JOHN COLLIER

DEFY THE FOUL FIEND

PENGUIN BOOKS

FICTION

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666

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Willoughby was the illegitimate son of Lord Ollebeare, a genial soul 'with a face like a coat of arms' and no sense of responsibility to worry him at all. So when the misfortune of his son's birth impinged upon the noble lord's peace of mind he promptly farmed out young Willoughby to an unwilling and unamiable brother, who was not the least interested in the poor boy. Willoughby grew up uncared for, yet not wholly unhappy, and when he reached the age of twenty, and it became necessary to give him a start in Life, he found he had much to learn (for he had no education at all) and still more to enjoy (for having no education he had developed few inhibitions).

For a time he lived an almost vagabond life, which suited him well enough until he met Lucy. Then the complications began to multiply. Lucy's life had been as settled as his had been perturbed, and she was as much in love with him as he with her. Yet neither was wise enough to make a life together, nor decisive enough to part company. *Defy the Foul Fiend* tells the story of their struggle with each other, of their parting, their marriage and its failure. It is a narrative rich in sardonic humour, yet animated by a spirit of compassion.

PENGUIN BOOKS

666

DEFY THE FOUL FIEND

BY JOHN COLLIER

DEFY THE FOUL FIEND

OR THE MISADVENTURES OF A HEART

BY

JOHN COLLIER

'Keep thy foot out of brothels,
thy hand out of plackets, thy
pen from lenders' books, and
defy the foul fiend.'

SHAKESPEARE

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED
AFFECTIONATELY AND GRATEFULLY
TO
A. D. PETERS

CHAPTER I

Lord Ollebeare – His cook – Our hero –
Ralph Corbo – I am a villain –
A good heart

LORD OLLEBEARE had a face like a coat of arms. His nose might have been a fist, clenched and mailed, gules. In fact, he was one of those men you sometimes see in the street. His moustaches were two dolphins argent, his eyes two étoiles azur. He had also an inalienable two hundred a year, paid weekly, a top bed-sitting-room with a good toasting fire to it, six Norman names, a ruined house, a wild park, and one large and barren farm. That was all the land he might not sell; his next brother held it, and paid him his two hundred a year.

Twenty-odd years ago, for we must hark back a little, he had had less nose, more money, much credit, and the best suite in Albany. There he had a charming cook, on whom, in the most careless fashion imaginable, he begot the hero of this story.

She was so exceedingly honest, this charming cook, that when she ran away with a lawyer's clerk, whom business brought frequently to the door, she could not bring herself to take the principal gift of Lord Ollebeare's bestowing, but left it in his bed awaiting him, that he might sleep the warmer for it, if not perhaps quite as dry.

Lord Ollebeare was no niggard of life's blessings; he gave our hero next day to a brother, not the one who lived in Gloucestershire on the remnant of the estate, but the youngest of the three, a prim stick, who had made a good thing of his patrimony, and who lived at Reigate in what would have been the snuggest box imaginable, except that no one ever felt the least bit snug in it. Lord Ollebeare was as delicate as he was generous, and belittled his princeliness, which might other-

wise have been embarrassing to his brother's independent feelings, by describing this really splendid child as a loan.

'It must suck,' he said, 'and that's not at all in my line. I know nothing about wet-nurses or milk bottles. You, Clarry,' said he to his sister-in-law, 'you must fit the child out with one, or it will surely starve. I'll come back when all's fixed, and then we shall see.'

His sister-in-law looked plaintively at her husband, who frowned. Our hero set up a yell. 'We must see to this,' said she.

'Very well, my dear,' he replied. 'Produce your nurse, keep her here for a day or two under your supervision; when you are satisfied that she is trustworthy, Richard will make his arrangements.'

'Thank you very much,' struck in Lord Ollebeare. 'Damn it, Ralph, I take this very kindly from you.'

'My wife is present,' replied his brother, without any warmth whatever. 'She is holding in her arms such tangible evidence of your character, that oaths are quite a superfluous corroboration.'

'God! That's fine,' cried his elder. 'How you think of such ways of putting things beats me altogether. But, Clarry, I'd be sorry to annoy you by a hasty word. I'm grateful to you, and to you, Ralph; I know how any disturbance makes you look lemonish about the chops. It's good of you.'

'Don't waste your thanks,' replied his brother. 'I shall spend a week in Paris while this nuisance continues. Be sure you take the child away by the fourth day at latest, and you, Clara, have the house aired from attic to cellar against my return.'

Now when he was on his way back from Paris a week later, his train halted on the points outside Calais. The south-bound train came bumping slowly past; he saw Lord Ollebeare sitting smiling in one of the carriages. There was no sign he had with him either child or wet-nurse; in fact there were two or three adult males in his company, and it seemed very much as if they were arranging themselves for a game of cards. Next moment the vision was gone.

Ralph Corbo reached his home in a state of great excitement. 'Richard has not called for the child,' said his wife.

'You simpleton!' said he. 'You obstinate simpleton! I gave you a look, you saw it; don't say otherwise. You took the brat against my wishes, and now we are saddled with it for God knows how long. Damn and blast the day that I married a fool!'

Hitherto he had rather avoided his elder brother, now the boot was on the other leg. Ralph Corbo employed agents, took journeys, put himself out in all ways to find Lord Ollebeare, not in much hope of him taking back the child, but just to elicit a definite refusal from him, so that it might be sent to an orphanage. He went to Monte Carlo twice, and burst into a *cabinet particulier* at Deauville. Each time his little agent had mistaken the man; at Deauville there was a degrading scene. After several months he was walking past Verrey's in Regent Street, when out comes his brother as easy as can be, sees him, offers his hand. 'Well, Ralph,' says he, 'how's Clarry? And how's that youngster of mine getting on?'

An argument ensued, if that can be called an argument in which deadlock is reached before the second sentences are exchanged. Lord Ollebeare pooh-poohed all idea of taking back the child: he pointed out that God had neglected to bless his brother's marriage with increase; very well, he would supply the deficiency. Possibly the child had been intended to brighten the dull home at Reigate; there had been a little mistake in the delivery. He alluded to the great advantage the child would enjoy, in coming under the influence of so respectable and substantial a man as his uncle was, instead of sharing the vicissitudes to which he himself was unfortunately subject. This did not impress his brother in the least; no more did a fine description of the felicities of family life, and the likelihood of it enriching a nature which some people held to be too narrow and too cold.

Lord Ollebeare came out into the open, and declared he'd not have the boy back, not at any price. The child would, he said rather tactlessly, make life worth living for poor Clarry,

and, as a rich patron might force the acceptance of a bank-note by threatening to throw it on the fire if it is refused, so he swore the boy should go to an orphanage if his uncle persisted in his foolish pride and his cruel lack of family feeling. This idea had none of the terrors of unfamiliarity for Ralph Corbo.

'Very well,' he said, with all the complacency in the world, and our hero would certainly have spent a crop-headed infancy, clothed in duffle grey, but, when it came to the pinch, his aunt could not bear the thought of it: the graft had taken, the only scion of all the Corbo stock was now fast knit to her heart, a circumstance which the good father, lovingly provident for his offspring, had foreseen from the first. There were a good many discussions at Reigate, some of them quite dramatic: in the end young Willoughby Corbo stayed where he was, and was tended very sweetly for two or three years. Then he ran to the gate and caught scarlet fever, his Aunt Clarry sat by his bed, and took the infection and died.

She had the most tender heart, and being a little apprehensive of what her husband had in mind concerning the child, besought him in the last of her speeches never to send him away. He promised what she wished, and being a man of great probity, he kept scrupulously to the letter of his word. It was well this letter extended no farther, or he might have had difficulty in doing so, for his frozen love for his wife broke up like a frozen river when she died, like the grinding tumult of the pack ice, and he, who had given and taken so little pleasure in his marriage, now had all the torments of hell in his widowerhood. 'I never loved her,' he said, and became very quietly, respectably, and secretly mad on it, and would have as soon hung a snake round his neck as kept little Willoughby about him.

At four, then, our hero had a pleasant room at the very top of Kent Court, that lovely white house near Reigate. It was larger than that to which his father had just moved, and a good deal fresher, besides being quite as rich in that infinite blessing, that kingdom of the imagination, that eyrie of the spirit, solitude. Unfortunately, the little wretch had no philo-

sophy at all, and was sadly unappreciative of this advantage, except perhaps when he caught his uncle's eye, if he chanced to cross his path below.

The nursemaid he had that first year was so preoccupied by her own affairs that she had little time to waste upon him, and no conversation, and while this made him quick in learning how to wash himself, and button his little breeches, it also made him rather melancholy, so that he spent most of his time in an empty reverie, presenting all the appearance, she told him frankly, of a miserable idiot. However, her affairs came to a head at the end of the year (or rather to a belly, for they were with the footman), and his uncle, whose quiet hatred overrode all discrimination between bastards, immediately sent her packing.

A new girl appeared, who chanced to have a pleasant nature. She had youth in her favour also, for she was only fourteen: she was easy-going, laughed a great deal, a tickler. She anticipated the modern educationalists by treating young Willoughby exactly as an equal, hugged him, took him to bed with her, and told him all that she knew. He might have learned a good deal, but for his lack of enterprise. As it was, he learned the difference between *meum* and *tuum*, as everyone should; heard of the black and tyrannous Blossy, who devoured the pickled bed-wetter in his chimney lurk; acquired a nervous distrust of the police, and gazed, like stout Cortez, at the ocean of merriment that surges before us when first we hear, on a giggle, the word *bum*.

His uncle was now away for months at a time, and the seasons, one of which must have contained a birthday, flowed over the house. Once, as he was going off, he told the butler to send the boy away to school; unfortunately the butler did not catch what he said. Nevertheless, one afternoon, when by an extraordinary coincidence all his little coevals all over England were hearing from their teachers that Sydney was the capital of Australia, and had a magnificent harbour, it so happened that the old coachman, who had taken a horse out there in his groom days, described the capital to Master Willough-

by, saying, ''Twere nought but new wood and old iron, like a lot o' nasty chicken-runs.'

For the rest, he learned to read; read about Prince Pippin at a penny a time, and thought him the devil of a fine fellow. The old coachman, who lived over the empty stable-yard, had him spell out the *Court and Society* from the newspaper. He heard about the people whose names occurred there, and gathered that they led lives like those described in the story-books. He was told he was a Lord's son, which a little consoled him for being his uncle's nephew. Some trifling disqualification was hinted at: that was all the more true to character.

Now there was nothing middle-class about this childhood, in which Sydney, the headquarters of Antipodean trade, was spoken of with contempt, which is, I believe, not the case at Eton. I could give you a thousand instances of this sort of thing, which was to have the most appalling effect on our hero's future life.

The old coachman was the only decent servant in the place; the rest were very pretty examples of what a damned double-faced lackey can be. Our hero had the advantage, which he did not in the least appreciate at the time, of learning to hate this type, and to recognise it wherever he saw it later on. The old coachman, who had been brought up at Ollebeare, told him of his father, what a real dashing young toff he had been: *Dare all, damn all* they had called him then – light a cigar with a five-pound note. All this was to have its appalling effect also.

Willoughby found the picture infinitely attractive; he embroidered it with certain chivalrous trimmings from Prince Pippin, and there had his ideal. He would have lost it at school, for it is not by chance that the aristocratic attitude is as rare as a red-skin: it can only be bred on the reservation of a dream-life. To this, as you see, a little love and a lot of hate confined him. His soul hungered for a Ruritania of high feeling; he was convinced it was his birthright, that these years spent in an ante-room mattered nothing. If the under-footman cuffed him, it was as though he had been bitten by a dog. He learned to regulate his conduct so as not to be bitten.

'That's a good boy,' the footman would say, when he brought him his tea without spilling it in the saucer, an inefficiency which that young man detested. Willoughby found himself very little honoured by the term, which had lost its initial attractiveness.

He said to himself, as if he were in an Elizabethan play: *I am a villain*, and smiled. Few phrases unchain the spirit as this one does, or admit as many new thoughts. It is true that Willoughby's idea of villainy did not amount to much. He wished to be bold, generous, dashing, and all the rest of it; ride a bay horse, come to a spectacular end; to be bloody to abstract legions, perhaps, but subtle and cruel only to butlers and footmen. On the other hand, butlers and footmen constitute a large part of the world as seen from under a kitchen table.

For the rest, he was a pudding-faced and timid little boy, and he still had a good heart. He longed to visit cottagers, free slaves, and gouge out the eyes of carters who ill-treated their horses.

CHAPTER II

Walter Burfoot – Time in gardens –
A perfect creature – The sweetest kiss in the world –
A fine fellow – Mental architecture – Bursting into tears

THE war came on. Ralph Corbo, who for several years had refused to pay any attention whatsoever to things he disliked, now paid enough to Kent Court to shut it up entirely. He took a post in a ministry, and a flat in Buckingham Gate. The idle servants were all dismissed, a silly old woman was engaged as caretaker; only Walter Burfoot, the old coachman, remained in his room above the stables; he was supposed to keep the gardens from utter decay. Willoughby was not mentioned.

The departing butler made an inquiry of the solicitor who paid him off, the lawyer repeated the inquiry in a letter to Mr Corbo. Mr Corbo overlooked this particular point in his

reply. As it happened, the lawyer had asked if he was to discontinue payments for Master Willoughby's subsistence; he took his employer's silence as a negative, the old woman received table-money for our hero as well as for herself.

The under-footman joined the army, and fairly soon they heard he was killed. Willoughby was unaffectedly glad, until the thought struck him that therefore he must go to hell, where in all probability he would meet the under-footman once more. This idea oppressed him abominably at bed-time. During the day he squared up to it more bravely. In the end he settled it thus: the under-footman was dead, and therefore either damned or saved. If he was damned, he had been cut off from all grace and divine interest before Willoughby had heard the news, and to rejoice over his death and damnation was but to acquiesce in heavenly justice. On the other hand, if he was saved – 'Then I'll be damned,' said Willoughby.

'Be sure you will, you wicked boy,' replied the old woman, on whom he ventured to test this solution. She was, as a matter of fact, very nearly right, for here were the shifting sands of casuistry perceptible in the mind of a boy of thirteen. Virtue, as we know, is built on the solid, impenetrable mental rock.

As the war went on, it became increasingly apparent that all Englishmen killed in the trenches went straight to heaven. Willoughby was the more certain that he was without the fold; but this only worried him very intermittently, for he had hopes of repenting at the age of sixty-nine, and time stood still in the garden, as it always does in gardens where the lawns run up to hay, and where the unpruned roses grow in a tangle, blooming small and sweet.

The old coachman is not to be blamed for this, I assure you. The grounds were of five acres, and he was in his seventieth year. He kept a plot clean in the kitchen garden, wherein he grew potatoes and greens, and potatoes and greens were all he knew the handling of. He did what he could.

So Willoughby lived on in this place: the old woman was good with dumplings, but her pastry was like lead. So was her

conversation. Willoughby conceived the lowest opinion of her, hinted at burning the house down, and became master. With the good Walter Burfoot, on the other hand, his relationship was cordial, deep, well balanced, almost sufficient. No one thing can be better, for a boy of these days, than the love and tutelage of such an old peasant, whose innocent memory is like a picture-book, full of fine things. It is a pity no one thing is ever enough. One must acquire from somewhere a sense of proportion, otherwise one may develop an ingrained distaste for certain important aspects of the world, which such an ignorant old peasant might describe as *not jonnock*. However, here was an equality, between the little bent old chap of seventy and the straight boy in his earliest teens, between the old centaur and the puppy hero.

All the same, centaurs have this further drawback: one admires their good qualities as if they were points of a horse, not to be imitated. He who finds virtue only in the servile, will also find something servile in virtue. Willoughby heard fables of a Cotswold Olympus, of an antiquity of fifty years ago, wherein the herdsman was praised for being steady, and those gods, his father and his Uncle George, were praised for being wild. It must be admitted that his Uncle Ralph was referred to as a *rare quiet un*; farther than which censure could hardly go. If these superior beings had been possessed of the homespun qualities, these qualities had not been exhibited to Burfoot, or he drew them in the grand manner, and as graces. Honesty became honour, perseverance wore a pink coat – 'A proper sticker, 'e was, dogged as you might say.'

Willoughby's father had been open-handed to a cowman, polite to a ploughboy, therefore old Burfoot, who had but the usual meanness and insolence of his country betters to go by, drew him a veritable young Jove, a prince, and Willoughby longed to beg, borrow, or steal a pound or two that he might be a prince himself.

Burfoot was particularly strong on chivalry, whose medal he struck in the image of the young George, the second brother: 'A grey-eyed un, he was, Master Willoughby. Just

such another youngster as you be. 'Twarn't long, I tell 'ee, afore 'e was a wunner for the young gals.'

Possibly the old man talked a little too much about the gals: he was very old, and found it hard to remember that Willoughby was very young. However, the books in the library were even more eloquent on the subject; Willoughby remembered his little nursemaid, and heartily wished her back again. Once or twice he spoke to schoolgirls in the road outside, but he talked so silly they soon gave him the cold shoulder. He thought them despicable for tittering at phrases from the *Morte d'Arthur*, and began to dream of a princess.

Not long after this, our good Willoughby had the privilege of a delightful experience. He was about fourteen; it was now his custom once or twice a week to take what food he could get, a stick cut out of a holly bush, to which he ascribed great virtue, and to go off for the day in the hope that something might happen to him. Because it was the highest hill in the neighbourhood, he went generally to Leith Hill, where then few people came.

On the southern slope, as you go up from Ockley, there is the most charming little house in the world, built of a clean yellowy-white stone of the neighbourhood, bowered in woods, and set about with gardens full of shadowy and blossomy trees. The woods all round are of pine, with thickets and alleys of rhododendrons beneath, and here and there some splendid yews. Willoughby would slide on his belly under the dark branches, and creep through the fringes of the gardens of this house, with which he was in love. He believed it might be the residence of a perfect creature, who, after a life of strange oppressions or strange joys, had reached his own age. He had a pretty vivid image of her in his mind: she was dark, with a red and fine-cut mouth: he indulged himself for hours at a time in visions of laying down his life for her, and of persuading her, by very extraordinary stratagems, to take off her clothes.

Very well, one day he had been sitting in his camp near the top of the hill, dreaming all day long of various encounters

with this perfect creature. It was extremely late, the August dusk was hanging blue among the pine trees, he comes down the slope, sneaks through the fringes of the garden, his mind still full of his princess. One of his points of cover is a tangly arbour of wild clematis, with a stone balustrade in front of it. He slides into this from the side: there is a little girl of about his own age, who has crept out in her night-dress, with a Jaeger dressing-gown about her shoulders. She sits with her elbows on the balustrade, and her chin in her hands, looking over the descending woods, and indulging in heaven knows what speculations of her own. They must be something suitable to the occasion, for Willoughby, who goes very soft-footed through the grass, is within a yard of her when they see one another; yet she is not in the least alarmed, but looks at him just as he'd have her look, with a parting of her lips (which were red) and a widening of her eye (which was dark).

Willoughby does not utter a word, and for two of the best reasons imaginable. One is, he can think of nothing at all to say that will not rudely bounce them apart again; the other is, he has something better to do. He throws his arms round this perfect creature's neck, and gives her the sweetest kiss in the world. It comes to an end: he has a notion of saying, 'At last!' a phrase he had invented some time ago, and often rehearsed. However, by this time he had embarked on another kiss. He is convinced he is tasting the very nectar and ambrosia of Paradise; he adores her, he could weep; her dressing-gown falls from her shoulders; all of a sudden he is seized by the neck and given a tremendous cuff on the ear. He has time to twist his neck round, and recognise his oppressor as a heavy young man in khaki, another cuff kindly puts his head straight again, and he is marched along a path by this fellow, beaten all the while like a drum. He flings himself down, feels the scoundrel's grasp relax for half a moment, breaks free, rolls over, twists, and slides under the branches of one of those great yew trees, which sweep the ground all along where the garden joins the wood. His pursuer is not so agile; next moment Willoughby is scampering away among the straight

boles of the pines, against which he bangs himself pretty frequently, for the darkness has thickened enough to melt them all into a haze.

Now when Willoughby woke up next morning he was enraptured by his adventure: all that troubled him was, a little uncertainty as to whether it had happened in reality or in a dream. The more he thought about it, the harder it was to decide, he dreamed so much, both waking and sleeping. He scrambled out of bed and looked at himself in the glass. Unless it was his imagination, one of his ears was slightly puffy. On the other hand, it was quite impossible that so exquisite an adventure could have happened to that face, the ordinariness of which he had long deplored.

He closed his eyes, trying to summon up a clearer picture of his charmer. All that flashed on his inner sense was an astonishingly vivid image of his Uncle Ralph; that would not do at all. I assure you, he was near stumbling on two or three different systems of metaphysics, in his efforts to decide beween illusion and reality. By the end of the morning, though, he had summoned up a number of minute scraps of evidence, which convinced him the miracle had really happened.

He set off to hang about the house again, but he could catch no glimpse of the little girl. It was pouring with rain. He wished he dared ask the lodge-keeper, was such a one living there, but the fact is, he feared arrest. He went there day after day, saw some elderly gentlemen strolling on the lawns, but never his charmer nor the barbarian in khaki. The great disadvantage of an eccentric education is an ignorance of the obvious: it never struck him that she might only have been a visitor, and by now have been spirited away. He repeated his memories to himself till it seemed certain he must have invented them; at the end of a couple of months he admitted it was a dream. At once her face rose up clearly before him; he tasted her fresh mouth again, entered into the most delicious conversations with her, and, by some very extraordinary stratagems, persuaded her to remove her clothes.

As soon as he had decided it was invention, he believed it

could be repeated, God knows when or where. Soon, he hoped, and he thought the arbour would do very well, but he could dispense with the military man, or, what would be better still, deal with him.

You may depend upon it, this episode strengthened his resolve to become a fine fellow; he did exercises morning and night. He suffered from this little difficulty, though: that he could not finally decide what sort of fine fellow he should be. His choice was embarrassingly wide, for no one had been obliging enough to tell him that Don Juan was only literature, and in life would be a soapy Dago, and Don Quixote a bloody fool. When he read of Panurge, he longed to be as merry a villain, and never was shown that what is a knave in a book is in reality a *howling cad*. To tell the truth, his neglected mind grew like something in the Gothic: lofty, useless, and gargoyled with dreams. What a cruelty that was, to leave it so heathen!

It was not too late: it still might have been remodelled in a high-class villa style, by a few terms at a suitable school. It could have been furnished with those decent thoughts which combine taste and comfort, and are appropriately designed for drawing-room, bedroom, and all the usual offices. For the fact is, Willoughby longed to be an ordinary boy. He imitated all of this sort with whom he could scrape acquaintance. He had the bad taste, however, to love these acquaintances intolerably, and he found it intolerable that they should drop him as easily as they did, or cut him so cruelly when they were with their ordinary friends.

He became so sensitive that he missed no fine inflexion of manner. In May, when his flannel trousers were new, you would have thought him quite *pukka*. His style was just a little old-fashioned, for the house contained no novels of later date than the year his aunt had died. Still, that would have done very well, if only his trousers had kept their first glory, or he had had the courtesy title and a different simplicity of haircut. As it was, he had not, and his trousers faded, and sometimes he would talk like a madman. Consequently he was

dropped and cut, as has been described. On one occasion, at the age of sixteen, too, he seized upon his beloved friend and harangued him before two chaps from the school and certain young ladies. He used the word *love*, and finally burst into tears. A pretty set-out!

Soon afterwards he learned to scowl and look arrogant, an exercise for which his countenance was ominously well adapted by nature. He had very straight hair, of a rusty black colour, large hands and feet, a wide mouth, and he talked to himself as he went along under the flowering trees that overhung the side-walks of Reigate, or the yellowing autumn trees, or the dripping black ones, season after season, year after year.

CHAPTER III

A stained-glass window – Lying screaming –
The boy must work – Bumber Stumber –
And you parade the name of Corbo!

SOON after the end of the war, Willoughby's uncle was afflicted by a hot and piercing pain in the lumbar region. It was only the beginning of gravel or something of that sort: the good man, however, postponed visiting his doctor, and convinced himself he had cancer of the liver. This was depressing; on the other hand, it provided him with a unique emotion, that of a gentle, propitiatory benevolence towards his fellow-creatures. When one part of an organism is diseased, latent weaknesses in other parts tend to show themselves. Ralph Corbo examined his conscience, and found it nearly as tender as the small of his back. He remembered his nephew. 'I have selfishly neglected that boy,' said he. 'Thank God it is not too late to make some sort of reparation!'

He began by sending for Lord Ollebeare, for he was not yet brought so low by his illness as to forget it is a father's privilege to be first in providing for his son. In the dim room Lord Ollebeare's face had the appearance of a stained-glass window,

which, by a double association, put his brother in mind of the white radiance of eternity. He shifted his head miserably upon his pillow.

'My poor chap,' said Lord Ollebeare. 'I'm shocked to see you looking like this. You look beat, absolutely beat. What is it?'

'The worst thing possible, I'm afraid,' said his brother. '*A growth.*'

'Cancer?' cried Lord Ollebeare in dismay.

'Of the liver,' replied his brother, working the whispered words out of his mouth like one exhausted upon the rack.

'Good God Almighty!' cried Lord Ollebeare. 'This is a damned sell, this is! To think of the miserable life you've lived, Ralph! Never any fun – and now to be seized on by such a thing as that, younger than me! It's not fair. You might just as well have been a good fellow, if that's all you get by living strict. Does it torment you?'

'I've no *unbearable* pain as yet,' replied Mr Ralph.

'Nor shall have,' cried his brother, rather too loudly for a sick-room. 'Damn it, my poor chap, we've not seen much of one another, never got on very well, but that's all my fault, I know. Never mind, we're brothers: and anyway, I'd not see a dog die so, if I could stop it. These dirty bloody doctors, they'd give you oxygen to keep you alive, screaming. Alive I say, but a man's not alive, he's not a man, lying like that, screaming. Trust me, Ralph, they shan't do that to you, not while I'm here. Face up to it like a bloody Roman, eh? Give me the word, stand a twinge or two to make sure first, then give me the word. I'll get you something, Ralph. And damn 'em, let 'em say what they like after, supposing it comes out. They'll never dare do much to me. If they did, what do I care? It's better than you lying screaming.'

