocklike regularity. He wrote from nine till twelve-thirty. He resumed work, after lunch, at one-thirty and wrote till, at half-past four, some toast and tea was brought to him on a tray. For this refreshment he allowed himself twenty minutes, and for ten minutes he systematically did nothing. From five till seven was his final daily spell.

Seven o'clock released him from his self-imposed task. At half-past seven he dined with his family, and having dined was free to cultivate such social amenities as he did not utterly despise. He formed the habit of seeking out Sheila ; he persuaded her to go for walks with him : strenuous almost racing walks, conscientious and concentrated exercise, essential to the maintenance of physical and therefore mental fitness. She, glad of an antidote for the daily dose of omiscience forced down her throat by Hypatia, welcomed this new friendship. She was a willing and intelligent listener ; the quickness of her mind delighted him, and his appreciation evoked an answering delight in her. The variety and

colour of her thinking, a habit she had of investing with emotion even the dry bones of argument, provided a foil for Edward's exact logic. She took imaginative leaps in metaphysical speculation, while he plodded laboriously on from point to point, never retracing a step. They sharpened their wits against each other and felt marvellously stimulated by the process. And still it was of the book, and of cognate subjects, that he talked, in an unending torrent of discourse. He involved himself in sentences so prodigious that Sheila sometimes got lost in a labyrinth of phrases and subordinate clauses. More than once she felt rising in her a secret impatience ; she even got to the point of contemplating the discontinuance of an intercourse that became daily more overpowering. Yet looking back, as the days passed, upon that vista of intimate, flushed, excited talk, she could not find heart to cut adrift from him ; moreover, he had made her feel, not without a sense of her presumption, that she had somehow become necessary to his literary scheme. These enormously distended monologues of his helped him to clarify his thought, and her occasional interpolated criticism freshened his dialectic processes. She felt a certain responsibility for him.

Mrs. Fairfield observed this ripening intimacy

with a curious admixture of benevolence and displeasure. One evening she came upon her son and Sheila sauntering in the garden together a few minutes before seven, and smiled at her guest with an inimical glint in her eye.

'Sheila dear,' she said bitter-sweetly, 'you mustn't take my son from his work.'

Sheila, flushing with resentment, could make no reply.

'Mother,' said Edward, neither hotly nor coldly, 'you interrupt the thread of my argument.'

Mrs. Fairfield flashed a point of jealous fire at Sheila, who turned on her heel, biting her lips in vexation. She was astounded and ashamed by this momentary and involuntary revelation of a woman's soul.

Edward followed her without an instant's hesitation.

'See you at dinner, mother,' he said casually, over his shoulder. . . . 'The matter is not quite so simple as that,' he went on, speaking to the girl at his side. 'The vitalist hypothesis has implications that lie deeper than that altogether, and that run, in my opinion, altogether counter to the ascertained facts of experience. Chemical analysis . . .'

Sheila let him ramble on, grateful that he took no notice of her evident embarrassment.

She wished he had left her. She wanted to escape from the intolerable sense of having been delivered an insulting ultimatum, a warning, by Edward's detestable mother. Yes, Edward's detestable mother : that was how she thought of the woman in whose mien she had read 'Hands off my property !' Her instinct was to run away from the house and never return ; but slowly, as Edward's sentences gathered length and momentum, she came to regard such an action as merely melodramatic.

She cut one of his clauses in half by asking abruptly : 'What did your mother mean by that ?'

He was pulled up short, and left floundering.

'I beg your pardon ?'

'I'm so sorry,' said Sheila ; 'I'm very rude. I'm afraid I wasn't listening. I was thinking of what your mother said. What makes her hate me so ?'

'Hate you ! Dear me, no !' he exclaimed. 'You're too sensitive. Mother is hurt because I give my confidence to you and not to her. Don't worry about her. She'll have to get used to it.'

'Oh no, she won't. I am going home to-morrow.'

'To-morrow ?'

'I had already arranged to, you know,' Sheila untruthfully assured him.

'I hope you will stay longer,' he said earnestly. 'If mother has offended you she shall apologize. I'll see to it.'

'Pray do nothing of the kind. And let's drop the subject. . . . Won't you forgive my inattention and tell me what you were saying?'

They had by now reached a remote part of the garden, a part from which the house was hidden by a mass of sweet peas clustering over trelliswork. A rustic seat on the gravel path by the trim croquet-lawn invited them to rest.

'By the way,' he said, when they had sat down. 'I've finished the *magnum opus*.'

'Finished!' she exclaimed, glowing with excited pleasure. 'How fine! Aren't you tremendously glad?'

'It's a relief,' he admitted. 'I shall take a week's rest and then start the revision.'

She, exulting still in the accomplished work, could spare no thought for the revision.

'How jolly to have finished! You didn't tell me you were near the end?'

'Ah, you'd forgotten then.' He smiled indulgently. 'I told you a fortnight ago that I should finish on the thirteenth of this month.'

She was suitably astonished.

'You mean to say you knew to a day?'

'I work on a programme, you see,' he said, relishing her surprised admiration.

Now that the work was done he seemed to have time for human weaknesses. This unexpected boyish vanity made Sheila like him more than she had ever done before.

'I suppose you're pleased with yourself now!' she mocked him gently.

'Very!' he confessed. They both laughed.

'There was another thing that might have told you,' he said. 'I came out of my room before seven o'clock to-night. Have you ever known that happen before?'

'You see, my watch had stopped,' she explained. 'So that is what your mother——'

'Probably.'

'Why didn't you explain to her?' she asked him.

'I refuse to propitiate her,' he said. 'Besides, I wanted you to know first.'

She was silent.

'Sheila,' he said gently, 'we could do such a lot together!'

She began to rise from her seat, but he placed on her knee a strong and strangely reassuring hand.

'It's a year since your last visit to us, isn't it?'

Sheila found her voice, a very small voice now, and answered 'Yes.'

'Well, a year ago I made up my mind to ask you to marry me. Will you?'

There was a teeming silence. Sheila's mind was in a whirl. There seemed something wanting in the richness of this moment, a disconcerting gap in the happiness that had come within her reach. But another feeling conquered. She looked at him with her heart in her eyes.

'If I can help you . . . Oh, Edward, I *do* want to help you!'

'My dear!' he said. He kissed her cheek in warm brotherly fashion. 'We shall be very happy together, you and I.' He took her hand in his.

For a moment they contemplated this prospective happiness without speaking. The gong summoned them to dinner.

Sheila accompanied Edward into the house with a numbed feeling in one corner of her mind. She could not banish a vague half-formed doubt that had crept into the heart of her new happiness. There was so much that was fine, so much that was bracing, about her relationship with Edward, and she told herself that this lurking discontent was mere perversity.

A feeling of comradeliness struggled with a sense of chill. She was to be his friend, his wife, the partner of his life's work ; they were intellectually in tune : what more could she ask of life ? What was this secret craving for tenderness, for romance, but a foolish lapse into the sentimental dreaming of her school-days ? Edward offered her in abundance what that boy-lover Kay Wilton had been so conspicuously unable to offer : the sympathy of an alert mind. Sympathy and comradeship—were not these the fairest flowers of life ? The rest were gaudy hothouse plants, nurtured in an artificial warmth and unable to endure the healthy rigours of continual daily intimacy.

She tried by such reflections to still the whispering voice within her ; nevertheless she was not herself during dinner, and it was with a catch of the breath, afterwards, that she heard Edward announce their betrothal to his parents. Stated coldly, the compact had the terrifying air of something irrevocable. She controlled with effort an impulse to flee from the room.