'You fool!' said his brother, in a ghastly sweat. 'Do you never think of screaming throughout eternity?'

'Who? Me?' growled Ollebeare. 'I hope I'm not of that kidney. I don't think I should stand for that.'

'Don't torment me with your blasphemous nonsense,' re-

plied his brother. 'Buffoonery won't help you then. Some people think that by posturing like clowns they may evade the consequences of having lived like hogs. Which reminds me: I sent for you, to ask what you propose to do concerning that boy.'

'What boy?' asked Lord Ollebeare, in some confusion.

'Your illegitimate son, whom you foisted on me, who killed my poor wife,' said the sick man, in the low and level accents of extremity.

'Oh, *him*!' replied the other, in tones not obviously calculated to excite the invalid. 'How's *he* getting on?'

'He has *inhabited* Kent Court for twenty years now,' said Ralph Corbo, still talking from the front of his teeth, as sick men do. 'May I ask if you propose that he should go on doing so for ever?'

'Well, I don't know,' replied our hero's honest sire. 'To tell you the honest truth, Ralph, what with one thing and another, I've hardly thought about it.'

'You had better think now, had you not?' observed the other, in the same level accents as before.

Lord Ollebeare scratched his head for a while, willing to oblige. 'Ralph,' said he, 'you are quite right; the lad has his way to make. He must work, like the rest of ... of mankind.'

'You have not been at great pains to have him prepared for any sort of respectable employment,' rejoined his brother.

'Why, no,' said Lord Ollebeare. 'I thought you were seeing to that. Is he at Oxford?'

'I think this interview will be the death of me,' replied the invalid, closing his eyes.

He opened them again after a brief space, however, and, continuing with much fortitude, he said: 'I have done nothing so ridiculous as to give the illegitimate son of a cook maid – or worse – the education of a gentleman. I suppose he has received some sort of instruction. I now regard it as my duty to see that he is put in some way of earning his living.'

'Why, that is very good of you,' cried his brother. 'Very decent indeed.'

'I sent for you in order to find out what you propose to do about it,' replied the sick man very acidly.

'Well, I hardly know what *I* can do,' said Lord Ollebeare. 'I've not much pull, I'm afraid, nor money enough to put him into the army, d'ye see, or anything of that sort.'

'With his parentage,' replied Ralph Corbo, 'I should hardly think he would be a desirable type for the army. In any case, the idea is absurd.'

'I would not like a son of mine to be a damned lawyer,' remarked the father.

'Many of the most estimable men I know are connected with the law,' replied his brother coldly. 'However, that is a reason against, and not *for*, putting him into such a profession. Besides, there is the question of the expense, which would be unjustifiable, and no doubt fruitless. No, he had better be sent to the colonies, as a clerk, or as a subordinate on some plantation. Then, if by any chance he has it in him, he may make good.'

'Oh, come!' said Lord Ollebeare dismally. 'You say you've not given him the education of a gentleman: now you would send him to the colonies, and what chance would he have there? I've been in South Africa. The people are appalling. Come, Ralph! it would be cruelty to the boy.'

Ralph Corbo was about to allow himself the pleasure of replying that it was that or nothing, but a stab of pain intervened on our hero's behalf. The sufferer was recalled to his unwonted indulgence of the weakness of others: 'Well,' said he, 'if it is not to be that, what do you propose? It is no good sitting there suggesting nothing.'

'Why, Ralph,' said Lord Ollebeare, after much thought, 'I've no money, and I see you don't want to be put to great expense. Can't he be secretary or something to someone in a political way? Then, if you'd fit him out first, he'd be no more cost to you; he'd meet people, see something of affairs; he might land into something very good.'

'The idea is not entirely ridiculous,' said his brother on reflection, 'but who would be fool enough to engage him?'

'Fool enough?' said Lord Ollebeare. 'Well, I suppose it comes to that, if he's not been very well taught. Most of these chaps are devilish sharp, I suppose. Fool enough? Fool enough? Why, I wonder if we might try old Stumber. You know Bumber Stumber. Ha! Ha! He's president of some League now; he's the very man. Of course he can find something for the boy. Let me go downstairs. I'll telephone him without delay.'

Lord Ollebeare came back, rubbing his hands. 'We're a lucky family,' he cried. 'Bumber remembered me well. "Look here, Bumber," I said, "I've got a boy, wrong side of the blanket" (he'd soon find out, you know), "nice boy, good-looking, intelligent, devilish useful to you. You've got to give him a job: secretary, something of that sort." I was talking about you to Asquith," I said. (So I was, long while ago though. I met him in St. James's: we laughed and laughed and laughed. Only I said it as if Asquith had suggested approaching him, d'ye see?) "He's not a poet, I hope?" said he. "Never written a line," I said; "he's *practical*." "Well, I do want a private secretary," says he, and to cut a long story short, the boy is to go: hundred and fifty a year, live in Belgrave Square, if only you'll fit him out as you said.'

'Very well,' said Ralph Corbo. 'If he doesn't get on with a man as easy-going as Lord Stumber, and on business as vague as that of that League of his, he must be an hereditary wastrel, and I wash my hands of him. But this chance he shall have: perhaps I am foolish, but I consider it my duty.'

Accordingly Willoughby was sent for: he arrived at Buckingham Gate with probably the worst hair-cut and the most shrunken flannel trousers that have ever been seen.

'Good heavens!' said his uncle. 'And you parade the name of Corbo! I am giving you a cheque for a hundred pounds. Here is the address of a tailor, who, I am told, will be adequate to your needs. Get yourself some clothes. The Tuesday after Whitsun you are to present yourself to Lord Stumber, whose private secretary you are to be. Here is his address. I hope your handwriting is respectable. If not, you have nearly a month

for its improvement. If you do well, I shall no doubt hear of it. If you do not, I prefer neither to hear of your failure nor of you.'

This was a little severe on the part of Willoughby's uncle. The fact is, he had seen a doctor at last, who had told him his pains were due to a derangement of the kidneys, which diet and a course at a spa would certainly correct.

CHAPTER IV

Drive like hell – A real treasure –
Corbo, Bye-blow – Statesmen and secretaries –
Lady Stumber's bosom – A look of amazement –
My name's Baiye

WILLOUGHBY arrived in Belgrave Square on the hottest afternoon in June, wearing what he thought to be an expensive suit, which nevertheless did not perfectly fit him. Do not think the worse of him, because at the age of twenty-one there was still an unformed, an untamed, quality in his figure and carriage which eluded the tailor's art. He might have chosen thinner shoes, however, and though his tie was a suitably ordinary one, yet its very ordinariness gave it that odd air that a false moustache has. The fact is, there was too much expressiveness in our hero's face, which, nevertheless, was not in the least like that of an actor.

Though he was in no hurry, he had told the taxi-man to *drive like hell* from Charing Cross. The taxi-man had driven very slowly; all the same Willoughby gave him an excessive tip.

'I ought to give him a bit of a beating,' he thought, and was depressed by the prospect of a world in which any rogue might swindle him uncuffed. 'I should be arrested, I should not get my job, and in any case I am too shy,' he said. 'I am too shy even to withhold his tip, and if I did he would call after me, and the situation would be more acute than ever.'

His chagrin was not entirely wasted; it made him a little brusque with the butler, who withheld the heavy artillery of his eye in consequence, and admitted him into the house, which was large enough to be a palace, except that the staircase was a little meagre. He was shown into a narrow room, with something of the pea-green nature of all ante-rooms about it. The butler withdrew, and returned immediately, announcing, with the look which he had had in preparation for Willoughby: ''Is Lordship will *now* see you.'

Willoughby did not like the word *now* in the least. He had read of the tension that sometimes exists between the stenographer type of secretary and the upper servants. 'Is it possible that this butler believes me to be proficient in shorthand?' thought he. 'In that case he must be as great a villain as that abominable Walker; the worst man, and the worst butler, that ever lived.'

Walker was the butler at Kent Court, in Willoughby's early years; a ginger servant, the vilest thing in the world. He remembered seeing him once, in one of his paroxysms of fury, spit into Ralph Corbo's coffee, as he was carrying it in. 'Would this butler do such a thing?' thought Willoughby; and eyeing him narrowly, he decided he would not, for while proud Walker's face was that of a fallen fiend, this fellow's grey chops hung like flaccid paps, and, with a wabble, promised the milky kindness of their natural order.

So Willoughby, advancing on him round the long anteroom table, set him down as a good character, a real treasure; honest, loyal, and eager to please. He eyed him soup and blankets, against his old age, and the butler's eyes wavered and softened, for no servant, except one of those knavish gutter-bred chauffeurs, whom nothing but money can move, can resist being put down as a good character, a real treasure, honest, loyal, and eager to please. Regarding him thus, Willoughby clapped his own mask on him; it fitted, so he must wear it, and smile for evermore.

However unconsciously a triumph may be achieved, and however small it is, it warms one. This little matter did much

to restore Willoughby's spirits. He was shown into the library. Lord Stumber very civilly half rose to greet him, pushing up his huge spectacles as he did so, and with them his impressiveness, which howitzered blindly at the ceiling, leaving Willoughby confronted with the large, mild, beaky face of a head-gardener.

'Never seen *you* before,' said his lordship benevolently. 'Thought I'd seen all the youngsters in the world at my sister's, opposite. She's got a stepson, Baiye. *D'ye know 'im?*'

Willoughby was a little taken aback by the velocity of these last few words. 'No, I don't,' said he, in surprise.

'Everybody knows him,' said Lord Stumber gloomily. 'Mews: news.'

'Excuse me,' said Willoughby. 'I'm afraid I didn't catch what you said.'

'Lives in a mews, has 'is name in the news,' said Lord Stumber. 'Of course you know him.'

'I'm sorry, but indeed I don't,' said Willoughby.

'Not one of that crowd, eh?' remarked Lord Stumber, still a little incredulously. 'Asquith sent you along, didn't he?'

'It was my uncle,' said Willoughby.

'*Uncle!*' said his lordship. 'Get things straight, eh? Got your dossier here. Have everybody's dossier. Age, weight, all the little details.'

He scrabbled awhile among the papers on his desk. Willoughby's assistant eye fell on one, which bore the words:

Corbo
Bye-blow

'This,' said he, indicating it to Lord Stumber, 'seems to contain my life-history up to the present.'

'Oh, yes,' said the old chap, quite unabashed. 'That's right. Ollebeare: *uncle!* Ha! Ha! I remember now. Asquith said you had ideas, wasn't that it? Well, let's hear 'em.' So saying, he leaned back in his chair, and joined the tips of his fingers, quite at his ease.

Willoughby, not quite at his, surveyed a mental Sahara. He

observed the stained ray falling through the be-diamonded library pane with just the same dead heat as it fell into a certain lavatory at Kent Court, and simultaneously recaptured, on mental and physical planes respectively, two extremes of experience there. 'How complex life is!' he thought idly, a thought which at this age always stimulated him. His eye fell on the telephone, its stale vulcanite mouthpiece whitened with dry saliva, like salt on seaweed. 'Fine weather!' he thought, and escaped into a fortunate madness. The word *dossier* clanged in his head like a bell.

The truth is, Willoughby, instead of practising his handwriting, had re-read every book in which he could remember mention of a secretary. Many of these were described as efficient, a word that put our hero into a fine state of terror. These efficient ones were the merest nonentities, were prim, obsequious, bespectacled, came and went like mice. On the other hand, there was Gil Blas. Willoughby had decided that he resembled Gil Blas, in all but handwriting, more closely than he did a mouse. He had rehearsed a dialogue on two or three occasions.

'I must confess, sir,' he now said, 'that I am excited to hear you use the word *dossier*. You say you wish to hear my ideas: well, one of them is that there are two sorts of statesmen, one of whom uses the word *dossier*, the other the word *record*. The second is too often the mere bureaucrat, or, worse still, the business man in office.'

'Far worse,' said Lord Stumber.

'Whereas, when one hears the word *dossier*,' said Willoughby, still feeling his way in the direction of Gil Blas, 'one thinks of the true statesman, and desires to be the true secretary. The business man has no use for anything but a stenographer. The Duke of Lerma, on the other hand ...'

'Duke of *what*?' cried Lord Stumber with sudden animation.

'The Duke of Lerma,' replied our hero. 'The great Prime Minister of Spain.'

'Oh, a Spaniard!' said Lord Stumber.

'He was a type of the princely statesman,' exclaimed Wil-

loughby, 'who ... who has secrets, and ... and therefore needs that sort of secretary.'

It may be wondered that Lord Stumber did not at once ring the bell. His lordship, however, was in rather a peculiar position. He was one of the very stupidest noblemen in England, which is saying a great deal. At the inaugural meeting of the North Somerset division of the League he had been automatically voted into the chair. The League grew; there were some little exposures a year or two later; all the prominent figures resigned in panic, except Lord Stumber, who didn't know what it was all about. There was a meeting in London: he was the only solid nobleman present, and he was voted into the Presidency. A minister, who knew him well, conceived the idea that the League might control a large number of votes; he decided to rehabilitate it in the name of patriotism and the interests of party, and to inform its chaos with a certain programme. For that to be achieved, the head and centre of the chaos, Lord Stumber, must remain *in statu quo*. It was only necessary for this good minister to hint to Lord Stumber's lady that barons had been made earls for less. This done, poor Lord Stumber spent most of his time in London, which he detested, and people bothered him continually. However, he liked the name of his office, and manœuvred his spectacles like a Cecil or a Curzon.

'Princely statesmen!' he now observed to Willoughby. 'Why, I have not the power ... hm!'

'I see the secretary's job,' said Willoughby, 'as one which begins where the stenographer's ends. I think you may be glad to hear, sir, that my handwriting is appalling. I could write the most non-committal letter in the world. My uncle, when he sent me to you ...'

'*Uncle!*' exclaimed Lord Stumber. 'Diplomatic, eh?'

'Diplomatic ...' echoed Willoughby, sounding the word like a tuning-fork.

'Eton?' asked Lord Stumber abruptly.

'Yes, thanks,' said Willoughby. 'I had lunch before I got the train.'

Lord Stumber pulled down his gigantic spectacles. Willoughby realised that there are some little mistakes which, though perfectly natural, had better not be made. At the same time, he allowed himself the liberty of despising his lordship for intruding this triviality into a discussion which had sounded so interesting, and for staring so discourteously at his tie.

'I saw,' said he, 'as soon as I put it on, that this tie has the air of a false moustache. Yet, Lord Stumber, you will see it is the most ordinary tie. I at once felt doubly assured that my true vocation is that of a private secretary.'

'Tie?' said Lord Stumber. 'Tie's all right, Corbo. You do yer job, you'll be all right. But what are you going to do?'

'Watch,' cried Willoughby, 'and learn. And when I have learned, my job will be to save you trouble. To divert that flood of unimportant business. ...'

'Divert it, eh?' cried Lord Stumber with enthusiasm.

'To divert unimportant or troublesome people. ...'

'Ha?'-cried his lordship.

'To leave you only momentous decisions. ...'

'I have decided,' said Lord Stumber, 'to give you a trial.'

Some sentences were now exchanged which raised Willoughby's spirits to the highest pitch. The dread image of stenography receded, he was to spend a week or two feeling his feet, seeing how the wheels went round, learning the ropes. 'And then,' said Lord Stumber, 'we'll see what you can do.'

This statement, made by one who had seen as little as Lord Stumber to one who had done as little as Willoughby, filled the library and the future with the pleasant glow of optimism. Our hero was soon left to browse on a tableful of papers. Lord Stumber went off to change, for he had to dine with a politician and spend the evening at the House.

Willoughby turned over the papers in a state of happy excitement, which he considered hardly capable of increase. Before very long, however, the door opened, and a young woman appeared, who introduced herself as Lady Stumber, and whose kindness and beauty were such that in five minutes Willoughby looked back on his previous ambition as dross,

and began to feel it would be a poor and narrow thing to devote all the generous feeling which brimmed his heart entirely to the ponderous and begoggled figure of his employer.

Lady Stumber, who was a great deal younger than her lord, had the most inspiring, the most provocative, and the most inescapable bosom in all London. It was a sight to make an old man young, and as for young men – it is as well that their thoughts, on meeting creatures so superlatively shaped, should not be apparent in their entirety; otherwise these creatures would be continually surprised, flustered, outraged. As it was, Willoughby found himself, in an incredibly short space of time, swept away by a tide of the very warmest feelings it is possible to imagine. Drowning in her smile, he surveyed the pleasing eminence referred to, with something of that intensity with which a forlorn swimmer regards the unattainable dunes.

Lady Stumber was pleased by his shyness, which was compounded to her taste. She was not entirely unconscious of his glance, but neither was she in the least ashamed of her attractiveness; in fact, she held that devotion to her beauties was a sign of virtue second only to devotion to her mind. It is easy to be ambiguous where a beautiful woman is concerned: let it be categorically stated that Lady Stumber considered such virtues, in youths as raw and humble as Willoughby, to be their own sufficient reward.

'I am going to show you your rooms,' she said. 'And you must tell me if you think you will be comfortable in them.' She led Willoughby up two or three floors and showed him a little bedroom, and a little sitting-room adjoining. In the sitting-room there were two doors.

'You and I,' said Lady Stumber, 'share a little box within a box. These rooms belonged to a librarian in the old days. That door opens on to a tiny staircase, which leads down to what was another library, a little place in which old Lord Stumber kept all his most precious books, and which is now my private den.'

'And where does he keep them now?' said Willoughby, who

had begun to think of his employer as quite disgustingly decrepit.

'Old Lord Stumber has been dead for many years,' replied the lady with a smile. 'Unless you are engaged to-night,' she added, 'I hope you'll dine with me. I kept this evening specially, in order that we might get to know one another, as soon as I heard you were coming.'

Willoughby was overwhelmed by this kindness, and with difficulty restrained himself from falling on his knees. Lady Stumber was quite touched by his radiant stammering, and before leaving him to dress, she gave him a smile of a quality to burn the heart up, all for himself.

To admire and desire have been condemned as antagonistic to happiness, a censure which is conspicuously undeserved by these emotions in their initial stages. Willoughby, during dinner, could scarcely remember to take his next fork from the outside, a point he had heavily underlined in one of his novels. He reverenced his hostess for her goodness, even more than he adored her for her wit. This was a little egoistic of him, considering that half the fashionable world was laid under contribution for her small talk, while the sensibility, the sweet frankness, the frank good-heartedness, which he preferred even to this, were provided entirely by himself.

Willoughby was as unaccustomed to wine as he was to love. Before the meal reached its end, he ventured to bathe this goddess in a gaze far more expressive than discreet. There was so humble an adoration in it, however, that she found it forgivable. Unfortunately, he allowed his countenance to fall a little, when, just as they reached the coffee, a young man entered, who cried from the very door that he was sorry to have failed her for dinner, but he had broken down at Hereford, and had to come up by train.

'I phoned at four,' he said, 'and told Andrews to let you know. Andrews, I hope you did.'

'Yes, sir,' replied the butler, who had not yet closed the door behind him.

'And here I am,' said the newcomer, who had, Willoughby

thought, a pale, cynical, prematurely aged face, and an enormous head.

Not only did our hero allow his countenance to fall, at the thought of the evening kept specially for him, but he actually glanced at his paragon in amazement, which was a poor return for a politeness which had done harm to nobody. Young ladies of great position and beauty do not like such glances from young men who possess neither attribute. Lady Stumber did not introduce him to the newcomer, but saying, 'Raymond, come up, and I'll show you the water-colours I've bought,' she gave Willoughby the pleasantest nod imaginable, and withdrew.

Willoughby, very much deflated, found himself a stranger in an enormous dining-room, none of the furniture of which had any interest in him at all. A footman appeared and removed the coffee-cups. Willoughby observed that between his two journeys he left the door wide open. 'There is nothing to do,' thought he, 'but to go up to my room and arrange my things.'

His things were not so many as to occupy him for long. When he had done, he stood for a long time at the sitting-room window, looking down into the darkening square. A large car drew up outside: Willoughby craned his neck and saw Lord Stumber descend. Next minute there came a tap on the inner door that opened on the little staircase. 'Come in,' said Willoughby, and was surprised to see the large-headed young man, to whom he had taken a mild dislike, and whom he observed to be carrying hat and stick.

'Hullo!' said this visitor. 'I've been hearing about you. Thought I'd dash up and make your acquaintance. My name's Baiye.'

CHAPTER V

Drunk on passion – Little errands –
Lady Stumber's promise – Speak no evil –
Let's dine together – A friend

WILLOUGHBY was not discharged in disgrace during the next day or two. There is a reason for everything; in this case it was Lord Stumber's midnight ignorance of what a secretary should do. He had already a typist, who was as efficient as she was plain; she was the most efficient typist in the world. Besides, she was acquainted with Lord Stumber's political friend, who helped her to prepare his lordship's monthly editorial, his speeches, and a few of his letters. Nothing else mattered.

Lord Stumber wished Willoughby to take over as much of his work as possible: he never did anything but feel bothered, and now Willoughby felt bothered instead. As for the patter, Willoughby read more and worse novels to get the tone, and the tone he got from them would have suited a Cabinet Minister, to say nothing of Lord Stumber, for popular minds think alike. It must be admitted our hero spoke from hand to mouth, as it were, sometimes opening a drawer to peep at the appropriate page. In doing this he was as bold and lucky as a drunken chauffeur, but the intoxicant in his case was love.

In all his retired life he had never seen anything like the form of Lady Stumber. He desired ardently to show his appreciation of it in the sincerest fashion. But he was all alone in this extremely large house, the routine and furniture of which were stately to a degree, but not very beautiful. The whole atmosphere was of a period a century too late to give him the slightest support in a programme of cold-blooded villainy, as they call it. There was no corrective to the most depraved of his many romanticisms; it was therefore necessary that he should fall in love, as they say, and he did so to perfection. At once the tessellated hall, and the Alma Tademas, came to his assistance, and so did Lady Stumber. She was

seven years his senior: within seven weeks she had adopted him as a younger brother, and she saw to it that he was a dutiful one.

She frequently gave him the intense pleasure of running certain little errands for her. On certain occasions, when it was necessary to ask no questions, and answer none, she crowned his happiness by pointing out that he was her *very parfit gentil knight*. She gave him her hand to hold.

'Constance,' he said, for it had got to that. 'You are so *good*.'

He actually ventured to press the hand she had given him to his bosom, to quench an intolerable ache that burned there ceaselessly.

'Now, Willoughby, my dear boy,' said she. 'Remember your promise.'

'Yes, yes,' said he, 'you are right. But you'll remember yours too, won't you? Your promise that perhaps I might have your hand to kiss some day.'

'Yes,' said she. 'Perhaps. Some day.'

He was always carrying notes, making last-minute arrangements for his mistress, for she hated using the telephone, the switchboard of which, during all the daylight hours, was controlled by the efficient typist. There is a reason for everything: 'Lord Stumber,' she explained to Willoughby, 'has terribly heavy burdens, burdens beyond his strength altogether. Yet he is so conscientious: he *will* have everything in his own hands, he is absolutely reckless of his sleep, his energies, his health. He would be terribly angry, hurt too, if he knew of my little conspiracies to help him. Sometimes I think he half suspects them already. He watches me, I sometimes think, to see that I never overstep the boundaries of a frivolous social life. Still, it's his kindness; one mustn't complain. Haven't you noticed it?'

'I can't say I care about his sleep and his health,' said Willoughby, who scorned to lie to his inamorata. 'He is as kind as can be to me, yet I wish he was dead. Constance, would you then ...'

'Never say such a thing to me again, you foolish, wicked boy,' cried Lady Stumber, with a look of great severity. 'But, poor Willoughby, is it as bad as all that?'

'Yes,' said he, with an agonised sincerity, 'it bloody well is.'

'Well, you mustn't let it be,' said Lady Stumber with a tender smile. 'But you haven't answered my question. Haven't you noticed – about Lord Stumber?'

'He does ask how you pass the day,' said Willoughby. 'Damn him! So should I. To lose a minute of your life would be like losing a minute of heaven, which is a thousand years of bliss.'

'That is just your fancy,' said Lady Stumber gravely. 'Actually a minute of my life is just like a minute of anyone else's. It is, really. Why do you fancy such things?'

'Because I love you, adore you,' cried Willoughby.

'Oh, you poor, silly boy,' said she, in the kindest voice it is possible to conceive. 'What *have* I done, to make you like this? How I wish I could do something for you!'

'Constance, you can,' cried Willoughby, almost on a sob.

'No, no,' said she. 'You mustn't say such things.'

'If you would give me,' said he, 'one little twist of your hair, so that I could put it under my cheek when I go to bed.'

'No,' said she. 'That would be wrong, but I will give you something else, something to keep for my sake. Look! you shall have these.' With that she took three little ivory chimps from the mantelpiece, Japanese stuff: one held its paw to its eyes, another to its ears, the third to its mouth.

'Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil,' said she. 'Keep them for my sake.'

Willoughby was not so besotted as to refrain from thinking that he could have done with a fourth, with its paw elsewhere: however, he did not say so.

'I do wish Lord Stumber was not so obstinate,' pursued his charmer. 'I could do so much to help him. So could Raymond Baiye; he knows everybody. But sometimes I think he doesn't like Raymond. Haven't you noticed it?'

'On the contrary,' replied Willoughby, with some indiffer-

ence, 'he is always asking if he's called, or if he's here, as soon as ever he comes in.'

'When Raymond comes to this house,' declared Lady Stumber, 'it is, more often than not, to see you. He likes you enormously, and only looks in on me for politeness' sake.'

Willoughby was immensely glad to hear that he was liked by the large-headed young man, and he admired the rigorous control that so subjected that liking to the claims of good style, as never to give him an inkling of its existence.

'I think Baiye is the cleverest person I've ever met,' said he with enthusiasm. 'The cleverest man, that is.'

'Do you think so?' said Lady Stumber with detachment. 'It's a pity he should be so repulsive physically.'

Thinking it over, Willoughby could not help wondering if his Constance was not mistaken about Baiye: 'Perhaps,' he thought, 'it is her modesty that makes her believe he comes to see me.'

It was true that Baiye quizzed him very amiably at all their chance encounters; moreover he had several times repeated his surprise visit to Willoughby's room, but when he did so he talked so abstractedly, and with such an air of boredom and annoyance, that our hero could not but wonder if Lady Stumber had compelled this civility, at the end of some more agreeable conference with her. On the other hand, he remembered two or three occasions on which, returning with Lord Stumber from some evening meeting, he found Baiye sitting in his armchair, and heard that he had been awaiting him an hour or more.

Willoughby's nature was a direct one, and having a friend was a matter of colossal importance to him; accordingly, he resolved to put it to the test. He was attempting a copy of verses one evening, in which he had the pleasing and original notion of comparing himself to a moth and Lady Stumber to a star, when Baiye made his sudden entrance: 'Look here, Baiye,' said our hero. 'I don't want you to come up here because you have to.'

'Eh? What's that?' said Baiye in great surprise.

'I'm exceedingly glad to see you,' said Willoughby, 'as long as it's not on Lady Stumber's account that you come. I should hate to be in a false position, particularly ...'

'Particularly what ...?' asked Baiye, with some rapidity.

'Particularly as I feel very friendly towards you,' said Willoughby. 'Very friendly indeed. These things, you know, are not very easy to say.'

Baiye subjected him to a long and sustained regard. 'Say no more,' said he at last. 'Words are appalling things: never put anything into words. I see you've got more savvy than I give you credit for. I like you for it. If you really mean that you're friendly, that is.'

'Indeed I am,' cried Willoughby.

'Well,' said the other, 'we are strange creatures. Personally, I also try to be the victim of no sort of prejudice, except,' he added with a strange significance, 'against tittle-tattlers. Don't you, too, detest the sort of person who can't resist a joke, or the chance to appear *knowing*? "I could, an' if I would" – that sort of itch.'

'There is nothing I detest more,' cried Willoughby with spirit.

'That's the stuff,' said Baiye. 'Look here, young Corbo, we must dine together some night.'

During the ensuing weeks Willoughby had several meetings with this admirable young man. Unfortunately they were generally interrupted. On one occasion Baiye was reminded of an appointment during the first act of a play, which he insisted that Willoughby should see to the end; on another he was prevented from turning up at a restaurant, but sent a friend in his stead to help beguile his disappointed guest. Nevertheless, their broken conversations were the vividest thing Willoughby had ever known; he poured out his fancies under encouragement, and congratulated himself on having found a friend.

This quite intoxicating pleasure was dashed a little by a change in Lady Stumber, who had adopted an air of some reserve. Willoughby was utterly at a loss to account for this.

'Have I gone too far?' said he to himself, but of that even *his* tender conscience acquitted him.

'I must be boring her,' he said. 'I ought to do something spectacular to regain her interest.'

He was sitting at his desk in the library pondering this question, when the telephone bell rang. It was Baiye, who said that he had just heard that Lord Stumber was to sit in conference in Downing Street that evening, and he wondered if Willoughby would join himself and some friends at his flat. 'Come in a boiled shirt,' said he, 'for if we become at all dull, we shall go on to some show or other.'

CHAPTER VI

Superior young men – Château Neuf du Pape – A hand upon a knee – What have we done? Uncle Fred – A laugh of pure joy – You young cur! – An ill-fitting hat – Not cricket – To hell with them! – Take him in charge

WILLOUGHBY was in the very highest spirits as he crossed the square to where, couchant behind the opposite façade, lay the mews in which Mr Baiye had his apartment. What an evening! he remarked to the trees, with a smile of *blind, confiding delight*. His enthusiasm was not confined to the weather, though that deserved it; he believed, as we do so often in youth, and possibly with good reason, that he was going to enjoy the company of superior beings. What a contrast with the sullen boredom of three or four months ago!

'Here I am in love,' he cried, 'in evening dress, and in Belgrave Square!' He believed these to be the three most desirable states in the world, and so indeed they are, if one is young enough not to mind a little discomfort.

Baiye greeted him with a warmth that would have been pronounced genuine by any expert. He was a little late. 'My dear chap,' said Baiye, 'I'd begun to think you had thrown us over.'

'I'm only a few minutes late, ain't I?' exclaimed Willoughby.

'Scarcely that,' admitted Baiye with a smile. 'Yet I was anxious.' This pleasing fiction, uttered in the hearing of all the company, gave Willoughby a little assurance, less because it was credible than because it was kind.

He was now made one of a company of young men, all of whom seemed remarkably pleased either with themselves or with each other: it came to much the same thing either way, for they were all extremely alike. Nevertheless, some were short and some were tall, and this was enough for Willoughby. Of all their names, he had only heard one before; it was that of Sir Charlie Riddlam, a young man of extraordinary pallor, dear to gossip-writers for his title, his flaxen side-whiskers, and his hansom cab. There were two others almost as tall and fair as Sir Charlie, but without the ninetyish get-up that gave that last touch to his sophistication; and there were two or three dark, sallow, smug little fellows, whose mouths were already dragged down at the corners, as if by the astringencies of a tart, unresting wit.

Willoughby heard such expressions as Catullus, paramour, retreat, old fornicator. He also heard the word Rome, uttered with a peculiar intonation. Nothing could have been richer, or compared more favourably with the poor effervescence of catchwords he had heard from the ordinary smart young people he had recently met. These were young men of a species as superior as it is rare: not more than five or six such cliques are turned out at Oxford in the course of the year, and they are produced to perfection nowhere else at all.

'Have you heard from his Eminence?' asked one of these young men of another.

'But so amusingly,' was the reply. 'He says I may read the book, if I omit certain folios, of which he gives me the numbers. Now, as you know, there are two editions, of which one is in quarto and the other in octavo. You cannot imagine,' said the speaker, with a smile, 'how much I dread getting hold of the wrong edition, in which the numbers would not correspond.'

'You are very wrong indeed,' said the other, 'to allow your-

self to read the lubricous passages upon such a feeble quibble. Myself, I never read them at all. I ask my little Lizzie, or whatever her name is (I am so bad with names), to read them to me. The effect is brought out to perfection.'

'The Pandarus Press is bringing out an interesting thing ...' began another.

'Are we to be bookish, damn it?' cried Sir Charlie. 'What does a chap want but a few bound volumes of the Pink 'un, and if he is by way a book-worm, possibly an *Ally Sloper* or two as well?' This interruption was not ill-received, for it was spoken in character, and the character was that of a man who had his own hansom cab.

'We must drink,' said Baiye. 'I think I can gauge your taste to a nicety,' he added, with something of a leer. 'Baker,' said he, when his ferret-faced manservant answered the bell. 'Bring in a dozen bottles of Château Neuf du Pape.'

'That's not my address,' cried Sir Charlie. 'Champagne for me, if I may have it.'

'By all means,' said Baiye. 'And, Baker, bring me in the whisky and soda.'

The others were not at all disconcerted at this.

'Let us put these damned heretics on the rack,' said one of the larger young men, who had hitherto said very little.

'No horse-play,' said Baiye very pleasantly. 'That is Big Ben you hear, not Great Tom. Let us drink confusion,' said he, 'to Science, Enlightenment, and Progress. I'm with you there with all my heart.'

They spent the next hour or so in drinking pretty fast. Willoughby felt his head spin a little, and sometimes found an old smile, left over from the last joke, still hanging about his face. Fortunately the jokes were not far between, so this passed unnoticed.

'Shall we go and see some legs at a revue?' said Baiye, glancing at the clock. 'I vote we do.'

'No, no,' cried all. 'We are very cosy here. Stalbert shall tell us how he lost his virginity.'

Shortly after this the telephone bell rang. Baiye went out

to answer it. Coming back, he said, with infinite regret, that he was called away for an hour or so, but he would return very soon, and he hoped to find them merrier than when he left. Some ribaldries pursued him; it seemed that the others believed, or affected to believe, that his important business was nothing more or less than an assignation.

'Take particular care of our young friend,' said he, ignoring these witticisms. 'And be careful what you say before him on matters touching the chief happiness of the human race, for he is secretary and right-hand man to that powerful statesman, my relative and benefactor, Stumber.'

Soon after his departure, Willoughby experienced one of those shudders that are supposed to be due to a person walking over one's grave. It must be admitted that by this time he was a little drunk. 'This is good wine,' said he with a smile.

'What fine fellows these are!' he thought to himself. 'At last I have found Rabelaisians, people of wit. Not one of them, it seems, but has a dozen mistresses, and here am I without the courage or skill to secure one. And how I long for her! How they would despise me if they knew!'

'Gentlemen,' he heard himself saying, taking their tone a little, 'I don't know how you did: whether some divine instinct guided you at a certain age, or whether you had the good counsel of your elders and betters. I find I have less instinct than I thought, so I must depend on good counsel, or burn. I wish you could give me your advice, for I am sure I shall never come by better. Gentlemen, I am in love, and it seems I have not the skill, and therefore not the courage, to bring my passion to, shall we say, a head.'

'Six heads are better than one,' said a sallow spark. 'Especially if in that six is included such a one as Stally's here, which is utterly dumb, numb, dark, vague, except in that one department, into which all his faculties have drained, and where, like a spent dip, they still burn, stinking and dim, but with an experienced light.'

'I have pursued a large number of women,' said the small young man in question, responding to his glance, 'and it is a

pretty open secret, in this quarter of the town, that one of them once rewarded me with a kiss. You are a very young man indeed, if you don't mind my saying so, and I may tell you that you have fallen into a nest of the most villainous libertines in London. They will advise you methods of disgusting crudity, which will cheat you of all the refinements of pleasure if you succeed, and land you into quod if you fail. I, on the other hand, see that you are a modest, sensitive, diffident young man, just as I used to be. I have very little doubt, also, that your inamorata is a paragon of virtue, and proud of it.'

'I don't know that she's proud,' said Willoughby. 'But certainly ...'

'Very well, then,' continued Stalbert. 'Consider this approach. You avow your passion in the most casual manner imaginable, as if alluding to an inconvenience which is obvious to all, but too boring to discuss, like the rain. Nevertheless, discussion follows. At first you are reticent: "It is nothing; a trifle, a joke. No, I never sleep: what of that? Let us talk about the slums, Bernard Shaw, something cooling."

'Sooner or later, however, the tormented heart is laid on the dissecting table, the lady is invited to inspect its convulsions, not in the very least in the hope of sympathy, but merely because the spectacle (though rather a bore) might amuse her. A tone of the uttermost detachment is adopted: above all, it is assumed, *with a finality amounting almost to sincerity*, that there is no hope whatever.

'The lady feels it would be narrow-minded to deny herself a pleasure so purely intellectual: she inspects the palpitating exhibit, and makes comments admirable for their good sense and taste. Frequent and lengthy examinations follow, which would be dangerously intimate if they were not so scientific, and, after all, they are not so scientific. The most peculiar phenomena are described. Sooner or later the fair commentator becomes exceedingly involved in her replies, so that she is forced to pause for lack of breath, or else she becomes exceedingly brief and enigmatic. Then it is, that you place your hand upon her knee.'

'And get a good, sharp slap,' cried one of the large young men.

'And what the devil would that matter?' replied Stalbert. 'The action is an unconscious one, and may be repeated unconsciously. A hand upon a knee is like a knock upon a door. Let it be repeated often enough at never so forbidding a portal, and, sooner or later, by reason of the warmth of the day, an extra glass at dinner, a regrettable novel, a sense of insufficiency, boredom, vague longings, curiosity, indifference (Oh, Heaven! what a multitude of good angels we poor bachelors have, to undo the locks of our imprisoning celibacy!), sooner or later, as I say, even the most forbidding portal shall be opened to you.'

Sir Charles had listened very impatiently to this. 'Sooner or later!' said he sarcastically. 'I should like to know what tricks you resort to, when you enter a shop to buy a packet of cigarettes. God Almighty! your ideas are as out of date as your drink, Stally. I only hope the rest of your equipment is not equally antique, worn out, lengthy, ponderous, crusted, and cobwebbed.'

'Here is my method, Corbo,' said he. 'I mark my game, give her a look, just to put her on the *qui vive*, d'ye see? Next day I ring her up: "I must see you, simply must, alone, can't wait, matter of life and death," – all that. I rush round. "What is it?" "I love you passionately, madly." Smother her with kisses. "Unhand me!" "No, no, I must explain." More kisses. Melt an iceberg!'

Having spoken thus, Sir Charles took up his glass again, and holding it up to the light, he smiled.

'A great deal depends,' replied Stalbert, 'on the relative weights of the parties concerned. I envy you, my dear fellow. To seize a woman in a crushing embrace, pinion her like a dove, silence her screams with kisses, feel at last the strong, intoxicating current of your passion awakening response ...'

'Go on! Go on!' shouted all.

'Oh! it must be divine!' cried he, in a rapture. 'But what romance is there in five or ten rounds of evenly matched wrest-

ling? It is my misfortune to fall in love always with majestic women. If only my tastes led me to the stage door of the midget show, I might experience the ardent pleasures which have been so tersely described. As it is, I always feel like a visitor to St Paul's. I date my happiness from the day when I realised that the visitor to St Paul's is expected to express a complimentary opinion. "Aah!" I now sigh, like a dying pig. "Aah! How annoyed Titian would be if he knew he was dead! Forgive my impertinence: the fact is, I hold that all great works of art should belong to the nation, to be admired by all." I then walk round the lady two or three times, with the air of one at a picture gallery. "Yes, goddesses are for all."

'She finds the joke amusing, but there is a very real emotion discernible beneath my attempt at facetiousness. I ask her to assume various poses. Some of these need adjustments, in making which, my hand, I assure you, lingers as caressingly as that of any connoisseur upon the patinated bronze. This might almost be called the Pygmalion stage. Meanwhile, we refer to her beauty as if it were an object exterior to both of us, like a masterpiece discovered in a garret. When a masterpiece is discovered in a garret, first the owner exults over it in private, but very soon the gratification must be shared with a friend. All its points are gone over in the fullest detail, delicious little arguments arise, as to this, and that. In the end – "What have we done?" she cries. It seems barbarous to be silent, and even more so to enlighten her.'

'Then you have a fine set-out,' said a secondary small young man, when the general hilarity had subsided. 'Remorse, tears, upbraidings, all at the moment when a cigarette tastes most delicious, and the contemplative mind is most calm and clear. No, I ...'

'I am with you in one thing,' cried Sir Charlie, 'I share your taste for a Juno.'

'Ah yes!' cried the little enthusiast, beaming on them all. 'My dear fellows, you make a great mistake, a very great mistake, if you waste your time with any others.'

'A majestic female torso!' he cried, in a tiny voice, casting

up his eyes as if something of that order might be visible through the ceiling. 'God in heaven! Can you have too much of a fine thing? What man, having spent a holiday in the Alps, can remain contented with Skiddaw and Scafell? Confronted with such a positive landscape as I describe, one has the superb sense of being master of all the world. "Where can one find two better hemispheres?" as Doctor John Donne so feelingly remarks.'

'Ah, these damned doctors!' said the largest young man. 'Did I ever tell you of my aunt?'

'Silence, barbarian! This was a poet and divine. And so is a mighty flank! My friends, I am unable, I freely admit it, when contemplating such a masterpiece of nature, to refrain from imprinting a reverent kiss. Then we have the knee, the thigh, or fibula. All this leads us where? My friends ...'

'What a devilish lot of fuss about nothing!' cried one of the large young men. 'I agree with Charlie. Listen, brothers, or half-brothers, for such you probably are. You all knew my wicked Uncle Fred: if not, you cannot be called wise children. The ugliest brute that ever lived! Very well, a well-known Irish poet he met at a horse-race gave him a love philtre (this is what he told me). At that time he was the backwardest young man in the world, being such a hobgoblin. Very well, he tries a drop of this in desperation. It works! All his life long he uses just a teeny drop – has to resign his commission, barred from the paddock, chased all over the Prado, three duels, the happiest man in the world, and lowered the standard of beauty for the whole human race, especially Stalbert. He got such faith in his philtre, he never said a by-your-leave. Very well, he had it analysed just before he passed out – pure water!'

'Excuse me,' cried Willoughby in some disorder, 'I must leave you for an hour or so: I've just remembered an appointment of the greatest importance. See you later.' He rushed out, and across the square. The air was soft and blue, full of the leaping of his heart, like the soft sudden flashes of electricity. On such a night ...! There was a light in Lady Stumber's window.

He went to his room first, looked in the glass: his whole

face had the air of a false moustache. 'Am I drunk? Perhaps I am a little drunk,' said he with a titter. 'Wine! Passion!'

He went down the little curling stairs, slipping a step or two in the darkness. He tapped at the inner door.

'What? Who's that?' cried the voice of his beloved.

'Me, me,' replied Willoughby.

'Wait a moment,' she cried. 'Don't come in. What is it?'

'Life and death. Most important,' said he, flinging open the door. 'Constance!'

She was in negligee. She breathed love. He could feel it in the room. 'Constance!'

'Willoughby! What *do* you want? What's the matter with you?'

'Love,' said Willoughby, bursting into a laugh of pure joy. 'Love.'

'Are you drunk?' she asked, as if unable to believe her ears.

'On love!' said he, with a half-bow. 'Your hands, your arms, shoulders, neck, all!' With that he seized her, and aimed a series of kisses at each of the first four items as he named it.

'Do you want me to call for help?' said Lady Stumber firmly. 'I *will* call. I will.'

'Constance. Goddesses are for everyone.'

'Stop. I won't call, if only you'll be quiet for a moment. Listen. Please.' A table fell with a crash. He continued to imprint kisses at an incredible rate. Between them he panted, for Lady Stumber wriggled amazingly. 'You are tearing my clothes,' she cried.

'Yes, she has noticed it too!' thought Willoughby. 'We notice the same things! Besides, she is not calling. Love!'

A period of deadlock ensued. Withdrawing her wrist, she pressed her forehead to his. Their eyes, incredibly unfocused, mingled. She whispered: 'Please, my dear boy, I understand everything. It'll be all right. As you wish, I won't call, if only you'll let me go. And be quiet till I've talked to you. Please. *Darling.*'

Willoughby, villain though he was, was uncommonly susceptible to kindness. All the power went out of his arms. They

relaxed. He was infinitely glad, infinitely sorry. He felt he would do anything in the world for her: weep on her bosom.

'Listen,' she said, louder. 'Sit down. Let's talk for a minute.'

But before he could withdraw his nerveless arms, the door was flung open and Lord Stumber came in.

'Constance!'

'Cecil. Thank God you've come! This brute, mad, drunk ...'

'Corbo!'

'I confess it, sir. I love your wife passionately.'

'... assault me.'

Willoughby heard the words with some dismay. His brain, working at an incredible speed, had pictured Lady Stumber joining with him in an explanation with her lord. Words like *understand*, *magnanimous*, *our happiness*, had sprung in his mind. 'Assault?' he cried. 'No, there must be some misunderstanding.'

'I should think so indeed!' cried Lady Stumber. 'Look, he has torn my wrap. He burst in.'

'You young cur!'

Willoughby saw it clearly. She was a woman, and afraid. Her love was not strong enough. Very well, he knew his part.

'Well, perhaps so,' said he, white-lipped in all probability. 'I was overcome. No encouragement. No, it was entirely auto ... auto ... auto ... you know.'

'I think he's drunk,' said his betrayer, prepared, it seemed, to give away all his intimate little secrets.

'It doesn't matter, sir,' he cried. 'drunk or sober, as long as you realise it was my fault. An aesthetism. Goddesses for all. Such beauty – common to all.'

'Be careful what you are saying, sir,' cried Lady Stumber. 'I know, Cecil, you won't pay any attention to the vile insinuations of ...'

'Be calm, my dear. I apprehend the situation exactly.'

'No! No!' cried Lady Stumber.

'Be calm,' said his lordship. 'I smelt this villainy in the air. You see my instinct was right. I grant you I looked elsewhere for its source. I admit my mistake, my dear. Overlook it, eh?

Have him to dinner, eh? Bygones and all that. But what of this wretch?' he roared suddenly. 'He should be thrashed within an inch of his life; handed over to the police.'

'Cecil, I implore you; no scene, no scandal,' cried Lady Stumber, fluttering her hands. 'I can't stand it. Send him away. Leave me alone.'

'For your sake, then, my dear. Otherwise – within an inch of his life. Every bone in his body. Corbo: you leave this house this moment. Your things, a cheque, lieu of notice, shall be sent after you. You may telephone Andrews in the morning. Take your hat. Go!'

'My hat?' Willoughby spoke vaguely. For some moments past his attention had been engrossed by a shadow, which a wall lamp threw out from behind a screen. Now unless the light distorted it, this shadow was that of someone with a very large head.

'Yes, sir. Your hat. Your hat. Isn't that your hat?'

Our hero's eye, following Lord Stumber's finger, rested upon a top-hat, which someone must have placed on a table by the door. Unless he was mistaken, that someone had a very large head. Like a drowning man, he saw his whole life, for the last three months at least, in a series of vivid pictures. 'My God!' thought he. 'Duped all these months! Assault!'

He took the hat, but instead of retiring immediately, he faced the agitated couple again, and put it on. The room was obliterated, his ears bent beneath its weight. Half a sardonic smile was, he trusted, visible. He lifted the hat again, and essayed a bow, then, still carrying it in his hand, he ran wildly down the stairs and out into the square.

As the heavy door closed behind him, Willoughby entered into the most exalted frame of mind of which man is capable. That is, he enjoyed the full possession of comedy, both as actor and spectator. This perfect duality is unfortunately forbidden to those who take part in life's little tragedies, in which the unfortunate actors, who begin as blind as Kent and end as mad as Lear, are in no condition to appreciate radiance, harmony, and so forth.

Willoughby, however, was. In certain moments life withholds nothing from us, he had even become sober, or sober enough, during the last two minutes. As for jealousy, resentment, regret for his lost job: all these were dissolved in his golden merriment, which was the richer for it.

'Oh, the villain!' he exclaimed, thinking of Baiye. 'How he took me in! And now ...! How it worked out! How it fitted! What justice! What a shape! Oh, it was beautiful!'

He wallowed in the blue air, spouting laughter like a dolphin. Cats diverged noiselessly from under the approach of his feet. The shadows of plane leaves moved in the lamp-lit golden stone, wreathing the shadow of his gibus: his head had its coronal. A policeman, beautifully blue, turned his head to the laughter; his glance splintered harmlessly on the breastplate of boiled linen. A young swell, merry.

The joke became too painfully exquisite to be borne alone. 'I must go back and tell this tale,' cried Willoughby. 'How we'll mock Baiye when he returns!'

Arriving at the mews, he put down his own hat, but retained Baiye's, which he had carried off in his hand. He found the company still engaged in animated discussion, and still on the same subject.

'Hullo!' said someone. 'You've not been long.'

'I've been long enough,' said Willoughby, 'to lose my precious job.'

'What's that?' cried someone else.

'I congratulate you,' said Stalbert.

'You will be infinitely better without it,' said Sir Charlie.

'But how did you lose it?' said another.

'Oh, just for rape,' said Willoughby.

'For rape?' cried two or three.

'That's what she called it,' said Willoughby, 'And her husband believed her, and, now I come to think it over – damn it! so do I.' He uttered these words with the greatest complacency in the world, and only the least of hiccups.

'This is a very promising young man,' said Stalbert. 'He will go far.'

'He seems to have gone too far,' said the little fellow who had an aversion to tears.

Everybody was roaring with laughter. 'Why,' cried Uncle Fred's nephew, 'this is the man who came to us for advice!'

'Have I not acted on it?' said Willoughby.

'We must hear the details. Details! Details!' cried all.

Willoughby felt himself to be the hero of the hour. 'You have not heard the real joke yet,' said he, beaming upon the room.

'I told you I had long suffered from a hopeless passion,' he began. 'To-night you told me various methods, some of which were the opposite of others, and all successful. I reasoned, therefore, that any method must be successful.'

'True! True!' cried Stalbert. 'This is another Loyola, my boys. This is the greatest man that ever lived.'

'Another Luther, I fear,' cried another.

'Don't interrupt him,' cried Sir Charlie.

'Go on! Go on!' cried all.

Willoughby proceeded, in the best imaginable vein, keeping all names out of it till he should reach his *dénouement*. 'And then ...' said he at last. With that he clapped the large hat on his head. Never did curtain fall so quickly on a climax, but that was as it should be.

The applause, however, was not deafening. Willoughby, lifting his hat, appearing from beneath it to take his bow, as it were, was brought up short by an astonishing change in the atmosphere. He observed that his hearers were exchanging the uneasiest glances, positively sucking their teeth in doubt and dismay.

'By Jove!' said one at last.

'A bit rough on old Raymond, isn't it?' asked one of the tall young men.

'Get the poor chap into the hell of a mess,' said Sir Charles.

'Hardly cricket from the woman's point of view, surely,' said the little he who loved a majestic torso.

'A joke's a joke,' said another.

There was never anyone as crushed as Willoughby was.

'But ...' said he. The word broke vainly, like a tired wave, failing to gain the inch for which it vainly strove. 'But, damn it!' said he at last. 'You said ...' He couldn't remember what they had said. 'Your talk ...' he began again.

'It's a question of drawing the line,' said Stalbert in a chilly tone.

'Where did Panurge draw it?' cried Willoughby.

'If I may make a suggestion,' said Stalbert, 'I imagine that Baiye will return very shortly: I should hardly think he'd be overwhelmed with delight at finding you here.'

'But,' said Willoughby, 'I must explain to him. Surely he'll understand. It was a joke.'

'He may find it rather a painful one,' replied Stalbert. 'If I were you I should retire.'

Willoughby's tongue failed him. He could find no phrase that would strike at the core of the matter. What's more, if he had found one, and used it, it would have been like striking armour-plate with a sensitive fist.

Sir Charles suddenly began to roar with laughter. 'Upon my word,' he cried. 'This is very rich: the joke of the season! Ha! Ha! Ha!'

'That's it,' said Willoughby eagerly. 'That's what I mean.'

'You cut along,' said Sir Charlie. 'Oh! it's marvellous! Ha! Ha! Ha!'

'Damn it!' cried Willoughby. 'Cut along! And leave you to skim the laugh off it, without dipping your fingers. Well, skim away. I suppose it's the nearest you've got to all that you talk about.' He began to pant a little; his bosom laboured under the sense of injustice.

'Bloody actors!' he said. Someone very politely opened the door of the room.

'Oh, well!' said Willoughby, with a gesture of rage and despair, 'I'll go.' And with that he made as unsuccessful an exit as can be imagined. However, he kept Baiye's hat.