Mrs. Fairfield was exclamatory and encouraging, and Mr. Fairfield vaguely echoed his wife's expressions of pleasure. Mrs. Fairfield opened her plump arms and wrapped them round

Sheila as though taking permanent possession of her.

'My dear Sheila!' she exclaimed. 'A new daughter for me!'

From that capacious and efficient embrace Sheila emerged with a sense of having been rescued from a yawning gulf. The one thought in her mind was that she did not wish to be a daughter to Mrs. Fairfield. She felt that Edward's mother would as readily take, if she could, the globe itself into that large embrace, and exult greedily in her newly-acquired property, like a child with a big ball that it may bounce to its heart's content.

'Now that *is* nice!' said Mr. Fairfield. 'Very pleasant arrangement indeed! Well, well!'

A diversion was created by the entry of Bunny. He tried to conceal an air of desperate purpose under the affectation of breeziness.

'Hullo, by Jove!' he exclaimed. 'How are you, Mrs. Fairfield? How are you, sir? How do, Ted? And how are you, Miss Dyrle? Myself, I'm jolly fine. Thanks for kind inquiries.'

'That's a comfort anyhow,' said Mrs. Fairfield grimly. 'You seem a little upset.'

'Upset! Me!' cried Bunny. He calmed a little to add: 'Bit excited perhaps. Got some news for you, Mrs. Fairfield.'

'Ha!' The light of triumph gleamed in Mrs. Fairfield's eye. 'You've agreed to be president of the Workers' Federation after all.'

'No, not exactly.'

'You haven't!' Mrs. Fairfield became the picture of righteous indignation. 'You refuse to do a little thing like that for me, when your name would be so valuable to us!'

'It wouldn't be fair to my father. He's a bit old-fashioned, I dare say, but there it is. He can't help being an earl. He makes rather a point of my not getting too deep in the movement.'

The Honourable Richard Bunnard stood on one toe and twirled once round to assure every one that he was perfectly at ease.

'Please don't fidget, Bunny, when you're talking to me, even though I *am* only an old woman. Once again I ask you, and for the last time: will you do the right thing, the public-spirited thing?'

Bunny tried to soothe the exasperated lady.

'My dear Mrs. Fairfield, I've already promised my father.'

The storm burst.

'Your father! Fiddlesticks your father! Hypatia's at the bottom of this!'

'Don't get excited, mother,' urged Edward.

'I will, I will,' retorted his mother. 'I've

a perfect right to get excited. You young people, you've got hearts of stone. All the love we mothers lavish on you is nothing to you. Do we get any gratitude? Not a bit! *Scorn*, yes, plenty of it! Scorn of our grey hairs and our silly ways and our ignorance. But gratitude—the last thing in the world. . . . Some chit of a girl comes . . .'

Edward shrugged his shoulders in cold disgust.

'Ah!' exclaimed Mrs. Fairfield. There was an ominous pause. Her husband rushed towards her.

'It's all right, me dear. I've got you safe and sound. Sit down and have a bit of a rest.'

The afflicted lady sighed.

'She's going to faint,' cried Mr. Fairfield. 'Why didn't you let her have her way, you young devils, you!'

'Of course she's going to faint,' said Edward. 'That is the last scene of the melodrama.'

Sheila watched the scene with a mixture of indignation and compassion. The indignation was short-lived: it died suddenly at sight of Edward's complete detachment. He seemed utterly devoid of the filial sentiment that would have made allowances for his mother. For she was, after all, his mother, Sheila reflected. She had faced death to bring him into the

world. He was flesh of her flesh, bone of her bone: for him she had spent herself, and he was still the centre of her life. Had Edward shewn anger, Sheila would have been whole-heartedly with him, but this cold disdain, this resolute refusal to be stirred a hair's breadth either to pity or to wrath seemed to Sheila's warmer heart almost inhuman, although it extorted from her an unwilling admiration.

'I think I'd better clear out,' said Bunny, moving towards the door. 'Sorry to have been the cause of a disturbance.'

But Mrs. Fairfield's recovery was as abrupt as her collapse had been. From the arm-chair into which her husband had placed her she urged the young man to stay.

'Don't go, Bunny. I'm better now. It was my son upset me, not you. Come and tell me your news?'

She spoke in a languid faded tone, the tone of one bearing bravely an immense burden of wrongs.

'Well . . .' began Bunny nervously, glancing towards Sheila.

Edward, intercepting the glance, asked: 'Are we *de trop*, Bunny?'

Mr. Fairfield intervened. 'Edward and Miss Dyrle have just come to an understanding, Bunny.'

'An understanding?' asked Bunny.

'Yes. Bit of sweethearting, you know.'

'Really!' cried Bunny, beaming. 'I congratulate you. Well, that makes it easier for me. There'll be a double event.'

'A what?' demanded Mrs. Fairfield, all the languor gone from her.

'You see,' Bunny explained, 'I'm engaged to be married.'

'Well I declare!' said Mr. Fairfield. 'Engaged! Why, everybody's getting engaged. Time we set about it, mother, eh?'

Edward made a congratulatory noise. Only Mrs. Fairfield was silent, watching Bunny with feline intentness.

'Well,' she said sharply. 'Who's the young lady, Bunny?'

Bunny, with his hands in his pockets agitating a bunch of keys, stood first on one leg and then on the other.

'That was what I came for,' he said, blushing, 'to ask your blessing, don't you know. You see, Hypatia . . .'

'Yes,' said Mrs. Fairfield curtly. 'What about Hypatia?'

Even the amiable Bunny had not unlimited patience.

'Hypatia?' he said. 'Well, nothing about

her. You asked me who was the young lady. I've told you.'

'Hypatia!' demanded Mrs. Fairfield.

'Exactly,' answered Bunny, and strode out of the room.

'Herbert!' cried Mrs. Fairfield to her husband. 'Go after him. At once. Hypatia shan't have him. She shan't!'

'You'd better faint again, mother,' remarked Edward.

'Oh, Edward, how can you!' cried Sheila, stung to speech.

She beckoned him to the bay window, as Mrs. Fairfield followed her husband to the door.

'Edward,' Sheila said, 'are you sure you want me?'

He looked at her in surprise. 'You know I do.'

Sheila felt that her question needed an apology. 'It's only that I hate to cause a fuss. Your mother does loathe me, I'm sure.'

He took both her hands in his for a moment. 'Sheila, you're not going to forsake me, are you?'

'Not . . . if you really care,' she answered in a low voice.

Mrs. Fairfield from the passage stepped back into the room.

'Children!' she muttered, regarding the lovers with malevolence, 'children . . . no, vipers!'

Her husband returned, followed by Bunny wrapped in his dignity and by Hypatia armed with invincible placidity.

'Now understand this,' began Mrs. Fairfield. 'We old folk refuse to be ignored. We just won't put up with this insulting behaviour. You think we don't count, but we'll see. Bunny, let's hear no more of this nonsense about marrying Hypatia. You shall not marry her. You're a young snob. And Sheila shan't marry my Edward either. I won't be robbed of my children by young stuck-up creatures who despise me and my husband because we're in trade.'

'What a wicked lie!' exclaimed Sheila, with flashing eyes. 'You know we don't despise you! Everybody's parents are in trade . . . except Bunny's, I suppose.'

'Herbert! . . . Edward! Will you stand here and hear this girl call your mother a wicked liar?'

'Where do you want me to stand?' enquired Edward. 'Besides, I'm not Sheila's controller. I'm not even her parent.'

'You will leave my son alone,' said Mrs. Fairfield, struggling with her rising passion.