The staircase was of only a single flight. Willoughby was out of the mews before he had recovered spirit enough to swear even. He heard his tongue damning and blasting away like an

engine starting up. 'Soon I shall begin to think,' said he. 'I've no presence of mind, that's what it is. They outfaced me, they outnumbered me; not six to one – six thousand to one: they called up six thousand pie-faced Etonians, whom previously they had laughed at. And that's not all of it.'

Willoughby began vaguely to see the villainous strategic value of a negative position. 'Draw a line!' he exclaimed in disgust. 'It's a trick by which they score over everything they exclude, regardless of its worth. I see it, I can't grasp it all, but I can see it. If they did what they said, all their pretty little evenings would be bust up. Or they only do it where they know it's damn well safe, or with girls in tea-shops, or poor little whores. Then they talk like Rabelais or God knows who, and get the best of it both ways; safety and style. Well, I'll go for style, and damn safety! Who wants to be one of that gang?' With that he sent the hat spinning out into the road. 'To hell with them!' he exclaimed aloud.

The hat struck a chauffeur, who swerved, and grazed mudguards with another car. 'Hi!' he cried.

''Ere! 'ere!' said a policeman, hatefully blue, tapping Willoughby on the shoulder.

'To hell with you too!' cried Willoughby, whose nerves were a little frayed.

'Stop that young hooligan,' said an elderly man of military appearance, thrusting his head from the window of the car.

''Ere, don't you talk like that to me,' remarked the constable.

'Curse it!' thought Willoughby. 'One can't even throw a hat away in this ridiculous world.'

The policeman now unnecessarily took him by the arm.

'Take your dirty hand off me,' said Willoughby, 'or I'll give you one in the eye.'

'Assaulting the police in the execution of their dooty,' remarked the constable, entwining his arm with Willoughby's in such a way as to put that desperate act out of the question.

'That's right, constable, take him in charge,' said the military man. 'Is the car damaged, Walters?' said he to the chauffeur, who now approached.

'Can't say it is, sir,' replied the chauffeur. 'Can't see no scratch, sir. It's a wonder there ain't one.'

'Then let me go,' said Willoughby, tugging at his arm.

'Do no such thing,' said the elderly man. 'Drunk and disorderly. Might have caused a fatal accident. Here's my card, constable, look at that. Take him in charge, I say.'

''E certainly smells of it,' said the constable dispassionately. ''Ere, stop that! You come along o' me and see the superintendent, that's what you'd better do.'

CHAPTER VII

Verrey's – A nose like a strawberry –
A delightful conversation – A guarded secret –
Two or three hundred pounds – I was robbed –
An uncle at Ollebeare – Six months to live –
A quiet evening

NEXT morning Willoughby appeared before a magistrate, who would not listen to a single word. He might have had the best excuse in the world, and it would have availed him nothing. He had to pay altogether twenty-eight shillings.

'If you'd been dressed ordinary,' said a pleasant fellow who showed him the way out, 'it'd only been ten bob. 'E 'ates a rowdy gent.'

Willoughby felt that it was a very villainous country in which there was one law for the rich and another for the poor, and which served such abominable breakfasts in the name of His Majesty the King.

He hurried off to an hotel by Victoria Station, whence he telephoned to Belgrave Square. His things were soon sent round, the cheque with them: he changed, went out, and cashed the cheque at once. With a little that was left over from his original hundred, he had forty-three pounds and a pocket full of silver.

'It is as well to begin with a round figure,' said he. 'Besides,

the morning is sunny. I'll stroll as far as Verrey's, where I will read the newspaper over a glass of lager beer, and afterwards – possibly a light lunch.'

He bought the newspaper for the sake of the personal column. 'In that,' he thought, 'there certainly should be an advertisement, demanding a young man with a taste for adventure, to execute a confidential commission abroad.'

He was perfectly right: there should always be such an advertisement. In this dull copy, however, there was no such interesting little item.

'Never mind,' said our hero, who was always happy when he was in Verrey's, because of its delightful atmosphere: 'Perhaps there will be one to-morrow. If not, I can only wait till all my money is gone, and then I shall join the army or ship before the mast. In both cases the food is bad: at sea, one has the better appetite. Also there are atolls, dolphin coral, the monsters of the deep. On the other hand, a gentleman-ranker has probably a much greater chance of being picked on for promotion. But the drill!'

Verrey's was no place to contemplate the drill in, the tawny barrack square, the meaty faces in the shadows of archways, the sergeant-majors, the lack of conversation. Anyway, all that was infinitely remote. He contemplated the life of a tramp, a scholar-gipsy (though God knows he had little enough of either Roman in him); he sipped his drink, thought of the long idle day, and smiled.

No one had a pleasanter smile than Willoughby. An old gentleman, seated at the next table, observed it, and regarded him with benevolence. It was impossible not to remark that this old gentleman had a nose like a double strawberry of the largest size, that sort of nose which, for some reason, does one's heart good to see.

'Please excuse me, sir, but is it possible you may be my father?'

'Have more respect for your mother, young fellow, than to ask such a question as that.'

'My name is Corbo,' said Willoughby. 'I have lived a long time at Kent Court, near Reigate.'

'Why, boy?' said the old chap, 'How d'ye do?'

'Very well, Dad,' replied Willoughby, 'Thank you for begetting me.'

'That's the way to talk,' replied Lord Ollebeare. 'I meant to write you a letter. Had I heard those words, I've little doubt I should have written it.'

Willoughby was enchanted by the ease of their encounter, and by the twinkling of his father's eyes. 'It contained ....?' asked he, apropos of the letter.

'Some advice, first of all,' replied his father. 'How to get on with old Stumber. *Bumber* we called him when we were boys: he succeeded while he was still at school. Ha! Ha! Ha! Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!'

'Good heavens! my dear father,' cried Willoughby, 'I hope you never hear a really good joke. You might go off in a fit of apoplexy.'

'Don't, my boy, don't,' puffed the old chap. 'Don't say that sort of thing. What was I saying? You have put me off the thread of my talk. However, no need to have written that letter, for, you see, we have met here. How did you know me?'

'By your eyes, my dear dad,' replied Willoughby with some tact. 'But had I had your advice,' he went on ,'we might not have met, which would have been a terrible pity. Everything is for the best: I am only here this morning because I have left Lord Stumber.'

Lord Ollebeare was distressed to hear this, still more so when Willoughby confessed he had no other prospect of earning a living. 'Bless me,' said he, 'I would not for the world intrude in your affairs, it's against all my principles, but it was madness to leave Lord Stumber.'

'On the contrary,' said Willoughby, 'it would have been madness to stay another moment.'

'And now you are penniless,' said his father. 'Good heavens, my boy! these are very frosty nights for sleeping on the Embankment. However, you're young: you've doubtless hosts of friends who can put you up.'

'Not one in the world,' said Willoughby. 'Poor old Burfoot's dead.'

'Don't know him,' said Lord Ollebeare.

'However,' said Willoughby, 'I am not penniless: I have a little money.'

'A pound or two,' said his father. 'That will not last you long.'

'No, no,' said our hero. 'As a matter of fact, I have forty-three, which should last me till something turns up.'

'What?' cried the old man, cheering up amazingly. 'A young plutocrat! To think a son should have all that, while ... However, that's no matter. You are standing me a lunch, my boy. Who said 'twas improvident in me to beget you?'

'Pleased and proud,' said Willoughby, who had never been so much at his ease before.

Over lunch they had the most delightful conversation. Oh! how fine it is to see a father and son on such terms, waggish, tender, smiling, passing one another this or that! The careful sire, moreover, was careful to mix a little powder of good advice with the jam of good companionship: he was particularly strong on bloodsuckers, parasites, pimps, confidence men, sharks of all sorts: above all, he warned Willoughby of the folly of putting his money on a horse.

'I have no intention of doing that,' replied our hero.

'I used to like the races,' said the old man. 'On a fine day, they're fine. There's the rails, you know, the stands all clean and white, the turf, everything. The nags look very fine. So do the women. You see everybody: there are some fellows you never see but at the races. I like to see a *parson* at the races. Ha! Ha! Ha! I don't know why. But as for gambling,' said he, 'that's quite another matter. I say gambling, but it can't be called gambling, there's no fair chance in it. You've heard of the law of probability, I suppose?'

'I think so,' said Willoughby.

'It would appal you,' said the old man. 'So would the law of something else – averages, I think it is, or something about combinations. A fellow explained them to me once, but I'd

already dropped *my* packet. Hoo! Hoo! Hoo! Besides, the bookies are in a ring.'

'Are they, indeed?' cried Willoughby, in tones of horror.

'Did you ever meet a ruined bookmaker?' asked his father, lighting a cigar.

'To the best of my recollection, no,' said Willoughby.

'Nor never will,' said his father. 'They're a close combine, my boy: hedging, laying off, above all, manipulating the odds. Besides, they know which horse will win. Oh yes, they see to that, and they keep it the closest secret in the world. Take advantage of my experience, my boy; I make you a present of it; it cost me some thousands. Never bet.'

'Thank you,' said Willoughby, 'I won't.'

'I suppose,' said his lordship, 'that apart from the bookmakers, there's only one man in town to-day who knows what will win the three thirty.'

'Indeed?' said Willoughby. 'Who can that be?'

'By the greatest irony in the world,' replied Lord Ollebeare, 'it is I. A cruel joke of fortune!'

'Upon my word, father,' said Willoughby, 'I could do with a little of that cruelty myself.'

'It would not be cruelty to you,' said his father pedantically. 'For you could put a pony on, and snaffle two or three hundred. What a pity! I've taken to you, my boy, and I wish to God honour did not forbid me disclosing the secret.'

'So do I indeed,' cried Willoughby, his face falling a little. 'I could do with three hundred pounds.'

'*Two* or three hundred, I said,' observed Lord Ollebeare. 'Don't let your fancy run away with you, my boy: never do that. However, let us talk of other things. How's my excellent brother Ralph getting on?'

'How should I know?' said Willoughby. 'I should very much rather talk of three, or even two, hundred pounds. After all, you are my father: could you not put the money on for me?'

'Don't stretch my honour, boy,' replied his lordship. 'It's all I have left, my honour.'

'Don't think me careless of the niceties,' said Willoughby.

'I am only ignorant of them. Supposing I gave you the money, what should hinder you from making me a present afterwards, of two or three hundred pounds?'

'What's this?' cried the old man, in great delight. 'Have you been with the Jesuits? Ha! Ha! That's ingenious, that is. Hoo! Hoo! Hoo! I've got a boy with brains. Let me look at you, son, to see you have no trace of that nasty lawyer's clerk in your jowl. No, by God! you're mine; the nose settles it. A boy with brains! Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!'

'Well, Father,' urged our hero. 'Aren't I in the right of it?'

'No doubt you are, my boy,' said the old chap doubtfully, '*in an arguing sort of way*. There's lawyer's honour, and our sort of honour, no argument about it, ha? Don't you think? Give all the fiddle-faddle arguing points to the devil, eh?'

'Let the devil take the argument by all means,' said Willoughby, 'as long as we have the two or three hundred pounds. It's as plain as a pike-staff. Accept this present,' said he, tugging out his wallet. 'Tell me, what *is* a pony; twenty-five pounds or thirty?'

'Well, that depends,' said his father. 'Say thirty.' He added that he would be engaged that night, but would meet Willoughby at the same place and hour on the morrow; he called for his hat, his enormous cane, smiled with infinite kindness, and departed.

No sooner was he left alone than Willoughby conjured up a vision of his three hundred pounds. 'However I am tempted,' said he to himself, 'not a penny of it shall be spent rashly. Such a stroke of fortune may never recur; nor could it have come at a better time than this. It shall be the very foundation-stone of my life! I will safeguard it from all the erosion of petty extravagance, and especially from those vile sharks of whom my fine old father has warned me. I would not have lasted long in company with Sir Charlie: thank God I am disillusioned as far as the gilded sort are concerned! Thank God, too, it is not a mere fifty or seventy-five! Such awkward sums are good for nothing: you run through them, and where are you then? My father must keep a hundred, however; that I

shall insist upon; he is hard up. Still, the rest will keep me for a year, two with strict economy, and during those years I will live very plain, and learn a lot. Of the twenty-four hours, eight shall be passed in sleep, but by no means always the same eight. Eight more shall be spent in studies. I will dip into everything, acquire a general culture, like Baïye, and find out where I should specialise. The galleries! The museums! Perhaps even lectures! Then the other eight shall be spent in the study of life. I will eat in strange places, at God knows what hours. I will come by strange encounters at midnight coffee-stalls, in Chelsea among the artists, possibly even in the dens of the East End. What I save on those nights I can spend in visiting (more eyes than gullet, nevertheless, I must remember) night clubs. I will have a little room, an attic possibly, as befits a student. I can go up the river on a steamboat. Perhaps I shall meet some little shop-girl who will become my mistress, as in de Maupassant. If there is one thing that still can move me,' he said, remembering Lady Stumber, 'it is freshness, innocence.'

At this point the waiter brought him the bill for luncheon, which contained an extraordinary number of items, and amounted to over three pounds.

Next day he set out early for Verrey's, and again afoot, though it was not so fine, but this time it was to save the bus fare, for rich men are economical. He arrived a moment or two before the café opened, and an hour before the time of the rendezvous. This was unnecessary, for when that time arrived his father still put in no appearance. As the minutes passed, he became prey to a hundred horrible forebodings: the worst of them was, that the poor old man might have been run over.

'He walked in a very strange, uncertain way,' thought Willoughby dismally. 'Perhaps he was musing over our strange encounter, or hastening to put the money on for my benefit, when he was knocked down. How sad a dead thing he must look, with that nose, and all his twinkle gone! I see him on some horrible slab: it is worse than losing the money. Is it possible I love him?'

He telephoned to his Uncle Ralph, who sent back the

servant to ask what it was he wanted. In the end he learned his father's address, which was in Pimlico.

He went through streets of Georgian houses, unutterably grey. Now the names of these streets were all familiar to him, they had occurred so often in the murder and suicide cases, which he used to read out to the coachman, from the *News of the World*. There was nothing in their appearance to belie the notion he had formed of this district, except for a certain stale respectability, which grafted murder and suicide on to ordinariness, as, in a hospital, pea-green distemper and the smell of antiseptics bring death to sit quietly beside one in the waiting-room.

'There is no doubt at all,' he muttered, 'that my father is dead. It is the sort of thing that would happen, and it has.'

He rang at the front door, which was opened by a landlady. Willoughby was unfamiliar with the usual expression of Pimlico landladies at that time. 'I know,' he cried out aloud, 'my father is dead.' Her face remaining woefully blank: 'Lord Ollebeare,' he explained: 'I am his nearest relative.'

'Lord Ollebeare? He's upstairs,' said she.

'I think I had better see him,' said Willoughby, entering the hall, which greeted him with a smell that he took for the smell of death.

''Oo shall I say?' inquired the landlady.

'To whom? The doctor?' asked Willoughby. 'His son.'

'Your son the doctor, yer Lordship,' announced the landlady, knocking on a door on an upper landing.

'Eh? What?' came Lord Ollebeare's voice. 'Who's that? Wait a minute. Wait a minute.'

'He's in,' said the landlady, and descended the stairs, leaving Willoughby overcome with relief and astonishment.

'May I come in, father?' said he at last.

'Yes,' replied his father in a weak voice. 'Come in. Come in, my boy.'

Willoughby now entered a room, the furniture of which was simple in the extreme. His father lay in bed, the sheets drawn up to his chin.

'Well, thank God you are not dead!' exclaimed Willoughby. 'I knew you had met with an accident. Are you badly hurt?'

'Yes, that's what it was, my boy,' murmured the old man. 'An accident. I suffer from shock, that's all; only shock. It shook me up. Shock, that's it; that's what it is, shock. The worst of it is, my dear son, I was robbed.'

'Robbed, father?' cried Willoughby, in tones of the greatest concern.

'Of your thirty pounds, my boy, while I lay insensible.'

'What villainy that was,' cried Willoughby, 'to take such sneak-thief advantage!'

'What?' cried Lord Ollebeare, evidently infuriated by the recollection. 'Villainy? Oh yes, what villainy, to rob the defenceless! But depend upon it, the money has done the scoundrel no good. I expect he has spent it all by this time, or gambled it away, and is heartily sorry he ever stooped so low.'

'What happened to you, father?' cried Willoughby.

'I lost my balance,' said Lord Ollebeare, 'and fell.'

'I see you suffer from the shock; your hand shakes like a leaf,' said his son. 'Can I do anything to ease you?'

'Son,' said the old man, 'I should be easier if I could see some way of putting you right for money. When I heard your voice, my heart sank very low within me.'

'Why, damn it, father!' cried Willoughby. 'It would have been nice to have had the three hundred pounds: I had planned to study a year or two on my share of it. But I would sooner know that your fall was due to no serious cause, than have it here in my hand at the moment. Why, sir, you have had a good deal, and lost it all. Shall your son regret the loss of a trifle he never had?'

'Ah, boy,' said his father, 'I like you more and more. One day, when your fortune's made, I'll tell you a secret that will make you laugh. But oh! oh! damn it! it must be made soon then. What can we devise?'

'I thought,' said our hero, 'of the army or the sea.'

'Good enough, my boy,' said his lordship, 'but what can be done in these days? If I were Derby himself, I couldn't get

you in without some show at Sandhurst or Osborne. If you were my heir, I might yet pull some sort of a string for you. I've not much pull, though, in these days, and none for a bye-blow. Tell you what, boy, I'd marry your mother, but she's married and dead. I wish I could do that, it would put you in a good way.'

'I meant,' said Willoughby, 'to enlist as a private, or to ship before the mast.'

"And be kicked up the — by a rascal sergeant-major?' cried his father in disdain. 'No, boy, don't do that. I'm an old man, I've spent all, done no good, yet I lie here tolerably snug. I could not lie so had I been kicked up the — by a sergeant-major. No, I wish you were my son by law, Ollebeare would be entailed on you then: my brother George pays me two hundred a year for Ollebeare, and it will go to him when I die. Wait, I'm beginning to think. Go to that washstand cupboard: you'll find in it a bottle, and a couple of glasses. Look, boy, you shall go to Ollebeare and see your uncle.'

'Shall I, indeed?' cried Willoughby. 'What sort of place is it, and what sort of man is my uncle?'

'It's only the old house,' said Lord Ollebeare. 'God knows there's not much of it left. There's the park there, and a largish farm, that's what your uncle has from me. I signed it to him for life; he pays me two hundred a year. All in all, it's seven hundred acres.'

'Is that all the rent, father, for seven hundred acres?'

'The place is rough, boy,' said the old man. 'And I was pushed at the time. What's your name, by the way?'

'Willoughby, father.'

'Well, a rough place, Willoughby. Your uncle, he's one of the old sort. We were at loggerheads at the time of your birth, or damme if I wouldn't have made shift to drop you on his doorstep. George a dry nurse! Hoo! Hoo! Hoo! Oh, my head! Don't talk to him of your Uncle Ralph, though: he hates the sound of his name. Owing to your Aunt Clarry.'

'But what shall I do there, father?' said Willoughby.

'Why, boy,' said Lord Ollebeare, 'say you come from me.

We're friends now, George and I. I met him in the Haymarket the year after the war. We had a chat. Say you come from me. When you get talking, say I've met your mother; say I want to put something your way, and I'll marry her to do it if need be. Speak plain – George is a funny chap. Maybe he'll swear a bit; he dearly wants the handle, I know that. Say we want to be fair. Say if he'll consent to break the entail, so you have the rent when I'm gone, I'll not marry your mother, and he shall be number seven. "Now all that means to you," you say to George, "is you pay me the rent for the time between father's death and yours, see?" Now, we're only two years apart, George and I. "And after you're dead," you say to him, "the land comes to me, instead of Uncle Ralph, who doesn't need it." Mind you say that; that'll move him. Should he stick: "Then Dad shall marry," you say, "and I'll be Lord Ollebeare. And damn it!" you say, "soon as I inherit I take over. I've long wanted to try my hand at farming." Say that. That'll settle him.'

'But,' said Willoughby, 'didn't you say my mother is married and dead?'

'Did I?' replied his father very coolly. 'Perhaps I did. Well, George was at neither marriage nor funeral. Come to think of it, boy, he wasn't in at your begetting either; he doesn't know you be, for he never sees Ralph (hates the sight of him), and I forgot to mention it, the few times I've seen him since you were born. What a surprise!'

'I hope he won't be too furious,' said Willoughby, coming down to earth a little.

'Not he,' said his father. 'He'll take to you, boy, have no fear of that. And listen, you've not got much; take my advice, and billet yourself on him till you inherit.'

'Good heavens!' exclaimed Willoughby. 'That would mean a long stay, I hope.'

'Not so long, son,' replied Lord Ollebeare. 'They give me six months.'

'Six months to live?' cried Willoughby, in a dismayed astonishment. 'Why – Good Lord! – what is it?'

'Nerves,' said his father, in tones of supreme resignation. 'Something wrong with the nerves of my spine. Give me a drop more from that bottle. So. Now you're a day nearer your little arrangement, according to what the doctor says.'

Now Lord Ollebeare reached for this glass of brandy rather more eagerly than he had for the first one, when only his hand had waggled above the sheet. Out shot his arm, his chest became visible. Willoughby observed that he was fully dressed. 'Why, father,' said he, 'you are near your death, you fell down yesterday and were robbed, and here you are in bed with all your clothes on. May I hope, *also*, that you are not going to die?'

'You may hope what you please, my son,' said the old boy, with the greatest composure imaginable. 'Sir Frederick Cole says I must die six months from last Thursday, because I write my words backwards when I take up the pen. As for the other matter; look'ee, I am your father. I am near dead. I've fixed you an income for life. Say no more. How much have you left?'

'Eight pounds odd, father.'

'Brush me down,' said his lordship, scrambling out of bed. 'Save half that for Gloucestershire to-morrow; the other half will furnish us with a quiet evening.'

CHAPTER VIII

Ollebeare – The first of October –
You're trespassing – A gentle, gentle gun –
A fine cock – Clumber, retriever, liver spaniel –
Got the instinck

WILLOUGHBY was as gay as a lark when he left Paddington for Gloucestershire. The train he went by was the ten o'clocker; it was the first of October, and a day fit to advertise any ale in the world. His happiness fell one degree short of perfection, as everything must; the cause of this was, that he

was wearing a suit of his father's clothes, which he suspected did not become him to the best advantage.

The good old man, whose benevolence was all practical, as benevolence should be, had not forgotten to ask some pertinent questions as to his kit. When he learned it comprised two town suits, and some evening clothes, only: 'That will never do,' said he, 'your uncle hates a townee worse than the devil. Go to him in such an outfit, he'll think you just such another as your Uncle Ralph, and show you the door before you have time to broach our notion. Look, my boy,' said the old chap eagerly. 'At home in my trunk I've a suit or two of tweeds, which many a time I've meant to sell, for what's the good of 'em to me, these days? No time to have them taken in, they'll hang a bit loose; that does very well in the country.'

When their evening was done, they had gone back to Pimlico and lugged out the suits. It was impossible to deny that the material was excellent: one was holly-green, t'other something the mustard colour of a horse-cloth. All the same, they were rather museum pieces, and cut in the Norfolk style.

'You can fold the breeches under your belt,' said the old man. 'The coat is ample enough to conceal any little protuberance.'

'Yes, that is true,' said Willoughby.

Never mind, he was in the train. Believe it or not, he knew no other country than that which surrounds Reigate, or lies along its railway line to London. When the train left Oxford his excitement reached its highest: the carriage was empty, and he went from window to window, to see the ridges rolling away, and the clouds rolling over them. I wish he could have turned south from that point, towards country which is even better; however, he soon saw stone walls. He saw a red-faced fellow with gun and dog, stumping along the reedy fringes of a dyke; next, as the little train jolted slowly past a level crossing, he saw a waggon waiting, with a clown of about his own age aboard, lying on his back with the most contented expression imaginable. Then there was a road running clean up to a high sky-line; a ragged chap with a bundle turned and

waved his hand at the train. The woods were yellowing, boisterous in a brave wind. Our hero's sentiments would have done credit to any volume of Georgian Poetry: 'I don't care a damn whether I have the money or no,' cried he, and murmured some phrases, which we will forbear to repeat, concerning tramping the road, darkening shires, inn fires.

He got out at Kingham. 'I want to get to a place called Ollebeare,' he said. 'Five miles the other side of Stow, I believe.'

'Hi, Alfred!' called the ticket-collector, to a lean pale fellow who was cooling his heels outside. 'Gennelman wants to go to a place called Ollebeare, t'other side o' Stow'

'Near the Slaughters, I'm told,' said Willoughby.

'Oh, aye!' spoke up the lean fellow. 'I've heerd tell on un. Honourable Corbo?'

'That's it,' cried our hero in delight.

'Aw! Aw! Honourable Corbo!' said the ticket-collector. The lean man, without saying any more, began to crank up a dusty taxi.

'I'll sit beside you,' said Willoughby.

'Pleasure, sir,' said the lean man. They were soon out of Kingham, an inconsiderable place; the taxi went at fifteen miles an hour. Willoughby had time for a refreshing conversation with the driver.

After running along a high ridge, they went downhill between stone walls. On the left, the walls were lined with chestnuts, fine timber trees, evenly spaced; the stubble was already under plough, two teams of fine horses worked on it; there were some trim buildings, good gates, a cart-track well patched up with flints. Our hero only got a very general impression from this, nevertheless he permitted himself the use of the word *jonnock*, which was well received. On the right, the land appeared to be a waste.

'This is Ollebeare,' remarked the driver.

'Which? Where?' cried Willoughby in great excitement.

'That on the right,' replied the driver.

They turned in by a lodge, of which all the windows were

gone, and the roof was singularly well ivied. A heap of sorry coops was stacked in the garden of it, the gates were hospitably open, and would never again be shut. An avenue ran up from this deserted lodge; some of the trees were down, sprouting from the stumps. Brakes of elder and bramble swallowed up the trunks of the remaining trees. The land on either side was a sort of tuffety pasture, ungrazed, half-way back to warren. 'This is very picturesque,' said Willoughby to the driver, who made no reply.