'Marry the Honourable Richard, if you want to marry.'

'But that would still leave Edward and Hypatia unmarried,' objected Bunny, lapsing into weak humour. 'They can't marry each other, you know.'

'And you leave Hypatia alone!' Hypatia's mother turned upon Bunny. 'I'll make father disinherit them both if they disobey me.'

'Is that all you have to say, mother?' asked Hypatia, with the patient smile of the Christian Scientist.

'No, it is *not* . . .'

'Well, it's quite enough,' Hypatia assured her. 'Come along, Bunny. Come and buy the licence.'

Without a word, the young man followed Hypatia out of the room.

The flame of battle was awake now in Sheila's heart, burning away all lingering reluctance, all doubts and fears. If there was to be a feud, there was no doubt upon which side she would fight. Age had declared war upon Youth, and all the spirit in her woke to the challenge. Edward, her comrade, was being threatened with disinheritance. Sheila knew now that she was irrevocably his: a hint of doubt would have been shameful treason. She forgot the cold formality of his attitude to

his mother : she remembered only his strength, his glorious unyielding strength.

'Look here, mother,' Edward was saying, 'you'll have to readjust your ideas a little.' He waved aside a hysterical interruption. 'No, it's no use indulging in heroics : your storming only makes me tired. Storm in a teacup, that's all. Listen to me.'

Mrs. Fairfield turned her back on him.

'Yes, listen like that, if you wish. It's extraordinarily rude, but never mind. I was saying that you've got to readjust your ideas a little. They're about a hundred years behind the times. We young people, as you call us, have as much right to live as you, and as much right to freedom.'

His mother wheeled round swiftly. 'Freedom ! You've had too much freedom !'

'Please don't interrupt,' said Edward. 'There's been quite enough shouting and stamping. I want you to reason the thing out calmly. Freedom consists in being left alone, left with room to grow, not in being penned round with affection and told every minute of the day that of course we can do as we like if we don't love mother and father.'

'You're hitting too hard,' whispered Sheila.

'You think,' Edward continued, 'because you've born and bred us and sacrificed your-

self for us that Hypatia and I belong to you.'

'Oh no, you don't belong to me,' said Mrs. Fairfield in fierce sarcasm. 'I'm only your mother : that's all.'

'Precisely,' said Edward. 'Our mother, not our owner. We belong to nobody. We have our separate lives to live, and we intend to live them in our own way.'

'You're mine, mine, mine!' protested his mother. 'Don't you feel any common gratitude for what I've done for you? I gave you life ; I fed you with my body ; and now—is this the end?'

'Those are services that cannot be repaid,' he answered, without any trace of emotion. 'If in return for what you did for me I had to submit to be your doll for ever, it were better that I had not been born at all.'

'Brutal, brutal!' interjected his father, waking from a spell of bewilderment.

'Perhaps,' conceded Edward, 'but it's nature. Nature is brutal. Do you think that because you gave me life, as you say, that you have the right to take it away, or smother it, or confine it, at your pleasure? You shut your eyes to logical inference. See to what absurd conclusions your wild unreasoning would lead you if you dared follow it to the

end. Time and again civilization has been hindered in its march . . .'

For a moment Sheila ceased her loyal silent applause to ask herself : Why does Edward talk like a parliamentary candidate ? But Mrs. Fairfield quickly distracted her attention from that question.

' I see,' she said, ' I'm nothing to you. I'm only your mother. This bit of a girl, who's done nothing for you, whom you've known ten minutes, is more to you than your mother is.'

Edward assented gravely. ' So much more than I propose to live with her and not with you. You were a bit of a girl yourself once, mother. If father had been more devoted to *his* mother than to you, you might have been a childless spinster at this moment.'

' Now then,' said Mr. Fairfield, briskly asserting himself. ' We've had about enough of this. Mother's had her say. And you've had yours. You've got the gift of the gab all right. Now just you cut along and leave your mother alone.'

' Herbert, he shan't have a penny of your money ! ' Mrs. Fairfield turned confidently to her husband for ratification of this threat. ' Tell him so.'

' We'll see. We'll see. I'm not dead yet,'

said the little man, with unwonted independence. 'I hadn't any pennies myself when I was his age.'

His wife turned upon him a terrible *Et tu Brute* look.

'Never you mind,' he retorted, with incredible courage. 'There's sense in what the lad says, even though he is a bit of a hard nut. Gets that from his father perhaps.'

'His father!' cried the mother in scorn. 'They're their mother's children, both of them. Else they'd never dare to treat me like this.'

There was pride as well as anger in the glance she flashed at Edward as she gathered up her skirts and rustled out of the room.

PART THE THIRD

Sheila Fairfield

I

ALL roads led to Edward Fairfield. His atheism, his sister, Aunt Hester's opposition, all conspired to fling Sheila into the polite dispassionate arms of that rational young graduate from Cambridge. Kay had offered romance without intellectual comradeship : Edward offered a kind of business partnership in the propagation of rational atheology, and this proved an irresistible bait for a spirited girl hustled by disaster into premature cynicism. Edward concerns us no further, save that he married her, respected her, and practised upon her the editorials that appeared week by week in his own paper *The Iconoclast.* Everything that he did was in perfect taste and supported by a perfect reason. When, for example, she declared their marriage a failure, he provided her with a pair of admir-

able rooms in his own well-appointed house, and lived thereafter in contented celibacy. He was just to the point of inhumanity ; but she, a disappointed woman, was not just. The efficient elegance of her home afflicted her. It seemed a mere piece of machinery for the daily manufacture of well-bred happiness. Her two rooms, until she had transformed them, seemed sleek, complacent : they announced to her, with the patient smile and in the incisive tones of a secularist lecturer, the supremacy of Reason. In herself, reason was far from supreme.

A woman with love must bestow it somewhere : Sheila poured it without stint upon her dream of Kay. Ten years divided them, and more, before that dream was finally destroyed. Sophie, his wife, gave birth to a child, and Sheila, impelled by who knows what medley of motives, visited her. They sat and talked about nothing in a room pervaded by yellow. A pale-brown flower perpetuated itself at intervals on the walls ; a small occasional table set in the middle of a dark yellowish carpet was covered by a buff cloth ; a gilt-framed oval mirror surmounted the mantelpiece. There were photographs on the mantelpiece of Sophie's father, of Sophie's child, of Sophie, and one of Kay standing stiffly with a

book in his hand—a cruel photograph, courageously signed by the photographer. Sheila gave no second glance to it.

She interrupted a remark of Sophie's about the chapel Dorcas Society by saying, 'Oh I forgot to ask—you don't mind Bernard being here, do you?'

'Bernard?' Sophie was mystified.

Sheila pointed to the Irish terrier that was frisking round her.

A little ripple of merriment came from Sophie.

'Do you call the dog Bernard? How funny! I love dogs, but father doesn't care for them . . . But of course he won't mind yours,' she added hastily.

Sheila tried to puzzle out how Mr. Dewick could even have a chance of objecting to her dog, but just then a diversion was created by the entry of a rather plump old-young man in a morning coat rubbing his hands together and making an indeterminate noise in a vague endeavour to be hospitable. He wore a little brown moustache and short side-whiskers near the ears. His hair had receded considerably, more especially where the parting was, and had left an expanse of shining brow.

'Well, well,' he said, nervously cheerful.

'How are you after all this while? I'm sure we're very pleased.'

Sheila recognized him instantly, although there seemed indeed nothing of the old Kay left to recognize. Yet this was Kay. This was he who years ago under the moon had whispered to her, with eyes full of dreams, his boyish love. Shades of the meeting-house had closed on that boy for ever.

Almost sick with disappointment, she shook hands with him, and quickly sought refuge in responding to the terrier's still frantic demonstrations.

'I hope you like my dog,' she remarked to Kay, shy of using his name.

'Yes, yes, fine fellow,' responded Kay. 'Come on, good dog, good dog!'

He patted the dog awkwardly.

'We call him Bernard,' explained Sheila, afraid of the smallest hiatus. 'George Bernard, because he's Irish and vivacious.'

Kay looked puzzled. 'But why . . . do you call him George Bernard? I didn't quite catch . . .'

'After Shaw, you know,' Sheila explained. 'We suspect Bernard of having been a distinguished playwright in a previous incarnation.'

'Oh I see!' said Kay, his brow clearing.

But it was knitted again the next moment. 'What was it the Reverend Aitken was saying about Shaw last Sunday, mother?'

'I remember something,' Sophie answered. 'I think he said he was a mountaineer, didn't he?'

'Mountaineer,' murmured Kay. 'I think not. Ah no, mountebank! That was the word.'

Here Sheila joined the conversation in a mildly argumentative vein, but Kay sidetracked by waxing indignant over the attempted introduction of a liturgy into divine service. He had set his face against *that*, he assured them: every true nonconformist at the church meeting had set his face against *that*, and right feeling had ultimately triumphed over the incipient popery. It appeared indeed that the cosmos was being conducted in an entirely proper manner, except for the wanton behaviour of the east wind. He considered the east wind very dangerous. He became impressive and told a long story about a man of his acquaintance who ventured out in an east wind without his overcoat, caught a chill, developed pneumonia, and had to take to his bed.

'Dead in a week!' finished Kay, dramatically and with relish.

Except for an appreciative murmur from

his wife, the story was received in silence. Sheila with a stunned sensation was telling herself : 'I would never have let him get like this.' But Kay, misinterpreting the silence, began another story. It concerned another man who ventured out in an east wind without his overcoat. This man had a similar series of adventures, his experience differing from the first man's only in that he lingered for two days and then died, leaving a widow and five children. Kay could not remember whether there were three boys and two girls, or three girls and two boys. He began naming them on his fingers. There were Horace and George, Margaret and Vera. That made four. He was sure there was another one—he remembered the child perfectly as a baby, but he could not for the life of him recall its sex. He felt sure that its name began with F.

He became perplexed.

'Mother, can't *you* remember?' he asked. The question was an accusation.

'Remember what, dear?' inquired Sophie in her gentle way.

'The name of Tomlinson's youngest. You remember Tomlinson.'

'I don't believe I do,' said Sophie.

Sheila sat silent, limp under the burden of

her disillusionment. She felt something like fear when Sophie, with a rapturous cry, 'She's awake!', rose and darted from the room to fetch her little girl. To hide her nervousness she said, 'Such an unusual name you gave her, didn't you? What made you think of Robina?'

While Kay was losing himself in explanations Sophie came back, leading her baby daughter by the hand. The mother's face was shining.

'Oh!' A passionate cry broke from Sheila. In a moment she was on her knees gazing with adoration at the flaxen-haired, elf-like child. For from the big dreaming eyes her vanished Kay looked at her; the wonderful boy dead and buried in a prematurely old man, lived again in this two-year old girl. Hungrily Sheila kissed the tiny face . . . and once again she felt his arm about her and heard his boyish whispers.

'Oh, give her to me!' she cried, looking up over the child's head at its father.

Kay's face lit up.

'I've got it now. I remember,' he said triumphantly.

'What?' asked Sophie, troubled by Sheila's emotion, and yet gratified by it.

'Why,' said Kay, 'the name of Tomlinson's

youngest. It was Freddie. I told you it began with an F.'

He looked round with modest pride, and was surprised to see Sheila burst into tears.

So that was the solution of the problem. The beauty of life was only for the young, the very young. In a child's heart and nowhere else the kingdom of heaven was to be found, a frail gossamer thing vanishing with the years. This was the common lot : by contact with the world to rub the down of paradise off our souls, to grow drab and dull in spirit, drab and dull in mind, even before that waning of physical strength which alone could assuage the bitterness of the process. In Kay youth had died ; in Edward—Edward had never been young ; but in herself youth lived and craved more life. Yes, it lived still, but now it was stricken and dying.

It flashed upon her then that she too could renew her youth. In a child she could live again.

But a child had been denied her.

She deemed her life to be already virtually finished. She would age from this moment : after a brief fever her mind would dim and even the desire for beauty would sink into oblivion. She tried to hope it would be soon,

but the struggling youth in her cried out against the hope.

2

The struggling youth in her cried out, and, years later, the cry was answered. Beauty became incarnated in the person of Stephen Redshawe, whose son she later encountered in the house at Maadi. The past rose in sad loveliness, enveloping her with the fragrance of pressed flowers ; but of all the memories that surged in her, this one alone broke in pitiless splendour over her consciousness. In that moment Stephen Redshawe lived again, less as a man and a lover than as a gleam, an ecstasy, a chord of divine music, a symbol of all that she had longed for and lost. Other things she could recall minutely, but Stephen remained a vague splendour. She recalled how, in her little cottage near Mundesley, she had waited for his promised coming ; how she had looked again and again, in wonder, to find in her mirror the face he had called lovely. It was a face ravaged less by her thirty-three years than by discontent. His sisters and his mother she remembered only as so many bundles of feminine hostility. They disapproved of her, and no wonder : was she

not a married woman, holiday-making alone, who yet suffered gladly the admiration of an infatuated boy? They called her adventuress, no doubt, and she, even in the midst of the adventure, made allowances for them. She had neither the strength nor the will to renounce the fairest gift that life offered.

'May I come in?' Stephen's tall figure filled the doorway.

'You must,' Sheila answered, with a smile. 'I'm not going to give you any tea while you stand there keeping the sunshine out.'

'This is our last meeting,' blundered Stephen. 'I want to tell you. . . .'

Suddenly dreading to hear the words for which she longed, Sheila fended them away. 'Eat your pretty cake,' she admonished him.

After tea they went out into the sandy paddock and talked for an hour of indifferent things, of trains, of luggage, of books and bad music . . . until a stillness fell, heralding dusk. Evening became personal and urgent to enfold them: they could hear in the wash of the water, rhythmically plashing the sand, the rise and fall of her bosom; they could feel her breath sweeter than apples in the autumn air. And all the skies that during the past weeks of stolen companionship they had seen together, all the tides they had watched moving

upon the shore, became fused with that sky, with that tide ; all the hours of their comradeship were gathered up into that hour. They surrendered themselves to the embracing arms of silence.

To Sheila it was as if infinity had been spilled into time : the moments throbbed by, brimming with beauty, until the silence that these two guarded became a music, a poem, a flower of loveliness. It was a flower that budded and blossomed till their vision dimmed with the glory of it, a flower that burst and fell scattering pollen and perfume.

He bent towards her, with cheeks flaming. 'You know, don't you ?' he said, and for a moment could not go on. To Sheila life was become exquisitely unreal, a work of art. 'You must know,' he said brokenly, 'that I adore you.'

Compassionately she laid her cool hand on his.

'Yes,' she said, in a low tone tenderly soothing.

'Ah !' His breath fluttered. She gave him her trembling lips.

They kissed, first, like boy and girl, timidly ; then like comrades united after a long parting ; again, and a red splendour flamed through the throbbing world. He lifted her into his

arms, and divine madness seized her. He carried her with strong unfaltering stride into the house.