In a minute or two they made a turn, and our hero was confronted with the home of his forefathers. It was a fine house of the Cotswold stone, gabled, long and low, but, to say much in little, it stood in need of repair. The turf on either hand came to an end, the avenue opened into a wide terrain of gravel which ran right up to the façade, the nettles hissed under the running-boards of the car; they drew up at the handsome porch, the steps of which were cushioned to the feet by stone crops and mosses.

On an obscure impulse, Willoughby had his bag put down and dismissed the driver. He turned and surveyed the door, which was of studded oak, magnificent, but it bore the look of not having been opened for a very considerable time. A rod and ring appeared to be some sort of bell-pull. Willoughby pulled and let go; the iron obeyed inertly, unresponsively; it was like lifting and dropping a dead man's hand. Nevertheless, the sun was shining as brightly as ever. He rapped with his knuckles upon the oak. 'That won't do,' he said, perceiving its solidity. 'Perhaps there's a back door somewhere.'

He walked along the front of the house, looking in at the uncurtained windows. There was a huge room, with busts on pillars, leather furniture, bookshelves, and the floor was covered with apples laid out on newspapers. The next was completely empty, except for a pail standing in the middle of the floor. Half the ceiling was down. The next he could not see into, the blinds had fallen. Nothing could be more silent. There were the dead windows, the dead rooms, the nettles, the façade, the sun. A human being would have been quite terrible.

Luckily the end room was reassuring; it contained a truckle bed, a chamber-pot, a chair covered with candle-grease. Willoughby went round the corner, and came to the back of the house; a little flagged terrace, well be-thistled, gave down into a walled couple of acres. He went along the whole length of this terrace, pushed his way through a shrubbery, came out on another walled garden, with cabbage plots, bristling espaliers falling from the walls, a line stretched between two old standard trees; on the line, shirts, like blue flags on a desert reef. On this kitchen side a door was open; he looked in; there was an old woman with her elbows in a tub of lather. He tapped for her attention.

'I've come to see my uncle,' said he. 'Mr Corbo.'

'Why, sir, he's not here.'

'Not here?' cried our hero in some dismay.

'Being the first, sir. Not but what he's out every day now. But – on the first, sir – *the Honourable George Corbo is never at home.*' The old woman made this announcement with a smile of innocent pride.

Willoughby found it mysterious. However, at last he discovered that his uncle was shooting pheasants, it being the first of October, in company with William Bucknell, keeper, who lived in the house with him, and that the old woman came once a fortnight to do the washing, and every afternoon in the season, to put a bit of dinner on against his uncle's return. He got his bag round, and put it in the wash-house: the old woman told him he might find his uncle below Pinnigers. He rejoiced at this, and learned that Pinnigers was a hanger which he might discern unmistakably once he was beyond the garden wall.

He retraced his steps along the garden front, took a good look at it. 'This is fine,' said he. 'What's even finer is the thought it may come to me some day, if I play my cards well, which I certainly must. I should have to live simply, to live in it at all; all the same, I think I could trim it up a bit, and very contentedly eat bread and cheese. My uncle seems to live strangely: still, strange people are easiest to approach. Besides, he is a Corbo, and may do as he likes, and so am I, and so may I. Fine!'

He ploughed through the tangle in the garden; came out by a little wicket gate, saw the park land sweeping down, a few scraps of plough further on, coppices scattered about everywhere, the stone walls mostly lost in bramble and briar; a valley, and a long wood on the slope opposite: that must be Pinnigers Hanger. 'What a lot of land!' he cried in delight.

He saw two men sitting under a tree in the bottom, eating. A black retriever, a liver-coloured spaniel with a very small head, and a barrel-bodied white spaniel set up a harmless bark. 'This looks very easy and pleasant,' said Willoughby to himself. 'I wonder who those two men can be.'

Both were dressed the same: big coats, huge pockets, breeches close about the knee, all of an old, smooth, hard-looking material, very much the colour of cow-dung, home-made stockings: one wore boots, the other anklets, that was all the difference. They both had long, pointed noses, haggard cheeks with a streaky red spot high up on the bone, tufts of hair on these spots, long thin moustaches, little keen eyes, overhanging brows.

'Good afternoon,' said Willoughby. They looked at him with no interest whatsoever.

'What does he want?' said the man in anklets to his fellow.

'What do you want?' said that fellow to Willoughby.

'I want Mr Corbo,' replied our hero, frowning at the first speaker. 'I was told he would be somewhere about here.

'Oh, aye, he's about here,' said the booted man.

'What d'ye want with him?' said he of the anklets.

'My dear sir,' said Willoughby politely, 'no doubt I shall be delighted to tell you, when you have told me what the devil it has to do with you.'

'Maybe my name is Corbo,' replied the man with the anklets, whose coat Willoughby now perceived to be unquestionably the oldest in the world.

'You can't be my uncle,' said he.

'No, by God I can't,' said the other. 'No tricks! I've not a nephew in the world, nor want one.'

'Are you the Honourable George Corbo?' demanded our

hero with some impatience. 'If not, kindly take me to him at once.'

'Maybe I am,' replied the old fellow, with a convincing complacency.

'Then you have got a nephew,' said Willoughby. 'I'm him.'

'No tricks!' cried his uncle with a frown.

'You're trespassing,' said the other man suddenly.

'My name's Willoughby Corbo,' cried our hero, thrusting out his hand. 'And if you're my uncle: how d'ye do? My father's Lord Ollebeare.'

'That's a lie,' said the other very doggedly. 'I met Ollebeare, February four or five years back – when we went to Crufts, Bucknell, and it wasn't on – he said no woman had got her hooks in him.'

'True as that onion's on that bit o' paper, sir,' replied his companion. 'You're trespassing,' he said to Willoughby.

'I know all about you, Bucknell,' said Willoughby. 'Heard about you from Walter Burfoot.'

'Walter Burfoot?' cried the keeper, utterly undone.

'Walter Burfoot?' said his master. 'What Walter Burfoot's that?'

'Why, that'll be Jim's older brother, sir,' replied the keeper. 'Jim Burfoot at plough t'other side of the road this very moment. I knew him well. Walter Burfoot went for groom to Mr Ralph. Why, sir, that seemingly proves it.'

'Proves it, my – !' cried his master in a rage. 'A scoundrel!'

'No, sir. Walt warn't never that.'

'Must have been, to go off with my ugly brother Ralph,' cried the Honourable George Corbo.

'No indeed,' said Willoughby determinedly. 'One of the very best.'

'That he was,' chimed in Bucknell.

'He brought me up,' said Willoughby.

'Told me a dozen things about you,' he added to Bucknell.

'I warrant he did,' cried that worthy with enthusiasm. 'It's

so, sir; he's your nephew, he's a Corbo. Look at his great big nose. You must shake him by the hand, sir, that you must.'

'Some bye-blow of that dirty devil Ollebeare's,' said the old man, not acting on his keeper's suggestion.

'Good God!' replied Willoughby, very haughty. 'If you'll think more of me for that, it can be put straight. My father's offered to marry: I can be legitimate son *and* heir, all in a week. Then perhaps you'll receive me properly. 'Twas that very thing I came down to see you about, fearing it might upset your convenience. Never mind.'

'It's blackmail,' cried the old man. 'That's what it is. Take it down. Note every word he says, Bucknell. Wait a minute, I must think about this.'

'While you think,' said Willoughby very coldly, 'I'd be glad if you'd let me have a crust and an onion. I don't travel empty a hundred miles to see an uncle every day. I believe your brother Ralph would greet me better:'

'Bread and cheese and an onion,' said his uncle in derision. 'For a smarty like you? No. You want champagne and chicken. You won't get that here.'

'Smarty!' cried Willoughby. 'What? Don't you know your own brother's clothes? Look,' said he, plucking at his baggy breech. 'Look,' plucking at his belt. 'Don't you know the shape of your own brother?'

'Say he may eat, sir,' begged the keeper. 'The young gentleman's fair flagging for want of a bite and a sup.'

'No I'm not,' said Willoughby, but giving the basket a very particular look.

'Let him eat,' said the old man, 'and be damned to him: coming here to disturb me on the first day of all the year.'

'Eat hearty, sir,' said the keeper, offering Willoughby an open clasp-knife.

'Eat quickly,' said his uncle. 'We're waiting to get on. I'll not move till I've settled you one way or another. Ollebeare's not married, you say?'

'Not yet,' said Willoughby, with his mouth full. 'Nor need not be if you don't wish it.'

'What's the trick?' said the old man.

'No trick at all,' said Willoughby. 'He sent me down to make an arrangement with you. It's all very simple, but why let it spoil your day? It can wait till this evening. That's a fine gun. That's a more beautiful gun than they seem to make nowadays.'

'Give the rascal some beer,' said the old man. 'That gun,' said he to Willoughby, 'is one of a pair, made forty-four years ago this very summer. For my twenty-first birthday I had that pair of guns. Your grandfather was a funny sort of man; all the same, he didn't believe in giving a young chap a second-rate pair of guns. Because it spoils his style. I was out with that pair of guns at a certain place not a hundred miles from here ...' and he told a story which convinced his nephew he had to deal with one who dearly loved shooting, for otherwise he'd not have brought so much imagination to it.

Willoughby, while he listened, ate at speed. An unaccountable exhilaration possessed him, whether it was hearing old Burfoot's speech again, and no longer needing to check his tongue from following it – anyway, that member felt as one who puts on old loose clothes, and gave a frisk or two. He was relieved, too, to find his uncle so rustic. Most would have thought him a very unpromising card, but an uncle he could not tell from a keeper was comfortable to one who had dreaded some unapproachable Stumber or icy Ralph.

When his uncle had done praising the gun, he looked at Willoughby very hard, then, a certain itch getting the better of him: 'You're here,' said he. 'You may be a scoundrel; in fact, I know you're one. All the same, the first day of the year, eh? Ha! Ha! I don't know we can have a fellow about, Bucknell, and never give him a shot.'

'No, indeed,' said the keeper, 'not a nephew.'

'Besides,' pursued the old man, 'he can try my other gun. I think it will interest you,' says he to Willoughby, in the politest tone. 'You'll find it such a gentle, *gentle* gun. Not like these banging, short-barrelled things.'

'It would interest me very much to know how to load it,' thought Willoughby.

A boy was hallooed up, and after a good many cautions, sent to get this matchless weapon. 'Meanwhile,' said the old man, 'we're done lunch (you eat well, I'll say that for you). Bucknell, the boys might work through the little spur, just to keep us busy till the gun comes. Lend him yours, Bucknell, till then.'

'With pleasure,' said the keeper, offering Willoughby a positive fowling-piece.

'No, no,' said he, 'I can very well wait.' The fact is, he suffered a little from the foolish vanity of his years, and was afraid to say he knew nothing of the business, lest these stern votaries should despise him. He wanted to see how it was done. That was foolish, for an indifferent performer is the object of toleration at best, and often of a hatred singularly keen, while the eager novice is a creature to be begotten into venery, stamped with one's own image, moulded like the child in the womb, encouraged, his errors forgiven, his achievements exaggerated, his first right and left rejoiced over – it amounts to being loved.

So he was fool enough to hold his tongue. They moved off to a point in the bottom under an arm of the hanger: three or four hobbledehoys, carrying long sticks, got up from the other side of a clump of brambles, and took an upper path to the top of the wood. Old Corbo explained to his nephew the disadvantages of all those over-sized shoots where more land was shot over, more guns lined up, more beaters employed, more birds killed. Willoughby agreed heartily. His uncle was not without a sense of proportion; he next exclaimed against that piddling form of the sport which some mean spirits had the impudence to conduct upon a smaller scale. Willoughby agreed, with all the sincerity in the world, that shooting should take place over 752 acres of hilly ground, the woods being parcelled out into small copses and hangers, lying mostly south; the beaters should be few, the guns two or three, the bag a hundred birds in a proper day, a dozen to a walk round, and three dogs should be employed for the picking-up – a Clumber spaniel, a liver spaniel of what is called the *old-fashioned sort*, and a curly-coated retriever, old and rather blind.

He deplored the vulgar grandiose, he mocked the nasty little piddling rough-shooter, who was pretty sure to feed for another man's birds. What a change of heart this was, for one who had shot only five acres hitherto, his gun a Daisy air rifle, his bag one cat in a lifetime, and that a runner, his only beater the butler at Kent Court, who had beaten the game out of the sportsman's backside.

What's more, our hero had for some time past indulged in humanitarian impulses of the highest spiritual level. His good Uncle Ralph had begotten in him a strong aversion to the rich in themselves; his experience of lackeys had prejudiced him against the effect of riches on other men. His ideas were still without form, and void, but over their chaos brooded the dove-like spirit of nineteenth-century liberalism. He believed the human race to be perfectible, and, by long consequence, disapproved of blood sports. He was the friend of the bottom dog, as all young men should be. Regard him, then, under the necessity of directing a load of 1⅛ oz. of No. 6 shot against the bottom dog, if a feathered biped clattering at forty yards above one's head can be so termed, and about to impel this load not only with the force of one ounce of black powder of the smokeless diamond variety, but also with the deadly hope of prowess. Alas, poor Willoughby! you shall soon point your gun, and hope. In every load there is one more pellet than can be counted: it is a long shot, but yet that pellet may prick the dove-like spirit of nineteenth-century liberalism: a pricked bird may flutter on seemingly unharmed, but after a time it dwindles and pines away.

His uncle was not one of those who insist on the greatest possible silence in their beaters, lest sudden cries should disturb the concentration of the guns. 'I like to *know* I'm out shooting,' said he. The beaters assisted him towards this realisation by shouts of *mark over* and *cock forrard*, *hare coming down to you*, *sir*, *coming forrard*, *coming down to you*; the dogs lifted their noses and whined in eagerness; old Corbo, with exactly the same expression, also lifted his nose. Willoughby felt a tingling in all his nerves, which he was kind enough to ascribe to

the beauty of the yellowing sweep of trees, the tuffety grass, the dogs, like dogs in an old print, liver, white, and black.

The hare must have turned off; the woodcock, like a god in a legend, metamorphosed into a missel-thrush ere it burst out from the promontory of trees; for a moment the voices were hushed, the sticks tapped in the wood, there was a gathering silence, a pregnancy in the high, cliffy yellow. Well away to their left, a single cock flew out low and steady, the sun on his copper, his tail rippling behind like the tail of a dragon. But that was in another country.

'Come *on*,' said the keeper under his breath. Damn my eyes! the next moment a crackling cry sprang up like a ladder in the wood. From the top of it a fine cock launched himself magnificently upon the blue. Bucknell, standing below, lifts up his gun, stops, looks at his master, it's the first day of all the year. The old fellow, as greedy as a schoolboy, gives a grunt, takes the long shot. The bird, so struck, and seen from the side, seems hardly to fall, but to swerve, stoop, nay, *dash* itself down: it strikes the turf like a thunderbolt.

'Thank'ee, Bill Bucknell,' calls out the old boy, not loud, trying to pass off as a smile of thanks the smile of exultation that irradiates his weather-beaten chops. He cannot resist stealing a glance at Willoughby. Our hero receiving it: 'Upon my word!' says he in equal delight. 'I've not come a hundred miles for nothing.'

Now the beaters are very near, the first real rise is flushed, a proper little bouquet, right between the guns. These, just less than cool, pick their first birds, but fire a little chancy with the left. Three are down, one of them so far from clean-killed he bounces up six feet into the air again, falls, flutters up again, and continues to do so for the space of a minute or more. The dogs eye him, so does Willoughby, but the guns take no notice whatever. Willoughby feels a considerable qualm, he'd like to go and wring the bird's neck. Two things prevent him; one is, that he doesn't know how, the other, that he fears to make a fool of himself, for which I do not blame him at all. Nineteenth-century liberalism labours his bosom, and it is only

by way of anodyne, so far, that he applies his mind to this consideration, '*These things have been done for many hundred years, and by better men that I am: I had better know more before I say aught.*'

It's only a little branch of the wood, there are two more rises, one of which goes astray; then that drive is over. The beaters stumble out through the brambles, the dogs get up. Bucknell sets them to quarter the ground after a couple of runners.

'This is a lovely sight!' cries Willoughby.

'You will not see three better dogs,' says his uncle, 'not for forty miles round, though they're old, too old (like their master, some would say), and poor old Carlo's as blind as a bat. See how he works them! 'Lo, 'lo, 'lo, 'lo, Prince! 'Lo, 'lo, 'lo, Floss! I los'! I los'! Goo in, you devil, go in!'

'Now, master, you made me a promise not to go shouting on, when I'm a-trying to get these three damn dogs to work,' calls out old Bucknell from the other side of the scrub.

'Damn you, Bucknell! Damn the fellow! Damn his eyes ... impudence ... my own dogs ... talk like that in front of my nephew ...' mutters the old chap, to keep his face. At this moment the boy comes up, carrying the gun.

'Here we are. Just try that. Just try the handling on't. Try how it comes up. Like a living thing, eh?'

'Like a living thing,' says Willoughby, making a poke with it, and wishing to God it had life enough to shoot of itself.

'That's a well-balanced gun,' the old chap rattles on. 'You don't feel the weight of it. Now just you take a guess at the weight of that gun.'

Willoughby gives himself up for lost, can't decide whether it weighs twenty pounds or forty, lifts it up again with a critical look in his eye, purses his lips; fortunately the old enthusiast can wait no longer. 'What is it?' says he. 'Six and a half pound, seven pound – what?'

'Feels no more than six and a half to *me*,' says Willoughby, with the air of one abdicating reason in the presence of the supernatural.

'Seven pounds, seven ounces,' says his uncle.

'Good God Almighty!' cries Willoughby.

'You may well say, Good God Almighty!' says his uncle, with a very affable nod.

They are now walking round to stand under the main part of the hanger. 'If only my luck holds!' says Willoughby to himself.

What follows happened under Pinnigers Hanger, on Ollebeare, estate of the Honourable Corbo, near the Slaughters, at three o'clock on a fine afternoon, the first of October 1922. They were lined up again, a cock came out just as before, straight over Bucknell's head, a bit higher if anything. That worthy fires, the bird's on the swerve, he misses both barrels. 'Round to you, sir,' he calls to Willoughby.

Poor Willoughby feels his heart going fit to burst, lifts his gun and tries to *sight* the bird along it, using the wrong eye. He sees the bird at the end of his gun, makes up his mind to pull the trigger, an admirable resolution, which he fairly soon puts into effect. By this time the bird is round on its swerve, coming t'other way. As he's pointing six feet to the left of where 'twas, and pulling late, he's just in time to catch it on the way back: the taut crossbow breaks, a dark star twinkles. Down it comes.

'*Got him!*' cries Willoughby, convulsed with joy, and runs up to where it lies, picks it up, to have a good look at it.

'What's up?' cries his uncle. 'What's the fellow doing? Think he'd never brought down a bird in his life before!'

'No more I have,' cries Willoughby in his delight. 'No more I have. But, by God! I'll shoot many another, I hope.'

His uncle looks at him this way and that; can't make him out at all.

'Young gennelman shows a good deal of promise, then,' says the keeper. 'Well done, young sir, I say! There's instinck there, sir, if ever I did see it in all my life – save once, sir, *save once*.'

'What are *you* talking about?' says old Corbo, still in two minds about it all.

'Sir, that shot – ' says Bucknell, very impressive. 'That shot

is like the first shot as ever you took, out along o' me and my dad, as like as that 'ere gun is like that 'ere gun – PAIR to't. Year of grace 1874,' he adds.

'I remember it,' says the old chap, 'but that was a higher bird.'

'Mebbe a leetle bit higher, sir,' says the keeper, 'but you'd a-bin a-rabbit-shooting many a time.'

'I had that,' says his master. 'But he's been rabbit-shooting too.'

'No, I haven't,' cuts in Willoughby.

'But I wasn't more than seventeen,' says his uncle.

'That evens it, then,' says the keeper. 'Bred in the bone! Nothing like it. Brings me back my young days again. Just such another, as never I expected to see.'

'You think he'll make a first-class shot, then?' says the old man.

'Bred in the bone,' says Bucknell, avoiding the implication.

'I'll make some sort of a shot, anyway,' says Willoughby. 'For if ever I enjoyed myself in all my life, it was when I saw that blasted bird come down.'

'Got the instinck!' cries Bucknell. 'I *know* the instinck; told you Carlo had it, eight year come second week in February, when you was talken about drownden' on un.'

'Better get on,' says George Corbo, with a long look at Willoughby. 'Take his cartridges, Bucknell. Let him point an empty gun. Don't want to be shot by my own nephew, not on the first day of all the season.'

Bucknell touches his hat, blows his whistle, the beaters come down through the wood.

'Is this right?' says Willoughby, stabbing the air. 'Is this the way?'

'Don't you say too much, young sir,' says the keeper, speaking low. 'You come out with me an hour or two, sometime, and try at the rabbits.'

CHAPTER IX

A steak-and-kidney pudding –
Apples on the floor – Your Grandpa –
A lovely face – You talk too much –
I'll never forgive myself –
Three months at Ollebeare – I've fixed you up

WELL, they went back to the house at the end of the day, and sat, keeper and all, in an enormous kitchenish room, not unimpressive, only rather like a tap-room, eating a steak-and-kidney pudding the old woman had put by for them. The Honourable George, who bent down pretty close to his plate, found time to direct several piercing glances at Willoughby from under his shaggy eyebrows. Willoughby needed pull no special sort of face; he was happy, and his nature was, when he was happy, to show it. What's more, poor, untaught lad! he was liable to sudden affections, and had come by a singular liking for this old uncle of his.

'Why the devil,' said he to himself, 'was I ever taken in by those pompous fools I met at old Stumber's, whose shirt-front starch any grocer might put on? This chap, and my dad, are the only two positive gentlemen I've ever met: the others are less than men, their distinction lies in what they *fear* to do. These show their silly natures in every word and look, and their silly natures are noble. Damn it, they're fine!'

He was greatly struck by the relationship between his uncle and the keeper: what little they said was so easy and pleasant, it was clear there were never two better friends, and just as clear that one was master and t'other man. 'And if I couldn't be one, I'd next soon be the other,' thought Willoughby; '*that's the point of it*. However, I hope I shall be that one some day.'

The impression it made on him was tremendous; it confirmed his unthought thoughts, as poetry does. 'How *true* it all is!' he said, noting that in his uncle's face there was a good

deal more than he had observed at first. He thought he saw traces of knowledge and disillusion there, their equation worked out to much the same simplicity as was native to Bucknell's honest jowl.

While they ate, the talk was all of the day's sport, mapped out by crusts and cruet-pots: immediately afterwards Bucknell got on his stiff legs: 'I'm stepping down to the Five Alls,' said he tactfully.

'That's right, Bucknell,' said the Hon. George.

'Well, now,' said he to his nephew, when they were left alone, 'I don't doubt it, you're Ollebeare's son all right. I'm glad to see you, though we live pretty simple here. How long were you thinking of staying?'

'I'd like to stay a bit,' said Willoughby. 'If I'd not be in your way.'

'Have no fear of that,' said the old man in a peculiar tone. 'However, we'll talk about that later. Tell your story, boy.'

Willoughby told about Kent Court, didn't say much, but said it pretty well: his uncle was much taken by it. 'That's my sneaking brother Ralph all over,' said he. 'Now he was begotten wrong side of the blanket, that I'll swear: not our sort at all. Now your grandfather, he was true sire to Ollebeare and me. You're the same breed: come and have a look at his likeness.'

He took up the oil-lamp, and led Willoughby into the better part of the house. Our hero glanced around: 'How heavy the stone looks out at the back there,' he said, 'and how light it arches here!'

'That room we were in,' said his uncle, 'that was the dining-hall of the old house, before they put all this front on, reign of George the First. Then it became the servants' hall. I use it now – one can live alone, and rough, under the rougher stone. Living as I do, in this part, that 'ud put me in mind of those old prints of Bedlam: you know, the light pillar, the fine arch, and underneath – altogether too faded a company.'

'I know what you mean, sir,' said Willoughby, very pleased to find his uncle had this side to him. 'Out there, you and

Bucknell eating a steak-and-kidney pudding together – it's somehow natural, right, the best possible thing: here it would be damned odd, and here oddness is madness. Yet it's a pity the library should have apples all over the floor. Why don't you open the place, and entertain people of your own standing?'

'My boy,' answered his uncle, 'better these civilised walls should look down on a couple of madmen than on a score of idiots. Besides, I've no money, not for that sort of thing. Come in here,' said he, opening a door. 'I used to use this room to write letters in years ago, when still I wrote 'em. There's your Grandpa.'

Willoughby saw, over a fireplace, a gentleman who looked very much like a tame bear, tricked out in a high collar. He looked at it for a while, felt his nose: 'Yes,' he said. His uncle made no move, only looked several times from the portrait to Willoughby and back. Our hero felt it was unnecessary for him to go on looking at the bear-like gentleman; he stole glances right and left. Over a bureau in the shallow bay beside the fireplace was another picture. This one, vilely painted, was of a girl of the uttermost beauty: I mean of that vivid flesh and that vivid spirit that gives one a new idea of the gods. The lamplight fell on it clearly enough. Willoughby was struck to the heart by this astonishing face. 'Good God!' he cried.

'Come on,' said his uncle.

'No,' said Willoughby, who had not had the restraining influence of education. 'May I look at this? I must. I've never seen anything like it in my life. Yet it's the sort of face one thinks one *has* seen.'

'Oh, ah!' remarked his uncle.

'Who was she?' babbled our hero. 'Did you know her well? I suppose she's an old woman now. Is she still beautiful? I thought that was all rot, in Browning, "a face to lose youth for," but it's so. I'll never fall in love again.'

'Will 'ee come on?' cried his uncle in the roughest tones. 'You talk too much. Too much by half.'

Willoughby heartily pitied the dried-up old codger, unkindled before such burning loveliness. However, he be-

thought him of his manners as they went through the door: 'I'm sorry I kept you waiting, Uncle,' said he. 'I didn't mean to offend you, but I was so much struck.'

'You don't offend me, boy,' replied his uncle, 'but come back to the dogs and the fire.'

When they were seated again, Willoughby took up his tale, mentioned his job, described in more detail his meeting with his father. 'Go on,' said his uncle.

'Well, do you see,' said Willoughby, 'he wants to provide for me. We rather took to one another, you see? Let me get it clear. When he dies, this place and the title go to you: when you die, they go to Uncle Ralph.'

'Ah, damn him! So they do,' replied the Honourable George.

'Well, the obvious thing,' said our hero, 'would be for my father to marry my mother, then they'd come to me, and, I suppose, I should at once have your handle. He'd have a sort of nurse for his old age too.'

'Well, if that's all right by law, why don't he marry her?' said the old chap.

'He's only known me a few days,' said Willoughby. 'He's known you all his life, do you see? He says it wouldn't be fair to put you out.'

'Oh, ah!' said his uncle, with a peculiar glance.

This glance recalled to Willoughby's notice the fact that he was lying, or rather, since he had no objection to lying in the abstract, the fact that he was swindling this very concrete old man, to whom he had taken a liking. However, one must live.

'Perhaps he isn't specially keen on marrying her,' said he. 'Anyway, he proposed an alternative.'

'Go on,' said his uncle.

'Oh, hell!' thought Willoughby. 'Why do you leave it all to me?'

'He suggests,' he continued, 'that you, as heir to the estate, could consent to the breaking of the entail, so that he could leave me the land when he dies, with you to have a life's lease of it at the same figure, and have the title into the bargain.

Thus you go on as you are for the rest of your life, and when you die, Ralph gets only the title and I get the land.'

His uncle pondered over this, looking into the fire. 'That looks plain and straightforward, like all Ollebeare's schemes,' said he. 'If it's as square as it looks, it'll be the only one that ever was. Look'ee, boy, what do you know about it?'

'What I've told you,' said Willoughby, rather flat.

'I can understand you coming down to someone you've never seen,' said his uncle, 'with one of Ollebeare's notions to broach. All right. There's a lot of lawyer's details to be ferreted out, that's certain. I can put the ferret to 'em if need be. Myself, being no ferret, I stay above ground – why live simple, else? Likewise it's no odds to me, the matter of the rent: if I didn't pay it, it would lay by. I've my own income, which I hardly spend, though it's small. Supposing your father dies before me, I should not care that' (with a snap of his fingers) 'about the matter of a year or two's rent. On the other hand, supposing he marries, and all's square in law, you could put me out on his death: that would be the end of me. I could not live elsewhere but here.'

'I should not do that,' cried Willoughby, forgetful of his father's advice. 'Don't think that, Uncle, for that I'd never do.'

'Why not?' said his uncle, very suddenly.

Willoughby could not, without resorting to emotional terms, describe the impression made on him that afternoon and evening. He said, therefore: 'I will not say why, but I'd not do it, nor will I have the possibility taken into reckoning.'

'I believe you are a very decent sort of young chap,' said his uncle. 'I see no reason, boy, why I should not consent. You certainly brought that bird down very well. What's more, I believe you've something of our nature in you. God help you! your father lives a wretched life, and people call me mad. Never mind, one can do well enough on this place. I'd rather you had it than that Ralph. It seems above-board: I'd not trust your father, but you've a straight eye, spoken me very fair: I'll trust you. Give me your word there's no trick, and

the thing shall be done. Your word?' With this the old chap looked very frankly at Willoughby. Willoughby thought of two hundred pounds a year, and of inheriting this stone house, the tangled garden, the wide fields, the yellowing woods. He thought of becoming such another, with certain modifications (such as the girl in the picture), as his uncle was.

'I see nothing wrong in it,' he said. 'I see much that is wrong, foolish, criminal, in throwing away a settled income, freedom, and the hope of coming into this place, and ending up like you. Oh dear! I wish you had received me less kindly: I would then have given you my word. Curse it!' he cried in much stress. 'I would not mind being a rogue, not a bit – I am not such a fool, Uncle – yet I am fool enough to jib at this, because you have said I am of your kind, and so I am. I'd do it to anyone else in the world. I wish you were my Uncle Ralph. But there it is – I'll not give you my word.'

'Don't tell me you're not my nephew after all,' cried the old man.

'Too much so,' said Willoughby. 'No, the fact is, my mother has long been dead. I shall never forgive myself for this. It was my poor old father's idea. He is to die, so he says, in six months or so, and he wanted to see me settled.'

'Never forgive yourself?' said his uncle. 'Why, there's no harm done.'

'No, indeed?' remarked Willoughby. 'No harm in throwing away this place? I shall never forgive myself, never.'

'Oh, I thought you meant, for joining in the trick,' said his uncle.

Willoughby permitted himself the use of an impatient expression.

'You could not have forced my hand,' said his uncle. 'I believe your father's law is poppy-cock. We are governed by grocers, witness my fallows for one thing. All the same, I believe in no bill that could put me out by legitimising a bastard twenty-one years after his birth. But, bill or no bill, I'd not have stood for Ollebeare's blackmail. However, you seemed to believe in it. Yet you gave up the poaching trick

when it came to the pinch. Very well, my boy. You're my nephew when all's said and done. Your Aunt Clara was fond of you, you say?'

'So I was told,' said Willoughby.

'And you robbed – and you were the death of her?'

'That's why Uncle Ralph so hated me,' replied Willoughby.

'I'll get to know you, boy,' said his uncle. 'To me you seem a rum un. If my thoughts should chance to turn that way (which I don't say they will), there's one thing your father overlooked – your Uncle Ralph must consent to break the entail.'

'Well then, I'm done,' cried Willoughby. 'For he hates me like poison.'

'He cares nothing for the place,' said his uncle. 'And I'd rather the devil had it than him. That could be managed. Look, boy, stay on. I'll get to know you. I make no promise, mind, but I'll get to know you.'

'I should like to stay on,' said Willoughby. 'I've never been in a place I liked yet.'

'So Ollebeare's to die, if he tells the truth,' said the old chap. 'I'm sorry to hear it, if it's true. If he's not lying, then I shall be Lord Ollebeare, and that fat bitch, who looks down her nose at me, and her stockbroking husband, they'll – well, if it's not all lies, that is.'

They sat on beside the great fireplace, glad to have done with discussion. Willoughby had his beer in a mug with Lord Nelson on it: his uncle had one with sportsmen and pointer on. The beer in those parts is the cleanest, the bitterest, the best in England. Willoughby was not at all unhappy; he believed life to be a fountain of such fine things as this; lose one, another will come along. His uncle smiled at him. William Bucknell returned, said there was a frost: his face had the dahlia glow of it: frost, wood-smoke, taste of bitter beer. It was soon time to make up a bed for the visitor: nothing could be more pleasant than the way they all three said good night.

Or if anything could be, it was Willoughby's waking next morning. He woke between blankets, on a hard bed, in a little hard whitewashed room, with a deep window. This window

was full of blue, ambrosial blue, it was so rich and so strong: a pear branch, by being bathed in it, had become a mighty gold, and breathed easy in the lower part of the window. Willoughby, washed in sleep, sprang up and looked out. Below him was the kitchen garden; beyond it, meadows and stubbles, and woods and copses standing very still. There was a sting of frost in the air, the shadows were amethyst with it, and in all the holy, jolly blue there was no speck of cloud.

From this height Willoughby could see over the right-hand wall of the kitchen garden into a strip of old orchard, where, under a giant apple tree, there was a broken wooden table, and a bench overturned into the frosty grass. Our hero indulged in the fancy that Slender and Shallow had sat there overnight, a little while ago. 'I can take my mug of beer and join them,' he said, for he was used to shadowy company.

He found plenty to please his fancy during the days that followed, for life in this large rough country had necessities and pleasures quite other than those of the parky lands round Reigate, where there seems to be no dung. A little indifferent farming continued on the estate; Willoughby rejoiced in finding a whole race of Burfoots, who allowed him to hinder them with the greatest good-humour. He loved to listen to their talk; he loved to wander about alone, afloat in that vague *poetry* of the countryside, which is perhaps experienced most purely by those who know nothing of its prose. We might compare this delicate rapture to the love of the betrothed, as against that of the long-married; or to the intoxication one feels as a child, on reading a line of Wordsworth, without knowing who the devil Old Proteus was, or what exactly is a wreathéd horn.

Our hero could hardly develop more than this bright, straw-fire enthusiasm, for he had but one season of the fourfold book before him, and that the most cryptic. What's more, he had to learn its alphabet, except in relation to potatoes and greens, as he went along. This straw-fire enthusiasm is a very lovely thing, but a very personal one: its pretty absurdities can become extremely tiresome to an elderly owner of barns more

picturesque than water-tight. The Hon. George bore very well with our hero's prattle for a week; at the end of that time Bucknell passed a hint that the governor had no great stomach for young company. 'He don't like being drawed,' said that worthy, 'into book talk, though it properly tempts him. Dunno why, I'm sure; he likes enough the reading on 'em.'

Willoughby expected nothing more of an uncle, and very philosophically withdrew, but no further than his little room, for it had a fireplace, and he understood that little rooms upstairs were the prerogative of nephews.

The old man had expected a completer retreat: however, this did well enough, except when Willoughby talked too much at meal-times. As for our hero, he thought it, save in one respect, the best life in the world.

Its single small deficiency engrossed a good deal of his thoughts. Soon after Christmas he had reason to go into the front part of the house, and his eye falling on the door of the little study, he was moved to go inside, and have another look at the picture that had taken his fancy. It was as perfect as before. Willoughby was induced to revert to an odd habit of solitary childhood, and address certain words to it. He was rewarded by the agreeable illusion of a response in the pictured face. He remained there half an hour, and returned next day. In a word, he fell half in love with this beauty of thirty years ago, and at last could no longer refrain from bursting forth with all manner of questions and speculations at the dinner-table.

The Hon. George was a little morose that evening. Next morning, Willoughby was surprised to see him appear in a town rig of some seniority.

'I shall be away a day or two,' said he. 'Keep the boy in order, Bucknell. And, Bucknell ...'

'Yes, sir?' said the keeper.

'Hold your tongue.'

Two or three days later, the old man returned, and looked and sniffed about him as if he had been away a year.

'I've done your business,' said he to Willoughby.

'What business, Uncle?' asked our hero.

'That,' replied his uncle, who was a little addicted to the rustic riddling habit, 'that which to think of it makes you a rogue, and not to think of it makes you a fool. Now do you know what I mean?'

'I *half* think,' replied Willoughby, 'that you must mean something to do with my father's little arrangement.'

'True enough,' returned the other. 'I've seen your poor old father – God! who'd think we'd been boys together here, no longer ago, it seems to me, than yesterday? He's struck hard, and won't last much longer. You must go to see him, boy, he's in a bad way. They've got him in a doctor's home: I don't know who pays the piper. Three months they give him, cooped up there on slops and soda-water. He begged and prayed of me to get him out: "One good meal," said he, "would cure me of all my trouble." True enough, so 'twould. And he frets so, I nearly gave way to him. Ah, well!

'Well, I saw the other fellow: we'll say nothing about that. He's agreed; your father's made a will; 'tis all done. When he's gone, my bank will go on every week as before: you arrange it with his. Till then, I'm giving you something to go on with, so you may go at once, and see if you can keep him from fretting over being cooped up so, and fed on slops.'

'Why,' said Willoughby, 'perhaps I should have gone before. The truth is, I hardly knew how, for I've only a few shillings, and hardly liked to ask you for any. I hope I've not been a nuisance to you. I've never liked being anywhere so much before, but sometimes I've been afraid I've offended you.'

'No, no, my boy,' said his uncle. 'You're young for me, that's all. Let me hear from you. I'll send word when I'd like you to come for a couple of days.'

Willoughby felt that so small an invitation, and so far removed in vagueness, was almost invisible. Still, he knew uncles were strange beings, and, though he was sorry to leave Ollebeare, he was extremely glad to be going to London, which he thought might prove a very pleasant place to a gentleman of two hundred a year.

CHAPTER X

Paddington Station – A saloon bar –
An ancient order of beings –
Louise – One of those artists –
Fainting with enthusiasm – I adore you –
Mrs Bond's a beast

WILLOUGHBY arrived at Paddington at the smoky hour of dusk. He sniffed, under the high glass roofage, the acrid smell of arrival and departure; in Praed Street he relished the savour of fried-fish shops, his eye fell upon the syringes and the book-jackets in the window of a disreputable chemist. He was so misguided as to utter the word *Life!* in a tone of ecstasy. His face glowed. Those in whose veins the blood flows fast are exalted by the pungent and autumnal savour of decay. As the hunter's heart quickens at the smell of fungus and wood-rot, scenting in it the forest's inertia, its opening ways, its stillness before him, so the young man, advancing greedily on the brick groves and the asphalt glades, and the rivers of noise and the bowers of light, relishes dirt and decadence. Weak and rotten-rich, they tell him his power, and promise him a wintry beauty, which may start up in the haggard fever and white of the shop-girl, whose face looks as if it must smell like a chrysanthemum, or in the solitary vision at insomniac dawn. It is in the nature of young men to believe that when the slatey smoke-plumes deepen against the paling slatey sky, they will come by visions of unique intensity and beauty.

Willoughby went to his hotel near Victoria, where he was given a little room, so sterile and efficient in its enamel and its unsoftened light, that he felt it was like an operating theatre, on whose hard bed he might lie trussed up, ready for the severe ministrations of life, which we have observed him enthusiastically to salute by name. 'Come on!' he cried.

He flung his coat on to an armchair, off which it immediately slid. He washed the scratching grit of the railway from

his face, and threw down his towel on the dressing-table, from which it immediately slid, dragging with it the slip of linen which lay along the top. This was no place to lounge in; Willoughby threw up the window and saw the buses moving below; he longed to be out in it. He changed into a town suit, a stiff white collar, a pair of thinner shoes. He could not, however, put on a lean, acute, pale, sophisticated, supercilious, slightly embittered, hatchet or poker face, in place of the wind-reddened and eager grin that belied at once his immaculate collar and the foolish poetry of his eyes. Still, he was no snob, and smiled at this country friend, with whom he had achieved a shaving-glass intimacy during the last three months, and took him out to dine.

The smoky dusk of five o'clock had given place to a night-blue as clear as ice, and as stimulating, but not as cold. Willoughby felt strong but not hungry; he had eaten two incredibly compact pies in the refreshment room at Oxford: he had a weakness for them, which was a great pity. So when he had wandered along Victoria Street, and along under the pink and operatic Mall sky, fringed with an embroidery of palaces, he found himself too highly charged with vague emotion to sit down at a table-cloth and eat a slow dinner in Soho. Instead, he went off up the Charing Cross Road, and on the corner near Leicester Square he saw a large and well-appointed saloon, in which, it occurred to him, he might eat yet another and yet a better pie, without sinking his happy restlessness in the warm swamps of a *table d'hôte*.

He found himself in one of the pleasantest saloon bars it is possible to conceive: that is, it had an abundance of palm trees, plush of a suitable antiquity, a divinely reminiscent staleness; altogether, one felt one had arrived by hansom cab, and might at any moment behold the young George Moore, whose memoirs Willoughby had just been reading. The bar was no less well equipped to sustain the body than to delight the imagination, and lest by any chance the dressed crab or ham roll, bitter or Johnny Walker, might leave a single appetite unsatisfied, Providence assisted the management by dis-

posing, in ones and twos, at the little tables in the remotest alcove, a certain half-dozen ladies who took their early evening rest and refreshment here.

A quality, a certain soft and pearly fat, a certain toadish motherliness, a little matter of costume, coiffure, a *nuance* of expression, something in the discreet and aggrieved whisper in which they spoke to one another, proclaimed, even to the inexperienced eye of our hero, the mature and Anglo-Saxon whore. He saw them only as he advanced, embarrassingly burdened with glass, plate, and cruet, towards the little tables where they sat: every table was occupied, yet he thought he might hurt their feelings by turning back, so he stumbled on, trying to appear, God alone knows why, as if he were looking for a friend.

When he got in among these little tables, he perceived at the farthest of them all, and sitting alone, and alone in difference, a being who struck this young man as the most simple, the most charming, and the most harmless in the world, and whom, for that very reason, I shall endeavour to describe.

She was younger than Willoughby, slender, peaked-faced. She had a doe's glance, but her eye was slightly less soft than a doe's; more like a jewel. She wore a black silk dress, through which each limb, every curve and faint crease of her body, showed clearly, taking on a softly writhing appearance from the sliding black. Yet she sat very still, conspicuously still. Her limbs were slim, exceedingly round, and tapered to knee, elbow, and wrist. These, and her face, were of the order which da Vinci has set down, though without the protective mimicry of bourgeois toughness with which he sometimes adds the terror of disguise to its terrors. This order is perfect, and never changes: it was the same in Nineveh, Crete, Carthage. A thought would flaw its ivory: these strangers have some old movements of mind, very small, inevitable as their bodies' growth, and fitted to their bodies' purpose. They are idiots.

Willoughby, hesitating red-eared among the tables, beheld this attractive creature, and wondered if she would be embarrassed or offended if he ventured to sit on the vacant chair

beside her. While he still doubted, she smiled, though without moving a feature, and with lowered eyes, and she pulled in her glass towards her.

Willoughby made one or two slow steps, and set down his tricky burden on the little round table. His knife, recognising him as a novice, spilled out of his plate. He was in the act of sitting down: before he could recover himself, this charming young woman, this vacant perfection, this eternal thing, made a single incredible gesture, and annihilated the Charing Cross Road, the Bass and Johnny Walker, the accidental huckster whores, and, as if she had drawn a circle, convinced him that they were apart and alone. Still with lowered eyes, she had stretched out her hand, and put the knife back upon his plate.

She made a faint movement, a shift on her pointed bottom; a movement, I beg to inform you, of less than a quarter inch, and a tiny ripple passed under all her silk. Willoughby turned to her, broadside on, feeling as if the whole wall of his chest had been ripped away, and his naked, palpitating heart openly sweltered, waiting for her glance.

He waited, but no glance came; her eyes were still dropped, she smiled pensively, secretly, like a nun. 'Ought I,' thought he to himself, 'to say *thank you*?' He had an instinct against it: as well say *thank you* for a caress, as for this intimate, handmaiden's act. So he was silent, and too late saw that he should have used the word *kind*, possibly in a certain tone of voice. But by this time, such was the intoxication of his senses, the rout of his faculties and the disorder of his soul, he had gagged himself with an enormous piece of pie, which lay like a beam on his dry tongue. He rallied to the emergency, and devoted a minute or two to the complicated engineering of its removal. While this feat was in progress, he eyed with increasing aversion the cold and heavy remnant of the wedge; when all was done, he pushed the plate away.

Its silken supplanter was the most womanly of women, in that she held to a surpassing degree the conviction that men can do no wrong. She glanced with unjust suspicion upon the

innocent pie, and addressing Willoughby in accents of tender dismay, she asked him: 'Isn't it *nice*?'

Willoughby, who was as yet no realist, found insufficient of the pythoness, insufficient of the spark which, he thought, had set Troy's towers ablaze, in this simple question, which nevertheless contained an essential wifeliness, which, occurring at this extreme of her personality, this arm's-length phrase portended to a stranger, promised a similar kindness throughout her being. To be perfectly frank, this simple young lady lived in an eternal honeymoon: she could not bear that any want in any male should remain a moment unsupplied; her life was passed in an Eden in which ambiguous man was at once the constant and the inconstant factor.

Willoughby reproached himself for his absurd romanticism in being disappointed that this dove should coo in the accents of her dwelling and her day rather than in those of eternity. This proves that he had no notion of the habits of doves, or of what is eternal. As a matter of fact, his idea of her innocence was founded on her demure eyelids and the simplicity of her dress; he was unaware of how very much can underlie a down-dropped eyelid, and how extraordinarily little can underlie a black silk frock, even when it is not altogether new, and is cut on the severest lines. He decided they must be made for one another, in a more special fashion than was actually the case.

So, disregarding her reference to the pie, he looked at her like a Livingstone at a Stanley. She looked back at him, as if to say: 'It's you! Don't hurt me!' He drew a deep breath and said: 'Who are you?'

To this question, which has puzzled the subtlest metaphysicians of the ages, the beautiful girl accorded an infinitely tolerant smile, as well she might. These two young people now exchanged a look of a very special nature. Neither of them was perfectly aware of all its implications, for habit and ignorance are equally opposed to a clear consciousness.

Willoughby, though unsophisticated, was not a boor. He now introduced himself in proper form: 'Since we have met here,' he added, 'at least let me bring you some wine.'

'Port,' said his companion in the smallest voice imaginable.

'I wish,' said he, returning with the glasses, 'that wine could be called just wine, for occasions like this at least. Burgundy or claret, even; even the names of vintages, Lafitte, Margaux, have been too much handled, don't you think; overhandled by fat and sensual men? But port!'

'It's nice,' replied his charmer; 'they say it does you good.'

'The colour suits you,' he said. 'Hold the glass to your lips. How strange it is to see anyone like you here! Will you tell me your name?'

'Louise,' she replied beautifully.

'A name like a pearl on black velvet!' he cried. The fact is, he had become acquainted with the writers of the 'nineties.

'I like black velvet,' she said. 'It's nice. A girl was given some pearls by a gentleman and they weren't real.'

'How do you come here?' he said.

'I live quite close by,' she said. 'In New Street. It isn't very nice.'

'You ought to live,' he said (as you may well imagine), 'in a palace. Have you been to Venice?'

'I don't think so,' she said.

'I want to go somewhere,' she declared in a little while.

'Go!' cried Willoughby in consternation. 'Oh no!'

She smiled at him reassuringly, 'Only to the you-know-where,' she murmured. 'Good-bye. Be good.'

Willoughby was enraptured by this confidence, which he regarded as bridal, and unique. 'Here is a creature,' he thought, 'as simple as a child of ten, with a face, with a body, capable of anything!' It was perfectly true. He was still throbbing with the effect of the last glance they had exchanged, which, except that it was no longer, was of the same intoxicating nature as the first. 'I shall have her for a mistress,' he murmured, with a shudder of fear and delight. 'Two hundred a year! We will live in a single room, and partake of all the pleasures of the poor.' It may be considered blackguardly that he entertained no idea of marriage: however, to know all is to excuse all: this was no doubt due to heredity.

He reflected a little on her conversation, and could not persuade himself that it was either cultured or profound. 'Her mind is like a pure, blank sheet,' he thought, with a relief proportionate to the timidity of his years. 'She would do whatever one asked her. She would not think me a fool. I will make her happy.'

When she came back, she gave him another smile, which he was biased enough to regard as superior to a poem by Baudelaire. 'You have,' said he, 'the soul of a little girl in the body of a courtesan.'

She was not in the least offended by the vile bad taste of this remark, nor by its triteness. 'What is a courtesan?' she asked.

'Why, you innocent!' he exclaimed. 'One day I will teach you.'

'That will be nice,' said she.

'I am in love with you,' said he. 'What marvellous hands you have!' He took one of them to show her. It obligingly gave him a demonstration, which he was to find indelible all his life, of a precise meaning of the word *cleave*.

'It is as white,' he said at last, 'as goodness knows what.'

'Is it really?' she said.

'Listen,' said he. 'Between us, do you understand, no question can be rude.'

'Rude,' said she, not questioning nor reproving, but sounding the word as a child might sound a bell.

'I want to know all about you,' he cried. 'Your hands are as white as milk: what do you do for a living? Who are your people? Why are you here?'

She said, 'I think I must have been born abroad.'

'Where?' said he.

'Perhaps it was in Spain,' she said. 'A gentleman, he was one of those artists, said I had Spanish blood. I ran away.'

'Where, from Spain?' cried Willoughby in great bewilderment.

'No,' she said. 'Oh, it was horrible. Then I used to do art photographs. Then I went to live with Mrs Bond; she's a beast. Betty and I live there, only she's soppy; she cries. Do

'you know a man called Freddy something? He said he'd get me a job on the films.'

'Do your people support you?' said Willoughby.

'Support me?' she asked.

'Give you money,' he said.

'Oh yes,' she replied. 'Only I have to give it to Mrs Bond; she's a beast. I should like a job on the films.'

'You'd get mixed up with a lot of very offensive men,' he said. 'I'd not like to think of you doing that. Wouldn't you like to come abroad, to live among the students in Paris, or in some peasant's place on a ... a crag of the Apennine? Or some very cheap inn in Provence, or at Barbizon, where the artists live?'

'That would be nice,' she said.

'You darling,' he cried.

Their hands, still clasped, had fallen into her silken lap. He ventured to press downwards with the back of his, and the pressure was reciprocated. Willoughby, almost fainting with enthusiasm, was further overcome by a gratitude, a reverence, for the trustfulness and generosity of this simple act.

He said: 'Nothing is more natural than that I should fall in love with you at first sight, and say so, and act so. But that you should do that' – he pressed again – 'is something I shall never forget. I don't know how it may be with men of more experience, but to me at least ... Well, apart from what I feel because you ... like me at all, I couldn't feel more than you make me feel by behaving so warmly, so generously. To be spared the agonies of coquetry!' he exclaimed with a look of tenderness, and with the most amazing pronunciation of the last word. 'I adore you for it. Darling, will you do one thing more? Will you? Will you say ... darling?'

'Darling,' she said sweetly, 'I must go. Mrs Bond said I must be in by nine sharp.'

'When shall I see you?' he asked, mastering his dismay.

'I come here,' she said.

'Will you come to-morrow at the same time, or sooner? Come at six, when they open: I have to see my father during the day.'

'All right,' she said.

'I'll take you home,' he remarked, rising.

'No, you mustn't take me home to-night,' she said. 'Perhaps to-morrow. I'll ask Mrs Bond.' And with that she left, giving him a look more melting than all the rest, for she loved him for his courtesy and kindness, and pitied him for his exceeding innocence, and because he was not a toff, and for his ignorance of the films.

CHAPTER XI

Dr Whately – A nervous disorder –
The lower vascular lobic motors –
Lor' Ol'beare ees dead –
His lordship lies in state –
Good-bye, dear Dad

NEXT day, at two o'clock, Willoughby went to the nursing home where his father was, which was in the neighbourhood of Wigmore Street. The door was opened by a maid with eyes like boot buttons, whose uniform offered some vague suggestion of the nurse. Willoughby, stating his name and business, was greeted by a look of peculiar interest. 'Dr Whately wants to see you,' said the maid. 'Will you please wait in here? The doctor's in the home at this very moment.'

Willoughby spent some minutes in a room calculated to inspire a lifelong aversion to anything that is green or brown. The door opened, admitting a gentlemanly figure, which nevertheless had exactly the form of a pear. Across the lower and protuberant part was hung a watch-chain with a spade guinea on it. Willoughby raised his eyes and beheld a countenance of old-fashioned dignity, such as might be expected to sustain the soul in a life too intimately acquainted with the bed-pan. He found himself the object of a glance burdened with speculation, and had time to reflect on the similar dignity of family lawyers, doctors, and butlers, whose difference in

standing does not outweigh their like preoccupation with the soiled linen of other men's lives.