And this day, which they had called the end, was really the beginning. She returned on the morrow to Edward's house and confided to her husband that she wished him to divorce her. Edward listened patiently, like the disinterested friend he was ; but his disinterestedness made her pride wince, and the old hated surroundings were bleak about her. Yet on that night of her return, in the sanctuary of her bedroom, she undressed with a new joy. She stood nude before the wardrobe mirror and gazed with awe upon the pure rounded loveliness of her own form. She stroked gently her white velvet skin. Her body, so long disdained, had become sacred to her again. As she laid her head, that kingdom of heaven, upon her pillow, and murmured Stephen's name, Stephen himself, in a suburb fourteen miles away, posted his weekly letter to the girl—no adventuress, she—who was to become his wife and the mother of his only son. For Stephen, too, was back in the old routine, enfolded and pressed close to the bosom of his family, conscious of his mother's eyes watching him with an angry solicitude. Not without a struggle did he succumb. To

Grace, whose pretty simplicity no longer held him, he hinted dire things ; but at the first gesture of suffering from her he winced, and surrendered. And he wrote to Sheila in his best literary style. She carried the letter, as she had carried its predecessors, into the summer-house, that she might commune with her lover undisturbed.

'Darling,' she read, 'the thought of how I must hurt you is hell to me.'

She caught her breath, looked once upon the sky, and then bent her eyes again to receive the blow. . . .

With mind benumbed she looked up from the fastidious caligraphy to find Stephen himself standing, like a whipped dog, before her. For a moment they strangely stared.

'Why have you come?'

He broke out into self-pity. 'Oh, I can't bear it. Don't for God's sake look like that. . . . I couldn't leave you without a word from your lips.'

She tried to harden her heart. 'Is that all?'

His hands made a helpless gesture. 'I'm such a despicable coward. I've lived always among dreams. Real life is too hard for me—I'd be better dead.'

'Why have you come?' she asked. 'Have

you anything to add to this?' She held out his letter. 'Why not leave 'it at that?'

'I had to see you,' he said. 'I had to ask your forgiveness. I hoped to get here before that thing. Oh, how detestable I am!'

He dropped on to the seat beside her and sat, hunched and shaking, a figure of desolation.

'Never mind,' said Sheila firmly. 'Don't cry over spilt milk. You're quite free now to go back to her. And you've done me no harm.'

He stammered in amazement. 'You can say that! Don't you see how contemptible I am! I would like to kill myself!'

He brooded on that thought. Death was the only escape from his own insufferable egoism. Then he began to perceive that he was extracting enjoyment even from the savour of his own self-loathing. He was rolling the bitterness round on his tongue till it had a certain sweetness for him. He was indulging in an orgy of painful emotions that was delicious to the very egoism it wounded. He was discovering hitherto unplumbed depths in his nature and being fascinated by the stupendous spectacle of his own soul's suffering. And he knew that the experience was far too morbidly interesting to drive him to suicide.

The perception of his self-pity afflicted Sheila with a new and more sickening pain. Something of this change must have been visible in her face, for with a manifest effort he became calm, and began speaking in more normal tones.

'Perhaps we shall be glad afterwards,' he said slowly. 'The scandal would have killed my mother . . .'

Sheila winced. 'Oh, Stephen, are you trying to make me hate you? Why did you say that? . . .'

'Why——'

'Why do you talk in that unreal way? Why do you pretend . . . try at the last moment to blind me with false pious reasoning!'

'But what I said about my mother——'

'—Was false as water. You didn't mean a word of it. You are too dreadfully sorry for yourself to care about your mother. You're breaking faith, and because it hurts you you're trying to feel good about it. God knows I haven't disputed your decision—nor even blamed you for it. But now, please go!'

He rose. 'I am not to come back?'

'No, no. Go away.'

'But, Sheila——'

'Why will you torture me so?' she cried. 'It's your own choice. If only you'd never

come to-night—it would have been so much kinder.'

'Oh, I can't bear this!' He trembled towards her.

She rose, to confront him with lustreless eyes.

'Are you made of straw? Can you neither take me nor leave me? . . . Good-bye.'

'God, how you hate me now!' he murmured, as she swept past him.

She paused to say: 'That should be nothing to you. But it's not true. You have done me no harm. I had never known happiness before you came . . . but,' she added, with his child in her womb, 'I shall soon forget, and you will have made no difference. None at all.'

She stumbled out into the hateful sunlight and went, half-running, towards the house.

3

In Edward's house, and with Edward's bored approval—for he was busy at the time on a scathing history of the Jesuits—Stephen's child was born. And, in the triumph that followed agony, the spirit of Sheila rose from the dead. Four years later, determined to purge herself of bitterness, she visited the scene of her love. When she entered the

paddock again, her silent but excited child at her side, her eyes filled with tears at the sight of the old romantic disorder that had once so charmed her. 'These poppies,' her heart said, 'are children of flowers that witnessed our love.' The paddock was shut in on three sides by a hedge of briar. In the long rank grass numberless weeds had rioted unchecked for many years, and the hand of the picnicker lay heavy on the land. A medley of docks, nettles, thistles, poppies, empty cigarette packets, paper bags, ginger-beer bottles, and corks, greeted Sheila's eyes. 'What a pickle!' she said.

'What a lovely pickle, Sheila,' the little girl echoed. She began collecting corks with the solemnity of an elderly spinster gathering a cautionary nosegay for a drunkard's grave. This was a simile that Sheila, gravely nonsensical, suggested to Rosemary, who with perfect dignity assented. 'How fortunate that Edward isn't here to be shocked by my vulgarity,' Sheila thought.

Entering the house she found there matter for surprise: a greasy plate, a crust of bread, and a breakfast cup, caked with tannin, standing ankle-deep in a saucer half-full of spilt tea. The next moment Mrs. Boddy arrived, a little red berry of humanity to whom had been entrusted

a duplicate key and the duty of preparing the place for habitation.

'Oh, ma'am!' said Mrs. Boddy. 'To think that you should have got 'ere before me, without a bit of tea ready or nothing.' The sight of those inglorious festal remains was the culminating assault on her feelings. 'There! Just look at that.'

Sheila nodded, smiling. 'Some one's been here evidently. The question is, Who?'

'And how?' added Mrs. Boddy. ''Ow?' she repeated, by way of emphasis. 'And oh,' she cried, enveloping Rosemary, 'here's the dear little ducky duck. Hasn't she got a kiss for the wicked old woman that didn't get her mother's tea ready?'

Having released Rosemary, Mrs. Boddy stood brooding. 'There's been a man here. One of those persons of the tramp class.'

After a moment's contemplation of this hypothetical tramp, 'It's not at all nice,' she added, and drew away from the polluted table. 'You might be murdered in your beds.'

'Well, if one must be murdered, one could hardly choose a more comfortable place,' said Sheila. 'Let's try to make a fire to boil the kettle on, shall we? I'm longing for my tea.'

Mrs. Boddy became the embodiment of

bustle. She shot out of the house in search of dry sticks for the fire.

'And do you know what I would do if I were you, ma'am?' she enquired, reappearing after a brief and successful forage. 'I'd have my tea and go straight back to town. Straight back. I wouldn't stay another minute.'

'Not stay!' echoed Sheila in weak astonishment. 'Not stay for a holiday?'

'Not to be murdered, I wouldn't.'

'After coming all this way?'

'Not to be murdered,' repeated Mrs. Boddy firmly.

'But perhaps we shan't be murdered.'

'You mark my words,' Mrs. Boddy admonished her.

Sheila laughed. 'I'm not going to be frightened away by a dirty cup and saucer.'