'You are Mr Corbo?' said the doctor, in a voice of superlative richness.

'Dr Whately?' inquired Willoughby very civilly.

'Dr Whately,' returned the medico with great complacency. 'As you are no doubt aware, Mr Corbo, we medical men, certain of us, that is to say, specialise on one subject or another: my own subject, as you may have heard, is a certain order of nervous diseases, those in fact which are associated with physical affections of the cerebro-spinal system. On the recommendation of my old friend Sir Frederick Cole, your father, Lord Ollebeare, came to me at Harley Street in the early part of the autumn: shortly afterwards he entered this little home of mine for such treatment as, in my opinion, would tend to have at least an alleviatory effect.'

'How is my father?' asked Willoughby.

'I do not know,' continued the doctor, 'if you are acquainted with the exact origin of his little trouble, or with the precise effects of that trouble when it takes a certain course, and in the continued absence of medical supervision. I shall not inflict a string of technicalities upon you,' said he, with a look of extreme benevolence. 'It is necessary, however, that you should be aware that there quite usually occurs in such cases what we describe, rather loosely perhaps, as a *dislocation* – a dislocation between the hypostatic reflexes and Gennerer's impulsatory system of the lower vascular lobic motors.'

'My father told me he had only a short time to live,' began Willoughby, 'Is he ...'

'Apart from this condition, which I would have you clearly keep in mind,' went on the doctor, 'your father has evidently been, for a considerable period, what we medical men term a *bon vivant*. A *bon vivant*! With the accompanying increase of blood pressure, and the inevitable vascular strain. Well, my dear sir, there you are.'

'Is my father dead?' cried Willoughby.

'Oh, dear, dear, dear, dear, dear!' replied the doctor sooth-

ingly. 'Your father, when I saw him this morning at ten-thirty o'clock, was in a condition which (though from a professional point of view it could only be called grave) was, superficially at least, one of a considerable compensatory reaction of the whole cervicular organism. His temperature, though above normal, was showing an admirable response to an hourly injection of mosotheyne, and his general psychological condition, to which, as you know, we attach a vastly enhanced importance in these days, might have been described as *good*.'

'And how is he now?' cried Willoughby.

'My dear sir,' replied the doctor, 'that I am unable to tell you. Your father, Lord Ollebeare, left this home at some time during this morning, a course of action which, I need hardly say, was entered upon without the approval of his physician, myself, or, indeed, the cognisance of those attendant upon him.'

'Good heavens!' cried Willoughby. 'But this will be very bad for him.'

'Pr ofessionally speaking,' replied the other, 'I cannot but regard this rash act, which is undoubtedly a product of the dislocation I have described to you, as one likely to have results which will be, to say the least, serious.'

'What sorts of results, pray?' asked Willoughby.

'As I told Lord Ollebeare only yesterday,' replied the doctor, 'his present condition is one in which any excitement, any variation in the diet prescribed, any physical strain, and particularly any use – or rather any abuse I should say, since any use at all in this case constitutes an abuse – of stimulants, would most certainly set in progress a series of inter-accelleratory reactions between the cerebro-spinal system on the one hand, whose advanced deterioration I have already made plain to you, and the cardiac valves on the other hand, which have long been affected by the increased blood pressure. This could only result in a state of paralysis of all the occipital nerve centres (which are, as you know, motor in function), with resultant impairment of control, and eventual syncope, leading to final collapse of the already diseased ganglia, or, on the other hand, a rupture of the aorta, or of some other cardiac vessel,

very likely the sturium (though possibly my old friend Sir Frederic Cole would not agree with me there: however, we must agree to differ), and consequently, my dear sir, a general condition of functional suspension, resulting in – in what I may call – loss of life.'

'But this is terrible!' cried Willoughby. 'Dr Whately, was not my father looked after? Could he not have been restrained?'

'It appears,' said the doctor, 'that he assumed his clothing in the absence of the nurse, opened the door, and ah! walked downstairs, and into the street.'

'Perhaps he has gone to a restaurant,' cried Willoughby at last. 'I'll go and look for him.' And with that he hurried from the room without taking any further leave of the physician, who pursed his lips.

It was nearly three o'clock when our hero arrived at the third of the restaurants he was trying. He looked hastily around, and could see his father nowhere. He went up to the nearest table, and taking the waiter by the sleeve: 'Waiter,' said he, 'do you know Lord Ollebeare, an old gentleman with a big red nose? Has he been in to-day?'

'Yes, sir,' said the waiter, giving him a peculiar glance. 'You are his friend, yes?'

'Yes,' said Willoughby.

'Lord Ol'beare,' said the waiter, ''e come in, 'e 'ave double brandy soda, oui? 'e have two sherry. Et puis, dozen oyster, encore une demi-douzaine: champagne Heidsieck 98 avec: Et puis homard américain: Poulet diable: Hermitage Grand vin, une bouteille: Selle d'agneau, encore une demi-bouteille d'Hermitage: Fromage, café, six Biscuits de Bouche 65. Le grand cigare Romeo y Julieta. Alors, he sleep. Je fais l'addition, seven pound five shilling. I go to him, 'e sleep very strange. Ah! Mon Dieu! Ol'beare ees dead.'

'Dead!' cried Willoughby in dismay.

'The manager: oh, 'e was upset!' continued the waiter. ''E 'ave the poor gentleman taken into the office; 'e talk to him all the way to make pretend 'e was dronk.'

At these words Willoughby felt an overwhelming disgust,

too great, it seemed, for resentment. 'Where is Lord Ollebeare now?' he asked at length.

'The 'ospital 'ave just taken him away,' replied the waiter. 'I get you the manager; 'e wants to know about the leetle bill. Lord Ol'beare, 'e 'ave no money in his pocket, sir, pas du tout du tout du tout.'

'I have no time to talk to your beastly manager,' said Willoughby. 'Find out the name of the hospital at once.'

The waiter hurried away, but returned with a sleek fellow, whom Willoughby eyed with great aversion. 'To what hospital was Lord Ollebeare taken?' he demanded.

'The body, sir, was removed to St George's Hospital. If you are a friend of his lordship, perhaps I might mention ...'

Willoughby, however, had already turned his back on the manager, and was hastening out of the restaurant.

He spent the next two or three hours in dealing with the most depressing formalities. He was given a view of the old man, whose face now resembled nothing so much as a piece of blotting-paper, upon which red ink has been carelessly spilled. Seen from the foot of the bed, his splendid moustaches were shapeless and ill-coloured as a lump of melting London snow; his Bacchus blubber lips hung nerveless and askew; his fine tusks, pickled in the smoke of innumerable coronas, had now an ill cab-horse look to them; his little eye, which had been so bright, was dim as any fish's two days dead.

'You poor old man,' thought, or almost thought, Willoughby, who was a little unwrought. 'I never realised what your spirit was till now, when I see cast down here the poor properties and trappings which you paraded in so admirable a style. Doubtless those more exterior accoutrements of yours, card-tables, meerschaums, female figures of a special amplitude and softness, top-hats, enormous malaccas, notes of hand, now lie equally empty and enervate in the departure of your spirit: they are now mere husks, just as your body is, particularly certain of the notes of hand.

'God knows what I feel,' he said, or almost said, 'for *I* do not, I find it necessary to blink; if I had a good friend I could

spend the night laughing at it. Here is an inversion!' he cried, 'the handsome butterfly has come to his end, and I, poor caterpillar, emerge to carry on. I shall never spread out my two hundred into such wings as you made of it, nor sport such colours, nor drift so handsomely from flower to flower. I saw you twice: the first time you took my money; the second time you insulted my position as a young and modest man, as a son also, by telling me a number of dirty stories, all of which I had heard a hundred times before. But I wish you were not dead! I would rather work than that, yet it is a fine thing to be at leisure. After all, every one in his turn. If only I had seen you but one evening a week for a year, that I might have some reason for loving you! For I think it shows some despicable need in me, that I should love without a reason! However, we must all die; you died in good time and good fashion. Seven pounds five! Here's a promise: I won't spoil the joke, they shall not have the money if I can prevent them: they pretended you were drunk when you were only dead.

'Upon my word,' he said, 'I have a great deal to say to you. If only I could think of some more of it, I might find out what I am, and what's to become of me. Well – there it is. Good-bye. Good-bye, dear Dad.' And with that Willoughby laughed through his nose, and went out to find an undertaker who would attend to the matter of a coffin, and see to it the body was sent straight away to Ollebeare. Then, as it was six o'clock, he went to find Louise, and passed the wretchedest evening of his life because she was not there.

CHAPTER XII

A wet funeral – I have Louise – An indescribable smile – Mrs Bond on medical students – Black men and foreign parts – Together always – Hullo, Chicken!

NEXT afternoon our hero had to set off for Ollebeare, to be there in time for the funeral the following day. Everyone was

rather sheepish there, the weather was vile, nothing was notably done or notably said. Willoughby's uncle asked him rather gruffly if he would stay on for a night or two. Willoughby, thinking of Louise, did not even notice what underlay this rough overture.

'I'm sorry,' he said, 'but I must get back at once, I have an appointment.' He feared being questioned, so he spoke very casually, as if he were a man of affairs.

'Just as you please,' said his uncle, with corresponding carelessness. 'Good-bye. You know where I am.'

Willoughby, waking up too late, was hurt by this turning of the shoulder. 'What a sodden, frozen, misbegotten day this is!' he said to himself. 'Everything is as clammy and cold as the soupy clay, the damp varnish in the church, or the cushions of this frowsty cab.' Bucknell's face, unfamiliar under an oozing best hat, bade him dejected farewell.

'And the blasted train,' said he, when he was embarked in it, 'does not get in till eleven. I cannot go to look for Louise till to-morrow, and perhaps I shall never find her. I wonder what she is doing. Surely this is some form of hell, clammy, stinking, and cold, lit by that corpsy light, stopping at every station, in which one goes on for ever, without even a paper to read – not knowing what she is doing.

'However, if things had gone as I wished, I should now be the lover of Lady Stumber. What a drudgery that would have been! She would have thought me a young fool, an inept, as they say all young men are. I was her husband's employee, she would have despised me and led me the hell of a dance. And if, on the other hand, she had conceived a genuine passion for me, submitted, abandoned herself and adored, as is never utterly impossible, how very disagreeable that would have been, for she was older than I am, and it would not have suited her at all. No, I am well out of Stumberdom; I have two hundred a year, and the cities of the world lie before me.

'What is more, I have Louise, for I shall certainly find her; we were made for one another. She will not think me a silly, clumsy lover, for, though I know so little, I know more than

she does. I will awake her; kiss her all over; and she will love me for it, for that is how girls are made.

'How infinitely better a girl is than a woman of position, culture, and intelligence! All Lady Stumber's dignity, all her cabinet ministers, her elaborate managing, her tact, codes, poise, manicures, knowledge, all which I so much admired; it's only the furniture of civilisation. Civilisation is a cradle for understanding; if through this we understood as well as the Greeks did, what then to do but worship the breast of the nymph in the brake? And that is Louise's breast, which, please God, I shall come to worship by a shorter cut! I wish I had her in some hot summery glade in the Black Forest, and out of that black silk frock. How white she'd look! Why, her least attitude would be more wonderful than Lady Stumber handling five hundred guests on that staircase in Belgrave Square, which was too skimpy anyway. Another time we might spend a whole week in bed. ...' But here his pleasant reflections rose to the heights of poetry, to which it would be immodest for prose to attempt to follow.

Well, he got out at Paddington in an altogether better mood, took his look east, smiled happily, and went to his hotel. Next day he was as restless a creature as could be found in all London. 'If that damned Joshua,' said he, 'had not stopped the sun an hour, I should now be one hour nearer to six o'clock.'

At about tea-time he rushed out and bought a French grammar, in order to learn a few words in case they should decide to go to Paris immediately.

You may be sure he was on the pavement outside the bar some minutes before the hour of opening. It was during that short space of time that he laid the foundations of his mountainous prejudice against actors, in which order of beings the Charing Cross Road is, if the term is permissible, rich. As soon as the door parted, Willoughby burst in, the first to enter, yet looking all round for his charmer. He sat himself down at the same table as before. Every time the door opened, his whole being, with a sea-sick lurch, washed up towards it, and re-

coiled with inexpressible disappointment from the hateful face that then appeared. In the course of an hour he suffered the agonies of hope after hope, frustration after frustration, the very training diet of love. It was as if he had been engaged a year. He was tired, in the very marrow of his bones, in the fibre of his wasted flesh, of his immemorial languishings, and of the eye-stretching, the illimitable and loathly level of further delays. He began to feel that he had sat there through a small eternity; that opening and closing, light and darkness, had merged into an uninterrupted glare, as (science obligingly tells us) is what happens in an electric-light bulb. He was no more than a hollow tower, a ruin in a dry place, through which the cruel wind of his nostalgia for Louise howled bitterly. He wondered for what crime he had been thus ingeniously damned, and decided it was for the sin of hankering, in which he had undoubtedly indulged to excess. He thought of Prometheus, his fellow lag, away there on the Caucasus, and turned his head with an *indescribable smile*, as did the crucified Spendius.

What a fortunate young man he was! Some of us project *indescribable smiles* endlessly and unrewardedly into the wastes of space: this, his very first, had not travelled ten yards before its burden of weariness had fallen off, like Christian's, and it arrived at that heaven in whose absence its purgatory had consisted. It was now a radiant being, a lovely spirit beating its wings in that void that was Louise's face, calling for its mate. It must be admitted that its mate did not immediately appear. A demure, maidservant smile, a laying of the teeth on the lower lip, a very screen for modesty, a modesty for the screen, was all that Louise vouchsafed in response to our hero's flaming glance, and she sat down at a table beneath the bar.

'Ah!' he murmured, rising to join her. 'She is shy. That's pretty!' It may be thought rather bumptious of him, to set down her reserve to shyness, but it must be remembered he had received an unspoken encouragement, which he could not chivalrously regard as other than a guileless declaration of love.

Moreover, he was young and high-spirited, therefore it never crossed his mind that he might have been set down as a

medical student. He was unversed in worldly matters, and knew not Mrs Bond, nor suspected that lady's aversion for this class of young man. It was she who said she hated a young man drunk or an old man sober, and she had medical students in mind when she said it. She detested their business, their noise, pranks, swagger, effrontery, carelessness of appearance, and, above all, their abominable poverty, for she held that as women should be fair and kind, so men should be rich and generous, a sentiment to which it is hard to take exception.

She had another notion, too: it was a relic of the bad old days of her youth, it would be unforgivable except that she had suffered much. It was, that a lady who entertained a medical student in her professional capacity ran an uncommon risk of shortly afterwards visiting him in his.

Let the facts be as they may, she had frowned upon Louise's description of this civil-spoken young man, with whom the gentle girl was much taken, and warned her to have no more to do with him. Fortunately for Willoughby's illusion, Louise was the pliantest thing in the world; she had constancy enough not to approach him, but she could not revolutionise her whole nature upon advice, nor repel him cruelly when he came over to her.

He greeted her with so glowing a countenance that her simple heart was stirred, and she heartily wished that Mrs Bond had not set her ban on one so frank and kind. 'Bring your glass over here,' he said. 'I have a hundred things to tell you.'

'There can be no harm in sitting with him,' she thought. 'After all, it's only till ten.'

Willoughby, whose imagination was half-way to summer in the Black Forest, referred often and openly to his love, and even to hers. He spoke with a less exotic excitement than at their first meeting; she smiled whenever he used the word love, and said *yes* whenever she failed to understand him, which was during all the rest of his discourse. This was her habit, and nothing is better calculated to ensure that a pair of young people shall get on famously.

Before they had talked half an hour, Willoughby was rapt

in the contemplation of assured bliss; he sat silent, squeezing her hand. She squeezed back, almost wishing the almighty Mrs Bond had not set her canon against men who said they had come into money, and proposed a trip abroad. She wished she didn't owe Mrs Bond so much money for rent and food and clothes and interest, for then, she thought, she might not have had to believe her, or go to prison if she disobeyed.

'My dear, beautiful girl,' said Willoughby. 'When shall we start? We shall have to get passports, you know; that takes a day or two. Perhaps you will need some clothes: we had better say three days from now.'

'That would be nice,' said Louise.

'I wish we could be together in the meantime,' said Willoughby. 'Could we not go to an hotel?'

'Not now,' said Louise. 'Mrs Bond wouldn't like it.'

'Who *is* this Mrs Bond?' asked Willoughby in a hostile tone. 'Is she a sort of guardian of yours?'

'Yes,' said Louise. 'She's a beast.'

'I'd like to see her,' said Willoughby. 'But if she knew what we planned, you'd be locked up, I suppose.'

'Yes, locked up,' said Louise.

'Well, you shan't be,' said he. 'You shall leave what things you can't get away easily, and I will buy you new ones. After all, you will not need much in the way of clothes in the sort of life we shall lead.'

'I wish ...' said Louise.

'What?' said he.

'I don't know,' said she.

For some little time Willoughby's eyes had been fastened upon the most seductive curve imaginable, which was none other than the curve of Louise's bosom, under the black silk of her dress. He conceived the idea that if he might for one moment place his hand against that perfect shape, a certain cruel ache in his blood would be beautifully assuaged: otherwise it would rapidly intensify, and do him some serious harm.

Lovers are notoriously ingenious: he proposed they should go to dinner in a quiet restaurant in Soho, where they might

continue their conversation undisturbed. Louise visualised the private room, the drugged wine, the mysterious horrors of black men and foreign parts. She imagined also the wrath of Mrs Bond, should that lady send for her to this public-house, and learn that she was gone off with a medical student. She reflected, with an ineffable nostalgia, upon her little gas fire, the conversation of Betty, which she had actually found intolerably dreary in what were suddenly the old days, and on the peculiar smell of the lavatory at New Street. 'It was nice,' she thought, 'in a way.'

Her hand licked Willoughby's like the tongue of the vivisector's dog. 'All right,' she said, with a docility that was fatal and sublime.

Willoughby, however, did not take her to a private room, for though he had heard of such things, he did not really believe in them. He called a taxi, and gave the address of a little Italian restaurant in Frith Street. As soon as the door was slammed, he turned to Louise, put his arm round her shoulders; she put her hand on his breast, arresting him for a moment while she bathed him in a glance of such sadness and sweetness that it was almost thought, and had it been thought, it would have been poetry. He responded with such a tumult of the heart as brought him near tears; he kissed her as lovingly as may be, and then, with all the reverence of a communicant, enclosed in his hand that globe which, although there was a duplicate in existence, he would not, at that moment, have exchanged for the world. They remained joined thus while the taxi edged its way through the theatre traffic; Willoughby felt the healing assuagement he had anticipated, but, as they drew into Frith Street, he became aware that he was like a climber who, winning the crest of a foot-hill, sees still soaring beyond him the ultimate peak.

At this moment, though, they arrived at the chosen restaurant. They secured a corner table: Louise looked around her with the air of one reprieved on the scaffold. She shuddered like some somnambulist, woken on the edge of a precipice. She was, nevertheless, of the sweetest, kindest nature that

ever inhabited woman's flesh, and though she recoiled in horror, and made a resolve, she looked with no less kindness on Willoughby, for she knew men were devils, and she would not deny that this devil was honest-looking and courteous enough to wring her heart.

As for Willoughby, he rattled on, and time did the same. It was half-past nine. 'I must go home,' she cried, remembering a regular engagement she had with an old friend of her guardian's.

'I'll walk with you,' he said.

'Not all the way,' said she.

'Part of the way, then?' said he. He led her out, took her arm, held her so closely they were joined at the hip like Siamese twins, and had a common blood stream.

'I can't bear to let you go,' he said. 'I don't know how to wait till Saturday. But then we'll be together always.' She loved to hear him say such things, of which she did not believe a word. He struck out on a rather circuitous route, in order they might be the longer together. Unfortunately she was unable to find her way save in the narrow range of pavements about her home: in the end she was amazed to find herself coming out in Regent Street.

'This is not the way,' she cried in confusion.

'It's all right,' he said. 'We're only three minutes walk from St. Martin's Lane.'

'I don't want to go along here,' she answered weakly, being swept along nevertheless.

'Why on earth not?' said he. 'Look, here's a café brasserie. Let's go in, and have a last five minutes together.'

'No,' she said. 'It's a horrible place. I wouldn't go in there for anything. I never go in there. Come on.'

'Good Lord!' said Willoughby, halting her. 'It's perfectly all right. It was a favourite place of my father's. Come. After all, you're with me.'

'No,' she cried. 'No. Let me go. I must go home.'

'Just as you like,' said he, with the best humour in the world, releasing her arm.

It was most embarrassing, but before they could move on, a huge and flashy fellow, with something the look of a prosperous heavy-weight boxer, turned on the threshold as he was entering, and saw Louise.

'Hullo, Chicken!' said he. 'You here already? Warn't expecting you yet awhile – that's grand! But why didn't you wait inside, Baby? That goddam son of a bitch wouldn't keep you waiting out in the cold, would he?' said he, indicating the commissionaire with his thumb. Then, noticing Willoughby, he inquired with great geniality: 'Why? Hullo! Who's your boy friend?'

'It's my brother,' said Louise.

'Yer brother, is he?' said this gentleman, with a surprisingly affable smile. 'Yer brother? Well, will yer brother come in and have just one 'long you an' me?'

'No. He won't come in,' said Louise, giving Willoughby no chance to respond to an invitation so unusually and conspicuously humane. Then to him, with a look compounded ineffably of inflexibility and appeal, she said, 'Good-bye.' They turned to go in.

Willoughby remained rooted to the spot, paralysed. A first messenger of the *débâcle* reaching his consciousness, he cried, in accents of pathetic bitterness, *Brother!* He endeavoured to produce a cynical laugh, which, however, sounded, He! He!

Louise turned her head for a second, and looked reproachfully at his distorted face. Then she dropped her eyes as if resigned and given over. The man had his hand under her arm: the fingers of this hand were of enormous size. They passed through the door.

CHAPTER XIII

A missed opportunity – Mr Wilkinson –
A pleasant lunch – A discourse on oysters –
Baiye's impotence – little sugar-plums

It may very well be asked why the devil Willoughby did not at once rush into the café and down his boozy rival with water-bottle or with chair.

He found twenty-three excellent reasons for neglecting this little formality: every one of them was sufficient, and well became a philosopher, a man of the world, a cynic, or anything else he chose to consider himself. The only trouble was, there was a twenty-fourth reason at the back of his mind. And just as his paternal grandfather, who might have died in attempting a rescue, leading a charge, or exploring the wilds, did in actual fact succumb to a touch of delirium tremens, so Willoughby could not escape the reflection, that though good sense, good taste, or good-humour might each have justly kept him from a night brawl, what actually did so was the fact that he was a little lily-livered. He rehearsed all the possible reasons time and time again, but it was this last that fascinated him. When he came to it, he turned miserably in his bed, rolled his hot head on the pillow, groaned, and behaved very much as his Uncle Ralph had done, when that worthy had also believed that something was wrong with his liver.

At five-twenty-five in the nippy black morning, our hero flung off the bedclothes and sat on the side of the bed, gripping himself by the ears, as a sovereign specific against madness.

'I should have gone straight in,' he said, 'and addressed the fellow with a great show of tolerance, to put myself in the right of it. "My good fellow," I should have said, "I will spare you a rigmarole on the manners and customs of this country, and excuse your apologies. I have business with this young woman, to whom, though you will not see her again, you need not bother to say good-bye. You have my assurance that

this is quite in order, and that, no doubt, is more than enough for you. Come, Louise, or whatever your name is."

'He would then have offered me some sufficient insult. I should have seized the carafe,' cried Willoughby (nearly wrenching his right ear off), 'and smashed him over the head with it. Whatever happened afterwards, I should not feel as I do now.

'What if reason reproached me while I sat in jug? It reproaches like some old parson, who knows not life. Its congratulations are well enough, all congratulations are: but to be *excused* by reason as I am now! As well hide behind the skirts of a woman! Better have no excuse at all, and laugh, and be damned. Your lion, upon reason, would sit up and beg, and never be shot, and be no more a lion.

'I believe in honour,' he cried. 'What else do I draw my precious two hundred a year for, if I am not a man of honour; for sense and taste I clearly have none? I see it now,' he cried. 'No doubt I would have pushed the fellow aside, had he been a little weedy, teeny fellow. Very well, next time I am treated insolently by a heavy-weight, I'll seize the heaviest thing I can, and make such an attack, so ferocious and unswerving, as will cost me my bones if it fails, and perhaps my neck if it succeeds. What happens afterwards is an avalanche, an earthquake, a convulsion of nature: no disgrace to anyone. Perhaps, if I do it often enough, I may become a hero, and take it easy, and laugh at an insult, always providing there are no spectators to share in the merriment.'

It may be thought that Willoughby was too extravagant here, and that to be battered or to swing are both rather high prices to pay for such a pretty antique as honour. But honour, like love, may soon be given a new name by the psychologists, and one which will make of it an hygienic necessity, which was up till now a luxury. Moreover, there is this consideration, which may or may not have had its place in our hero's subconscious mind: that an opponent, however ogreish, will seldom have time enough to belabour his honourable aggressor very severely; moreover, that honourable, however enthusi-

astic, is in practice most unlikely to win the hangman's outsize diadem, even though he may arm himself with water-bottle or with chair.

However that may be, our hero, or prospective hero, found his mortification so much alleviated at this stage, as actually to allow him to savour the pangs of disappointed love:

After the pillage, shouting, and the fire
He burned with a strong feminine desire.

Her image rose up before his eyes. He longed to have her there in the reality, that he might heap reproaches on her, bruise her gardenia flesh, break through her waxen, idiot calm, start the living tear, perhaps; perhaps even hear some amazing explanation, which would justify him taking her in his arms, and kissing away that tear, and even attempting the same with the bruises.