'Well, let's hope for the best,' said Mrs. Boddy, with an unexpected access of cheerfulness. 'And after all, if anything nasty *does* happen, I'm not above half a mile away, am I?'

She emerged, goggle-eyed, from the pantry.

'And blest if me lord haven't helped himself to the stores I got in for you!' she exclaimed, shrilly indignant; and then, with lingering pathos: 'Oh, *ma'am*!'

After tea Mrs. Boddy went home, and Sheila took her child into the belittered paddock, and sat in a deck chair, crocheting, and watching the shadows lengthen, while Rosemary in her busily silent fashion wandered in the long grasses. From time to time the little girl took an occasional bite out of an apple with which Mrs. Boddy had sought to win her regard, until she made a discovery that sent her running to her mother, somewhat sternly demanding why she had been given an apple from which the cork had not been removed. Later, the paddock was invaded by a sleek brown dog with melancholy eyes, velvet ears, and a general air of unctuous virtue, with whom Rosemary instantly made friends.

'What a dear dog,' she said, returning to Sheila's chair after spending twenty minutes in the company of this engaging creature.

'Yes. He seems at home here,' replied Sheila, thinking of Mrs. Boddy's tramp.

'Of *course* he's at home,' said the child with magisterial emphasis. 'I asked him to make himself at home. And he did.'

'How friendly of him.' Sheila's eyes drank in eagerly the absurd delicious gravity of Rosemary's thought-puckered face. 'I wonder what his name is.'

'His name,' answered the child casually, 'is Poker.' After a pause she added: 'Poker Morgan his name is. He's just come home from school.' Sheila waited with becoming seriousness for further details of Poker Morgan's eventful life. 'He goes to school every day,' Rosemary went on. 'Every day except Sunday. On Sunday he doesn't go to school, he doesn't. He stays at home with his mother.'

'How nice for Mrs. Morgan,' said Sheila. 'And what does Poker learn at school?'

'Oh, just lessons; that's all.' Rosemary dismissed the question with the air of having sufficiently explained everything. 'May I have another sponge finger, please, Sheila?'

Irresponsibly light-hearted, Sheila retired to bed, joining Rosemary in the little attic room with the homicidal slanting roof. She stood for some time at the east window, bathing in the moonlight, and looking towards the sea which broke within twenty yards of the crumbling wall. The wind fluttered her night-dress.

Nocturnal calm was abruptly shattered by a beer-thickened voice uttering a passionate demand for admittance. Sheila stepped quickly across the room to the western window.

'You let me in before yourrurt,' urged the

voice. And Sheila, leaning out of the window, saw a gentleman in baggy corduroys that were tied with string at the knees peering up at her malevolently from under a huge cloth cap. The moon focussed her light upon his impressive figure.

'Mrs. Boddy's tramp,' murmured Sheila, secure in the knowledge of having made fast all doors and windows.

'I'll soon show you whose 'ouse it is,' promised the gentleman in the garden.

'Please go away,' Sheila advised him. 'I'm sure you must be ready for your bed.'

Mrs. Boddy's tramp found this well-meant counsel literally staggering. He executed a series of curious plunges, and having described a complete circle resumed his original stance.

'Oh, it's go away, is it?'

'It really is,' Sheila assured him. 'I'm too tired to entertain a strayed reveller. Please go away. I'm going to shut the window.'

'Oh, it's shut the window, is it? . . .' enquired the strange gentleman, in a slightly more conciliatory tone. ''Oose window? Answer me that.'

But the spirit of nonsense in Sheila had tired itself out. She withdrew into the room, and when the voice broke loose again from its owner's control, she began to feel impatient.

Presently this nuisance would waken Rosemary, and perhaps even frighten her. This fear sent her quickly back to the window.

'If you don't go away at once my husband will fetch a policeman.'

'I'm a Nopper by trade,' continued the visitor, unaccountably and savagely hurling his cap on the ground. 'Can't I turn me head a minute without a mob like you stealing the 'ouse off me back? Answer me that.'

The serene little figure of Rosemary sat up suddenly in bed.

'Who's that shouting to you, Sheila?'

'The gentleman's a hopper, dear. Go to sleep again, like a good girl.'

'I don't like him,' said Rosemary. 'Tell Mr. Hopper to go away.'

Sheila shut the window; and after a while the visitor withdrew, leaving behind him a dirty cloth cap and the germ of a new mythology.

In the morning Rosemary found inscrutable but sufficient cause to reverse her condemnation of Mr. Hopper. She spent the odd moments of the next day embellishing the ideal portrait that her surprising young fancy had drawn. At breakfast Mr. Hopper was a nice large gentleman; by lunchtime he was wearing blue spectacles, had developed a taste for

sponge fingers, and was clad in a velvet jacket, like Edward's, with cavernous pockets containing a clockwork train and a woolly-pated black doll. The next day he mysteriously acquired a brown beard and a pair of spotty trousers similar to those of a certain harlequin prominent among Rosemary's cherished memories, and before the week was out he was provided with a Botticelli halo that added sanctity to an already distinguished appearance. Stories of his wonderful doings began to circulate : how he had travelled in a train to the City to buy feeding-bottles for Rosemary's children ; how his several mothers (a generic term that included wives) had had to physic his cough ; and how bravely he could ride elephants. Mr. Hopper had various secondary designations : sometimes he was known as the man with a lot of mothers (a distinction he perhaps derived from Bluebeard) ; sometimes, more tersely, as 'my friend' ; and sometimes as Poker Morgan's father. In short Mr. Hopper was canonized ; Mr. Hopper became a legend. He went triumphantly upon his swaggering, nonsensical, polygamous, but none the less kindly way in Rosemary's mind, a figure of flaming glory and infinite adaptability ; until abruptly, and without pity, she tired of him and turned to other joys.

On Sunday morning she was taken, for the first time, to church; whence she returned consumingly curious. To Sheila, who had hoped for no more than a vague æsthetic enjoyment, the ceremony had been disappointing. She felt unequal to explaining why Rosemary must on no account bestow the big pockets and spotty trousers of her generous imagination upon members of the Holy Trinity, whose names the little girl had fatally remembered. But blasphemy being so clearly imminent, Sheila addressed herself with a sigh to the task of averting it.

'Jesus, dear, was the name of a real person, someone who really lived. Not like Mr. Hopper.'

Rosemary's intense dark eyes grew profoundly reproachful. This lapse from poetic faith on the part of so skilled a fellow-artist as Sheila was terrible. It was as though the whole beautiful city of pretence was threatened with hostile invasion.

'But Mr. Hopper is real too,' Rosemary said, with quivering lip.

'Of course he is,' agreed Sheila hastily. 'How silly of me! But he is different. You mustn't mix him up with these others.'

When some working agreement in this delicate matter had been reached, they went

to the beach together to dig sand castles and tell each other stories : an idyllic experience, type of many shared during this magical holiday.

4

Then upon the smooth sands of this quietude Terror planted his ugly hoof. Rosemary was seized with illness. Unaccountably, in spite of Sheila's lavish care, she had caught a dangerous chill.

Sheila locked up the house, and ran, already feverish with anxiety, to Mrs. Boddy. She arrived breathless, to find that amiable woman with her arms up to the elbows in soapy water.

'It's Rosemary—she's ill,' gasped Sheila. 'Please fetch someone quickly.' She dropped into the nearest chair, breathing hard.

The red hands leaped out of the wash-tub and were rubbed on an immaculate white apron.

'Pore lamb!' cried Mrs. Boddy. 'What's wrong with her?'

Sheila was now upon her feet again, her breath recovered. 'I don't quite know. She caught cold yesterday. I doctored her as best I could. But this morning she's worse

—breathing badly and almost delirious. Please go at once. She's alone in the house—I'm going back.'

The vision of the sick child calling in vain for its mother stabbed Sheila to an impossible speed. After running a few hundred yards she was overtaken and picked up by a man driving a trap.

Back in the cottage, 'I must keep calm. I mustn't lose control of myself,' she urged upon her wildly beating heart; and she climbed the stairs trying not to be terrified by the deathly silence of the place. When she opened the bedroom door she could hear the sawing noise of the child's breathing, and fear laid a cold finger on her brain: could that be what they called the death-rattle?

'Ah,' she said, half-aloud, 'if I lose my nerve I shall be useless to her in her greatest need.' And, deciding that she could do no more, she forced herself to sit down and await with iron patience the doctor's coming. She wondered whether she would do wrong if she opened the window she had in her first panic shut. The room was unbearably stuffy. 'Pure air *must* be better than bad,' she told herself; and unfastened the catch. The garden seemed full of sunshine and birds and the smell of honeysuckle.

She turned her head at the sound of steps on the stairs. 'At last!'

A commanding and resolute female figure appeared in the doorway: Edward's sister, Hypatia.

'Well, Sheila,' said Hypatia, humorously grim. 'You keep open house, I see.'

Sheila stared, unable and uncaring to hide her disappointment. 'Oh, you mean my leaving the front door open. That's for the doctor.'

Hypatia stepped into the room. 'Something's wrong.' Her tone became gentle as her glance fell upon Rosemary. 'Rosemary —she's ill?'

'Yes . . . Rosemary.' Sheila's voice lingeringly caressed the name.

'Poor little kid,' Hypatia murmured. 'What is it?'

In an undertone Sheila began repeating her simple story. 'Oh, I do wish the doctor would come!' she broke off. 'It may be pneumonia or something even more dreadful.'

Instantly forgetting Hypatia, she paced to the door and began running downstairs. And at that moment a trap drew up outside the house, and the doctor entered, followed at a respectful distance by Mrs. Boddy. He was a tall curvilinear man with a stoop

and an air of intense preoccupation. With a perfunctory response to Sheila's eager greeting he followed her upstairs. Furtively, with eyes veiling mistrust, she watched him approach the bedside.

Twenty seconds later her feelings towards him had totally changed. He won her heart by the smile that flickered for a moment in his face at first sight of his patient, and by the gentleness with which he unclasped Rosemary's fingers from the woolly bear that her arm embraced. Sheila gave herself to the answering of his professional questions.

Her fears a little stilled by the doctor's reassurances, she surrendered to Hypatia's importunity by withdrawing with her into the garden for a few moments.

'Now, Sheila, my dear,' Hypatia urged, taking her arm with a sisterly caressing, 'you're not to worry. Worry's fatal. The kid's going to get well quite soon.'

'Do you really think so?' asked Sheila, pathetically eager.

Hypatia feigned exasperated wonder. 'Well, I'm dashed!' she exclaimed, in the old schoolgirl tone of nearly forty years ago. 'What's the good of calling in a doctor and paying him ridiculous fees if you don't believe what

he tells you? Didn't Mr. New Moon say she'd be out of bed in a fortnight?'

'With care,' supplemented Sheila, on whose brain the doctor's words were indelibly written.

'Of course, with care. Without care we should all come to grief.'

Sheila faintly smiled. 'Do you remember when you so hotly denied the reality of sin, sickness, and death?'

'Ah, that's long ago,' said Hypatia good-humouredly. 'I've had a varied career since then. Still, we live and learn.'

'What's the latest?' asked Sheila.

'The latest?'

'The latest religious nostrum.'

'Back in the fold for a time.' Hypatia seemed to enjoy the new-found pleasure of poking fun at herself. 'Do you remember Herbert Spencer, Sheila? But one can't rest there. For me it's Woman Suffrage now. It's got to come. And I'm reading Butler again. Good stuff. *Life and Habit* especially, and *Unconscious Memory*. Jumps on Darwin for having banished mind from the universe. But you haven't asked me why I've come yet. Aren't you surprised to see me?'

'Why have you come?' Sheila asked obediently. 'I'm very glad you did come,' she added.

'I wonder if you are really,' mused Hypatia. 'We've been too polite to each other since we were married, Sheila, too polite to be quite good friends. Never mind. I came to say good-bye. Bunny's got a job in Cairo. Something to do with irrigation. The sort of thing he wanted.'

'Must I congratulate you?' said Sheila. 'No, I won't. You two are going to Egypt, and I shall never see you again. How very unpleasant of you.'

'I wish you could come too. But Edward couldn't very well move his little pet idol *The Iconoclast* to Cairo.'

'Oh, that wouldn't matter to me.' Sheila was too weary to maintain a pretence.

Hypatia raised her eyebrows. 'You've quarrelled?'

'My dear Hypatia, can you imagine Edward being so unreasonable as to quarrel? We could part without tears, I assure you. But that doesn't mean I can come to Cairo with you. There's Rosemary to consider.'

Hypatia smiled grimly. 'That's very thin. Go and pack your trunk for Egypt, Sheila.'

Conversation was cut short by the arrival of the doctor.

'She is already a little more comfortable,' he assured Sheila, 'and sleeping.' A fugitive

smile crossed his face. 'She is talking in her sleep about fire-irons, so far as I can make out. A certain poker . . .'

'Oh, that's Poker Morgan,' interposed Sheila, happy at the sound of so friendly a name. 'When will you come again?'

'Mrs. Boddy is with the patient. An admirable person. I shall call again to-night. Now, Mrs. Fairfield, are you a sensible woman?'

Sheila, eagerly submissive, hoped that she was. 'I'll do anything for her that you tell me. She's all I've got.'

'I'm sure you will,' he said. 'But if you're a sensible woman you'll not be alarmed when I suggest taking a second professional opinion.'

'Please do,' begged Sheila, who had long made a secret determination to insist on such a precaution.

'It's not that I'm afraid about the child. But I'm a cautious man. And I've never held omniscience to be part of a physician's equipment. She has had these chills before?'

'Frequently, but never so badly.'

'The nose and throat are affected,' said the curving doctor. 'She's acutely susceptible to cold. Treacherous east winds about. Bad place, England, for a constitution like hers.

You should take her to a warm climate : warm and dry.'

With a boyish air of having finished a necessary recital he raised his hat and began picking his way across the wilderness of paddock.

Sheila glanced at her friend's face. Triumph danced in the eyes of Hypatia.

PART THE FOURTH

Evening of the Same Day

'SLIP away while you can, and have a look at my Thought Forms,' Mr. Bunnard had urged the agitated young man ; and by politely acquiescing Stephen Redshawe's son had condemned himself to suffer a two hours' mystical monologue illustrated by coloured drawings. When they at last emerged from what the old gentleman termed, with accidental aptness, his den, the Egyptian dark had come, not at one stride yet swiftly, to envelop the house at Maadi.

But the darkness of this particular April evening was but a more exquisite light : day seen through a veil of mystery, purged of its glare. Moon shed her unearthly pallor over the piazza with its pattern in ochre and green, and silvered the leaves of the lebbek trees in the garden. The intense dark blue of the sky was numerously divided by the fine mesh of the mosquito netting that clung to the sup-

porting white columns. When Rosemary left the piano and sat down in the deck-chair opposite Redshawe, only the incessant dry rattle of crickets remained to make the stillness musical. She came like cool rain ; she seemed to bring with her a dewy grace that dispelled the languor wrought in him by the too-intoxicating syringa ; and he reposed gratefully in the unmeasured comfort of her nearness.

Redshawe, dilettante in letters, groped in his mind for a phrase that should symbolize the baffling quality in her : a quality as indefinable as the fragrance of musk-roses. ' Incarnate stillness ' hovered for his choosing ; but the futility of his efforts becoming thereby so patent, he abandoned the search, quite reverently sighing. Stillness, silence, the very spirit of quietude, in her became personal. She had light brown hair and olive skin ; she was perhaps twenty-five years old ; but her unfathomable dark eyes gazed from an oval face absurdly angelic with the sublime gravity of a child. With Mrs. Bunnard rasping on one side of him and Mr. Bunnard chirping a high-pitched chorus part on the other, Redshawe strained his ears to catch Rosemary's soft tones. In conversation she palpitated an innocent curiosity. She focussed those twin orbs of mystery upon his religious doubts ;

and not all the mature intelligence of her arguments could obscure for him the shining of her angel-infancy. That very phrase flashed on him while they talked, an echo from his reading, suggesting another, from the same source, that for a while almost satisfied his longing for an adequate symbol. 'A white celestial thought.' Yes : Rosemary herself was a white celestial thought.

'The fundamental cause of reincarnation,' said Mrs. Bunnard firmly, 'is, as you know, the lust for sentient life. Once we have conquered that——'

'We shall have reached a consummation,' interpolated her husband, 'much, as Shakespeare says, to be desired.'

'The law of periodicity, Mr. Redshawe,' Mrs. Bunnard assured him, 'is perfectly obvious and understandable. Night and day, life and death, sleeping and waking—all these simple alternations are but manifestations of a universal rhythm.'

Not to be outdone, 'The systole and diastole,' cried Mr. Bunnard, deftly inserting a smile and a phrase into the manifest gap, 'the systole and diastole of the Cosmic Heart.'

Desperately, like a goaded animal, 'But what,' asked Redshawe, 'has all this God-throb . . .'

A surprising ripple of laughter arrested his question and drew his eyes back to Rosemary. Sheila came generously to the rescue and distracted to herself the enemy's fire. In a little while Mrs. Bunnard withdrew to her bedroom with the announced intention of meditating ; and the battle raged less furiously between the two remaining elders : so healingly less that Redshawe had a beatific sense of being alone in the universe with his divinity.

He plunged deeply into the cool waters of her elusive beauty, and they talked eagerly, yet with harmonious pauses . . . until he chanced to see that on the third finger of her left hand she wore a plain gold ring.

Too desperately stricken to pay another moment's homage to his ideal English reticence, he in effect ran like a hurt child to Rosemary's mother by contriving an early opportunity of solitary speech with her. He the more readily exposed his wound to Sheila because he now perceived what until the shattering to bits of his fool's paradise had been beyond his vision : that Sheila too was suffering.

'She's married!' he protested to her.

'Rosemary?' she wearily answered him.

'Rosemary, of course,' he cried, forgetting

both patience and ceremony. 'You didn't tell me.'

'I didn't tell you?' Sheila repeated in astonishment.

Flushed and gloomy, he made equine plunges towards the explanation he considered so superfluous.

'Well, didn't you know? Of course, you must have known. Yet how should you?'

'Know!' echoed Sheila. 'Know that she was married?'

'No, no.' Impatiently he shook the suggestion away. 'What it means to me—you must have known that?'

'My poor boy! What *does* it mean to you?'

They stared at each other with troubled eyes.

'Everything,' answered his helpless gesture.

Her face contracted with pain. She bowed her head. With pain, swiftly, she bowed her head. For one terrible moment he thought she was going to weep.

He put his arm round her shoulders.

'It must be much worse for you,' he said vaguely, wishing to help. Already he knew dimly that he, being young, would forget some day.

She moved gently away from him. 'But we mustn't be tragic, must we?' she said,

trying to smile. 'You don't quite understand.'

'I understand something,' he pleaded, lest his sympathy should be repulsed. 'So very little, but something. I've loved her for weeks . . . but she must be infinitely more to you.'

'I wasn't thinking of Rosemary,' said Sheila. 'Please don't look quite like that,' she almost passionately added.

He trod the fringe of the incomprehensible. 'Ah, you were thinking . . . My way of speaking perhaps reminded you . . .'

'I was thinking of Rosemary's father,' Sheila abruptly assured him. 'And so you are in love with my daughter, are you?' She spoke almost coldly. 'Would you think me very bitter if I congratulated you on losing her?'

His face was all question.

'She would have broken your heart. She is very hard to those that love her.'

'Hard!' His tone was almost scornful in its incredulity. 'With the face of an angel and the wondering eyes of a child!'

'Yes. Have you never seen a child pick wings off flies? Rosemary is still a child. Enchanting. Sweet beyond words. But with a child's incapacity for love.'

'But she's *married*!'

'Yes,' Sheila answered, with dreadful serenity. 'She was married this afternoon, when I supposed her to be at the Lodge with her aunt. She dropped in somewhere to be married, and picked up Hypatia on the way home.'

'But . . .' Redshawe was helpless.

'Oh, I knew it must come soon. She had been engaged for some years.'

'May I ask to whom?'

'The Reverend Oliver Wendell Brunt, an American gentleman.'

Redshawe paced the room. 'And where in thunder is he?'

'On his knees, no doubt, invoking God's blessing on his work in China. He is a missionary. They leave to-morrow together. They've just had the call from God and must obey at once. Rosemary has apologized very nicely for her eccentricity. She was afraid I might make a fuss, and cry at the ceremony; so she arranged it this way. And she just doesn't understand what it all means to me.'

'What an inhuman crowd they are!' muttered Redshawe. And he gasped to recall Rosemary's serene bearing, her untroubled beauty, her lucid reasoning, her faultless rendering of Scriabine, and the placid prattle of her uncle and aunt. An incredible household.

Silence fell between them.

'Forgive me, Mrs. Fairfield,' broke out Redshawe after a while. 'I shouldn't have blundered in with my self-pity. But mine isn't a boyish fancy or any rot of that kind. To me she is just pure beauty. I've always worshipped beauty. I could have poured out my life like wine at her feet.'

'And to me,' said Sheila, 'she was a little helpless thing that fumbled at my breasts. She's been my whole life for twenty-six years. I waited for her coming as for the coming of God. . . . Let's go in: they'll be waiting supper for us!'

Sadly, 'Life seems to promise so much,' Redshawe began, with the unique solemnity of adolescence. 'Beauty stands in the doorway and beckons . . . and when we follow she's vanished.'

'Lucky boy!' with a wan smile Sheila said to him. 'You'll be busy writing lyrics about this to-morrow.'

The door opened noiselessly, and in the doorway, two slender white fingers resting on the handle, stood Rosemary, lightly poised on her toes as though for celestial flight. Her eyes sparkled with an almost stellar radiance; her cheeks were delicately flushed, and her lips a little parted, like the petals of an awakening rosebud. Redshawe, abashed at the memory

of having criticized her for inhumanity, worshipped once more her divinity, lapsed into mute adoration ; and Sheila held her breath, telling herself : 'I may never see her stand like that again.'

'Supper's ready, mother. I'm sure you're both hungry.' The words did but tremble in the air for a moment, and then became no more than an imperishable memory for mother and lover.

'Do let me take you in, Mrs. Fairfield,' said Redshawe, affectionately, compassionately gallant ; and as Sheila, a little tremulous but gravely mistress of herself, took the arm he offered, 'Thank you, my dear,' she rewarded him. But in her heart she was saying : 'The last supper.'