'I am, I suppose, the most foolish person that ever lived,' he said with a sigh. 'No one else could deceive themselves in that fashion, nor, when they were undeceived, regret it. But no one else is so lonely. There's no one now, in all this damned town, to whom I can address an intimate word, much less hug, cuddle, kiss, plunge my face into the bosom of. Oh, I must beware! I am capable of loving anything, on account of this deplorable hunger. Worse might have befallen me: I might have succeeded. I might have tangled myself inextricably with that lovely weed that ... that ... whatever Shakespeare says about it. Good God! Worse still! I might even fall in love with someone who is not beautiful. What a humiliation, to be deceived by a dirty desire, into an enthusiasm for something not absolutely first-rate!'

Here the chill, that had long ago seized upon his feet, ascended to his heart, and all was cold, and he slid back into bed. 'Ah, my dear Louise!' said he, patting the pillow. 'At least you were beautiful, though, now I come to think of it, I don't like waxy, silky creatures at all. Still, you were beautiful, and there is a wholesomeness, there is a saving grace in beauty: no folly is utterly vile if it struggles towards that. I

will go and buy some beads, and leave them with the barmaid, for her to give them to you.'

Next morning he went out early to buy his beads, which he decided should be of ivory. On his return, he heard the manager in conversation with a Mr Wilkinson. 'Yes, Mr Wilkinson,' said the manager, 'Mrs Wilkinson left over an hour ago.'

'Ah! I expect she was impatient to see the children,' remarked Mr Wilkinson complacently. 'She has probably caught an earlier train. I must have misunderstood her. Tell them to put my bag in a taxi, will you?'

'What a large head Mr Wilkinson has!' reflected our hero. 'It is almost as large as Baiye's. Why, it's his voice too! It *is* Baiye.'

He was not in the least alarmed. On the contrary he immediately approached this figure, and tugged at the enormous ulster which enveloped it. Mr Wilkinson swung round, presenting a countenance sufficiently familiar, except that in place of a look of comic despair which it had worn when he last saw it, it was now adorned with an equally comic moustache, flaxen, sweeping, and of enormous proportions.

'How do you do, Mr Wilkinson?' inquired our hero. 'And how are the dear children?'

'But what are you doing here, my dear fellow?' exclaimed Baiye. 'It is impossible, surely, that you are still connected with our friend, at whose house we last met?'

'No, indeed,' said Willoughby, 'I am just staying here, that's all. Are you angry with me?'

'But for you,' said Baiye, 'I should never have grown this moustache.'

'Oh, dear!' cried Willoughby in dismay. 'It seemed such a joke to put on your hat. ...'

'It is a poor return for such an inestimable benefit,' said Baiye, transfixing him with a glance, 'but if the best lunch I can stand you is acceptable as a slight token of gratitude, I'd be glad if you'd join me to-day.'

'Indeed I will,' cried Willoughby with enthusiasm. He could

not refrain from continuing his apologies. 'They told me you would be furious,' he said. 'They told me it wasn't cricket.'

'Nor was it,' replied Baiye. 'A joke is a joke, and cricket is our British sense of humour. One does not weep at a tragedy that is "only pretend": why, therefore, laugh at a joke of that order? This was a real one, and I'm infinitely obliged to you for it. It is true I am supposed to be in New Zealand at this moment.'

'How's that?' cried Willoughby.

'Stumber insisted I should go there, as an alternative to a divorce. So I had to promise.'

'And yet you are not gone?' cried Willoughby, a little shocked, for he always told his own lies quite unconsciously, and was horrified at the thought of a broken promise.

'I sent a suit-case there,' said Baiye gravely. 'That formality establishes residence when one wants to get married, so it must do the same when one doesn't want a divorce. Not only that, but I've retired to the social antipodes of Belgrave Square, and grown an unfashionable moustache. Formality, society, and fashion – can such people ask more? If they do, someone has put them up to it. I go so far as to see no one who'd let Stumber know I'm in town. That's my present to his pride: he thinks he has sent me to New Zealand, while Curzon proclaims he hasn't the power to send an office-boy across Whitehall.'

'Good Lord! I've heard that before,' cried Willoughby.

'Besides,' replied Baiye, 'if he hasn't learned that ignorance is bliss by this time, and vice versa, there is, I believe, a young South American who could demonstrate it to him. You, of course, will tell no one of our meeting?'

'I have no one to tell,' said Willoughby. 'I have scarcely an acquaintance to whom I could nod; no one, except perhaps Lady Stumber, at whom I could wink (and how ill-received that would be!), and no one at all, except yourself, with whom to exchange a single word.'

'Is that really so?' said Baiye, giving him a look of great interest. 'Well, let's exchange some words concerning this

lunch we are to have to-day. We have only an hour or so to discuss it in.'

In the course of that hour Willoughby heard a great deal that impressed him to the point of reverence: in the end he saw clearly the essential simplicity of all great art.

'I generally avoid the centre of the town,' concluded Baiye. 'However, I hope I know my duty to a young man.' So saying, he called a taxi, and directed the driver to a shy little side-street near Piccadilly Circus. In this street there was a window with a lobster in it; on the opposite side was a window in which there was nothing at all except a card bearing the word *oysters*.

'Certain short-sighted fools,' said Baiye, 'have long congratulated us on the near neighbourhood of iron and coal in the Black Country: but there has not yet arisen a wise man to celebrate the juxtaposition of these two establishments, in one of which you get the best oysters in London, and in the other the best chop in the world.'

Having said this, he put his head into the chop-house and beckoned a waiter, to whom he gave a particular order. Then he led Willoughby into the oyster shop, where, being seated on stools, they partook of a suitable sherry: a dozen oysters were placed before each of them.

'These,' said Willoughby, 'are the very first oysters that I have ever eaten in my life.'

Baiye regarded him with an emotion amounting to tenderness. 'Before you begin,' said he, 'let me tell you that the way to eat a dozen oysters is to take them up one by one at suitable intervals, resolving, as soon as you have tasted the first, to order a further half-dozen, during the interval between the sixth and the seventh.'

He then alluded to the Madonna of the Rocks, Full fathom five, sublimations of the sensation salt, the word nacreous, the murmuring of shells; to the presence in their midst, unhanged and at full liberty, of oyster cookers; to the cries of such birds as cried with a sea-cry, the word *sea*, the word *mer*; to those little fishing-quarter bedrooms in which, in delightful com-

pany, one recovers one's childhood, and realises its vaguest dream; to the flap of the broad-streamered and face-slapping seaweed in a slapping wind; to bladder-wrack, marram-grass, sea-pink, sea-holly, caves.

'You'll think it very extraordinary,' said Willoughby, as they rose to go. 'But I've never seen the sea.'

Baiye answered never a word. In fact, he was remarkably mum all the time they were eating their chops. When they had done, and eaten some Stilton and celery also, the place being by this time nearly deserted, he lit a cigarette. 'Corbo,' said he, 'I've noticed you're a person of a very intense life. It never occurred to me that this intensity must be a result of the few elements of which it is composed. Tell me,' said he, 'what *have* you seen?'

'I have seen much at Reigate,' replied Willoughby, 'and, as I've just told you, a little in Gloucestershire. I've seen apples on the floor of my uncle's library at Ollebeare. I've seen my old father, whose nose I believe you know, stretched out on a marble slab, and the sight moved me to a very strange sort of excitement, rather like that to which I'm being moved by this claret. I have seen a young girl, of whose peculiar and ... and un-sunny beauty I was powerfully – no, not powerfully – insidiously reminded by the pearly whiteness of the oyster shells: I have seen her, only last evening, taken under the arm by a Yankee bruiser with remarkably thick fingers, lifted, if you please, neatly and consentingly from my side, and seeing this, saw that she was a whore, for before that I had regarded her as a lilyfied or white fawnified waif, like myself, and had proposed that we should together attempt to get a little colour into our lives. That is all I have seen: I think you will agree it is either much too little or a little too much.'

'My dear Corbo,' said Baiye, putting on a smile so artificial that Willoughby had to catch back the impression that he had held the menu up to his face. 'My dear Corbo, if only you had an idea of it, your good fortune would astonish you. As it is, its existence is questionable, like that of beauty in an uninhabited desert. I, in fact, am the desert in which your good

fortune questionably exists, since I can perceive, but not enjoy it. I have the misfortune to be an impotent man.'

'Then,' cried Willoughby, in tones of consternation, 'what were you doing in Lady Stumber's sitting-room?'

'Alas!' replied Baiye. 'My malady is not a local one, but deeper set, a matter of the spirit, if I may use the term.'

'I am heartily glad to hear it,' cried Willoughby. 'You gave me quite a shock.'

'Don't be perturbed,' said Baiye. 'I am capable of that and most other forms of enjoyment, the only trifling disadvantage being that I get no pleasure from them.'

'Oh, come!' cried Willoughby. 'No pleasure at all?'

'You are right,' said Baiye. 'I often hear remarks which I find exquisitely droll.'

'I cannot conceive anyone not getting pleasure out of everything,' said Willoughby. 'Everything is exciting, and one pretends to be calm, don't you know? Or it seems to mean something. Or it is a farce. Or, especially if one knows as much as you do, one can savour it like a connoisseur.'

'If you have a liver,' said Baiye, 'of a certain shape and size, you will find after a while that everything is dull, and one cannot even pretend to be excited. One hopes vaguely that it does not mean what it vaguely seems to. It is a good farce, but spoiled by damnable acting. As for the pleasures of the connoisseur, they are as faint as a wine gone all to spirit; they consist in noting very exactly what is best capable of giving pleasure to other men.'

'Pray, tell me,' said Willoughby, in a reverent distress, 'what brought you to this end?'

'The resolution,' said Baiye, 'to surrender to nothing that was not first-rate.'

'Upon my word!' cried our hero. 'I have just taken that resolution myself, and not for the first time neither.'

'I thought as much,' said Baiye, 'from certain little mannerisms I've observed in you. You can't imagine how interested I shall be, to see to what end it carries so different a creature as yourself.'

'I hope,' said Willoughby very earnestly, 'that I shall not note in women only that which gives pleasure to other men. To be frank, I often wish I had two lives. One I should devote to a single great passion, and the other to the pleasures of a Casanova. So far,' he added with a blush, 'I cannot be said to have lived at all.'

'Oh, you will soon live,' said Baiye with a smile. 'You'll live, and share the privilege with every cock sparrow, buck rabbit, tom-cat ...'

'There are very great differences,' said Willoughby, 'between the animals you mention. And surely man is yet more different from any of them.'

'He has his dreams,' replied Baiye. 'Do you admire them? Look at any besotted pair you know of, and ask yourself if you wouldn't rather lose arms, legs, and all, rather than parade such imbecile illusions as they do. "My hero!" "My goddess!" You would think little of a nervous condition that made you so bad a judge of a beef-steak. Nothing is more hateful than to deceive oneself: nothing is more common than the making of a Cleopatra out of a Betty or a Joan.'

'I was thinking of that last night,' said Willoughby. 'All the same, that is how Cleopatra was made.'

'Young Corbo, you speak well!' said Baiye. 'Certainly she didn't make herself. Remember, though, that the story is beautiful, but Antony was not. What's more, in making your Cleopatra, if the material is the least bit promising, you are almost sure to have a superfluity of collaborators.'

'The devil!' cried Willoughby. 'You find nothing good. It was you who brought Cleopatra in. All I demand is a good and beautiful woman. It must be delightful to be loved by such, and to kiss and embrace her at all hours. If you had ever been as lonely as I am ...'

'I commiserate with you,' replied Baiye. 'But given your good and beautiful woman, might you not think she was a very silly one, to dote on the crafty imbecile that is the essential you?'

'Damned if it is!' cried Willoughby.

'Think, you ape,' rejoined his companion with a charming smile.

'I am only so in part,' said Willoughby.

'In that part springs your craving,' said Baiye. 'And what can she give to that dark sly creature, that must be for ever alone?'

'A hobby,' said Willoughby, with enthusiasm. 'Which will make it happy, and keep it from bothering the rest of me.'

'Well,' said Baiye, 'I wish you joy of your good and beautiful woman. I shall not dwell upon what ugly matters she must have in common with the ugliest.'

'Oh, no, no!' murmured Willoughby.

'As,' said Baiye, 'for her virtue: either that would not continue, or one would grow heartily tired of it. I don't know which is worse: to regret the presence of virtue in one's wife, or to find it gone. No, no, indeed; rather than your good and beautiful woman, I'd have a succession of little sugar-plums out of the back line of the chorus, tedious as they are.'

'Tedious!' cried Willoughby. 'Why, my dear fellow, there must be something gravely wrong with you after all. To call those delightful little creatures tedious, when they are blessed with such infinite variety: one is dark, one fair, one merry, one sweet. Another, perhaps, has some fascinating little fault, such as wearing a ragged shirt.'

'That is a fault you would soon be called on to mend,' said Baiye. 'But what do these differences amount to? Your merry one will giggle, your sweet one gush. These creatures are made of soft, cheap material, incapable equally of the pinnacle, or the abyss, or tasteful behaviour. Their differences are inconsiderable. They demand a degree of flattery which it revolts you to accord, and them to withhold. They have a genius for making a fool of you, which, as it is their only gesture of independence, they do even before you are tired of them, and invariably with the vilest of mankind. No, my dear Corbo, they are altogether insufferable; I would almost as soon have a good and beautiful woman.'

Willoughby was silent for a very long time. At last a reflec-

tion occurred to him: 'To which order, then,' said he, 'does Mrs Wilkinson belong?'

'I remember her well,' said Baiye. 'She only proves that I still relish the idea of pleasure, though I have lost the palate for it. It occurs to me I might taste it, as Lamb did his wine, on the tongue of a friend. I've seldom seen anyone with as eager an appetite as yours is, or one as unspoiled by stupidity or training. Let me see a lot of you, if it wouldn't bore you to do me that favour.'

'Favour!' cried Willoughby, intoxicated by such politeness.

'You cannot guess,' said Baiye, 'what good entertainment I shall find in you. I only wish I were guileless enough to take it up thoroughly, and to make plans for your education. They would never be realised; still, I should enjoy the making of them, if I did not know they would never be realised. Nevertheless, we will have some fun together; perhaps one day we will go to Brighton and see the sea.'

'I believe I am the happiest and most fortunate fellow that ever lived,' cried Willoughby. 'I don't even regret the girl who was snatched from me last night by a bruiser with fingers like pork sausages. It is true I badly need, I need excruciatingly, to come under the sway of a good, or perhaps a bad, and beautiful woman. But to think that I had nothing but a beastly job a few months ago, now I have an uncle in Gloucestershire, a friend, and two hundred a year! The rest will come.'

'Two hundred a year?' said Baiye with some concern. 'That is a nasty little sum. You must avoid wine and debts, for you could only afford the poorest and most acid varieties of each. Still, one life is as good as another, providing only it is free.'

'It will do very well for the life of a student,' said Willoughby.

'What sort of a student, pray?' asked Baiye.

'A student in the larger sense,' replied our hero.

'A student at the university of idleness and meditation,' said Baiye. 'It is what George Moore preferred to Oxford, and I think he was right. Providing, that is, you attach yourself to the right one of its many colleges.'

'I had thought of going to Oxford,' said Willoughby. 'But

I suppose I should have to pass an examination first. Besides, I don't yet know exactly what career I want to go in for.'

'But I thought,' said Baiye, lifting his eyebrows, 'you said you were going to be a student.'

'I mean afterwards,' said Willoughby.

'There is no afterwards to that,' said Baiye. 'Do you mean you want to break off after a short time, in order to earn some money?'

'I wouldn't like to be an absolutely useless person,' said Willoughby.

'The alternative is equally depressing,' replied his friend. 'Either you do something ridiculous for eight hours a day, and have an illusion of usefulness, or you sit in the sun, go to the picture gallery, and have an illusion of futility.'

'But some usefulness is not an illusion,' cried our hero.

'I don't know,' said Baiye. 'The hoer of turmuts may be useful, if the race really should be kept going, which is a matter of taste. And, if it deserves pleasing, the artist perhaps. But you can't be either of those. All others are only relatively useful. *Au fond* they are a curse.'

'Oh, come!' cried Willoughby. 'The doctor? The inventor? Do not be ungrateful for the double-barrelled twelve-bore ejector, and the cure for the pox.'

'I am grateful for the double-barrelled twelve-bore ejector,' replied the other. 'Regarding the cure for the pox, my feeling is impersonal but sincere.'

'Well, then,' cried Willoughby.

Replied Baiye: 'Not so fast. Ejector and injection are only two items in a vast sum. Strike the balance: where are we now? Why, *here*. On an island chequered with Bermondseys and Golders Greens, and crawling with the populations thereof. Regard the miserable ninety per cent of these crawlers. No – ninety-nine per cent, rich and poor. If they are conscious of their state, they should be killed in mere pity. If they are content with it, tolerant of Mum and Dad, or Pater and Mater; proud of bungalow and tenement; un-irked by their manifold uglinesses and discourtesies; unmaddened by their meaningless and degrading toil ...'

'Good God!' cried Willoughby.

'Then they should be hanged for their want of taste,' concluded Baiye. 'For these things are a loathsome and a running sore. Your inventor, your doctor, and one or two others, are loudly praised for giving us a few ameliorations of a state which, however, could not have come about without their officious agency.'

'They will do better, though,' said Willoughby.

'What *can* they do,' asked Baiye, 'but give man more and more freedom for his preponderating weaknesses? They themselves are persons incapable of *savoir vivre*. The rest of men, no better, take their indiscriminate gifts and use them to build a shoddy sty, which they hope will be an easy one. The doctors save us from a merciful blind-puppy death, the inventors give us a little more food: they had done better to withhold these blessings, for look! an island so crammed with its fifty millions, that life's worth living for none of them.'

'At least we are no longer savages or peasants,' ventured Willoughby.

'I know nothing of savages, one way or the other,' replied Baiye. 'If they are worse than most of us, they must be poor Indians indeed. As for peasants, draw aside the curtain, and tell me when you see someone whose face is as pleasant as that of the keeper you described to me over lunch. Meanwhile, hand me that newspaper.'

'I do not see one,' said Willoughby after a minute or two. 'At least, no man, that is to say.'

'But we can never be peasants,' said Baiye. 'And there is nothing else but to be a student.'

'Ah, well!' said Willoughby. 'How very well you talk.'

'Yes, yes,' said the other lightly. 'You'd never take it for simple truth.'

'I can't help thinking it's a little wild and sweeping,' confessed our hero.

'Perhaps, on the other hand,' replied Baiye, 'the simplest truth, the only truth, is even more wild and sweeping.'

Willoughby felt a slight chill at this remark, which was

accompanied by the most charming smile you can possibly imagine.

CHAPTER XIV

Taking a room – Baiye's retreat – The little thin books Beetle-brow – The Russian soul – A year next Friday – A room with pink walls – A blow in the face – Murder! Murder!

On Baiye's advice, Willoughby now set out in search of an apartment: this apartment to be the smallest, the cheapest, the nearest to nothing, in the world. 'All you need,' said Baiye, 'is a truckle bed, a washstand, and a broad-minded landlady. Beware of having more than a tent: if you do, your other expenses will rise accordingly, and your studentship will have to attend lectures in Carey Street.'

Willoughby had a great sense of tradition; besides, some young men, like some pups, have depraved appetites. Accordingly he thought of Pimlico, and asked his father's landlady, when he went there to collect some of his things, if she had an attic to dispose of.

'No,' said she. 'There are no attics here, but I have a top room at the back.'

Willoughby inspected this room, in the middle of which it was possible to stand upright; moreover, there was a landing on which he might have his box of coals. 'A bit of furniture in here,' said the landlady, 'and it would be a very nice little room, just the thing for a gentleman like you.' Willoughby asked the price, and was told he might have it unfurnished for five shillings a week. He thought this extremely cheap, and so it was; the truth is, the landlady was more often drunk than sober, and the house was in rapid decline.

Nothing is nicer than to possess a room of one's own: our hero went out in a state of exultation, purchased his truckle bed, chest of drawers, and the rest of it; he kept Baiye's in-

structions in mind, and equipped himself like a Spartan. 'Now,' said he, 'I am ready to face the world.'

Baiye came to see the room, and approved of it highly. 'It is positively a little eyrie,' he said. 'What is more, there is nothing in it to distract your thoughts from the contemplation of the glories of great literature.' He spoke in ignorance of what lay hibernating beneath the wall-paper, and Willoughby was very pleased.

'Come on,' said Baiye. 'Let us spend the evening together.'

'By all means,' said Willoughby. 'But why not spend it here?'

'Oh, yes; why not indeed?' said Baiye. 'The only thing is, I have some drinks in my own little den.'

Willoughby overcame his reluctance, and consented to leave his darling room. Baiye took him into the wilds of Hampstead, in which the air seemed fresher but less rich. In a side street, Baiye pushed open a green gate, and led him down a little path edged with frozen laurels: this twisted in and out among some low buildings, all in darkness. 'These blasted places are studios,' said Baiye, in a tone of distaste, 'and I am camping in one of them for the time being, disguised as an artist.'

He now opened a door, switched on a light; they were in a little dining-room, the appointments of which almost dazzled the eye. 'There's a little hutch to sleep in through there,' said Baiye, indicating a door. 'Through there, there's what can be called a kitchen and a bathroom. But come into the bloody studio.'

So saying, he threw open a third door, and displayed a gigantic apartment, furnished with sofas, armchairs, book-cases eight feet high, pitchers of flowers, sculptures in shining metal, savage masks, rugs of a pattern capable of transporting anyone who looked at them a thousand years back and two thousand miles east: there was also a bunch of violets, a little battered as if someone had worn them, but now unfastened, and standing in a tumbler of water.

'This is not bad,' said Willoughby.

'It's not bad in the morning,' said Baiye. 'There's a little

garden out there, arranged without taste, but pleasantly green. The sun shines on it very nicely at breakfast-time. But life is abominably complicated here. Besides, the cut of that mantelpiece gets on my nerves: I cannot think how people can be so insensate as to put up with such things. Never mind, see if you can find a place to sit, and let's have something to drink.'

Willoughby paid a great many more visits to this little *pied-à-terre*. Baiye amused both of them by saying: 'To-morrow afternoon, you will go to such and such a gallery. In the back room, in the middle of the wall facing you as you go in, there's a large Renoir; look at nothing else. You may take a glance at the whole of it, but observe particularly the head of the little girl, the peculiar tone of the hair, and its relationship to the geranium bloom, which occupies the next few inches of the canvas.' At other times he would lend Willoughby a book: 'You are not to read any other respectable books but these I give you,' said he. 'There are many others as good, but they belong to different worlds. One world at a time, and those in the right order, or all the good will be neutralised. I shall give you nothing but very thin ones at first, in order that you may see the skull of good taste, smiling away beneath the skin. Fat books, like that Rabelais of yours, lead young men astray. Rowlandson drew first from a skeleton.'

Accordingly he gave Willoughby the *Golden Asse*, *Candide*, *The Letters of John Chinaman*: unfortunately our hero met a beetle-browed young man, in a tea-shop near the British Museum. Beetle-brow lent him Dostoevski, on whom poor Willoughby went absolutely mad.

It is not too much to affirm that he saw Pimlico with a new eye. It seemed the very place in which to achieve spiritual freedom, by the utmost humiliation and suffering: there was nothing in its atmosphere at all antagonistic to sitting up all night and drinking tea, or to flinging himself on his bed, fully clothed, at about the hour of dawn. During these sessions, in which Beetle-brow participated, they whipped themselves into fine frenzies: on one occasion Beetle-brow advanced his teeth

perilously near Willoughby's ear. Willoughby, however, pursued the ultimate vision by the degradation of a cowardly flinching, rather than by the humiliation and suffering of being bit.

Baiye was away at the time: when he came back, Willoughby rushed round to see him, though he had shaved only the day before. He explained the alteration in his views at very considerable length. In the course of his testimony he used the word *suffer* fourteen times, the word *spiritual* twenty-seven, the word *freedom* nineteen. He described a programme compounded of all the principal eccentricities of Stavrogin, Mishkin, and Raskolnikov. One or two little items might have appealed to a jaded appetite; he did not mention them, however, with that kind of relish. He scorned to chain down his terms to any rigorous definition, otherwise his speech was moving to a degree, and lasted over an hour. It was marked with that burning sincerity which is native to the Russian soul, but which can be cultivated in England on a mixture of tannin, folly, and insomnia. Baiye heard him out with the utmost politeness, gave him rather a lot of Kümmel to keep him going: in the end he got up and shook him warmly by the hand.

'Good heavens!' thought Willoughby in a tremulous rapture. 'Is it possible that, beneath all his effete Western epicureanism, he is a Dostoevskian at heart? Yes, it would fit in: it might be the same sort of camouflage as the piano tunes played at the Nihilist debate.'

Meanwhile Baiye, retaining his hand, had led him insensibly to the door. 'Good-bye,' said he, with an expression of infinite sympathy and understanding. 'Come and see me on Friday, not next Friday, but the fifty-second from to-day.'

Willoughby was so overwrought by the fury of his own eloquence, that he could say absolutely nothing to the point. Baiye gave his hand a last shake, and followed it with the most cordial slap on the shoulder. This slap was sufficiently hearty to propel our hero through the front door, and two or three paces into outer darkness. When he looked round, the door was already closed.

Willoughby was hurt and humiliated. What was worse, the sensations were not quite of the right order: he gained no stimulus from them except such as made him walk very fast, and muttering to himself, all the way down to the Charing Cross Road. By the time he got there, he had recovered his composure, such as it was; he even had the insolence to accord Baiye a highly offensive degree of forgiveness, though his friend had been infinitely politer than need be. It may have been the Kümmel, of which he'd taken a good deal, but he went so far as to contemplate bringing about a change of heart in Baiye, by a letter to which he proposed to devote a very long time in writing, and finally to emphasise by suicide, in order to render its proposals more attractive to his dear friend. It must be admitted the idea uninvitedly entered his mind, how very frequently Dostoevskian firearms missed fire. He imagined a little scene, his strained features lit up in an ecstatic smile. A young lady, who had said good evening to him unheard, mistook this for a smile of welcome, and linked her arm in his.

He started violently, but at once perceived that his burden was to be laid upon him: he felt he could have borne it far heavier on the spiritual side, had it weighed a stone or two less in the flesh. However, if he thought of Louise, he also thought of Baiye, and set his teeth. She took him to a tall house in New Compton Street, and to a room on the second floor. It was nicely papered in pink, and adorned with pictures whose interest lay more in their message than in their technique. This should have been Dostoevskian enough, nevertheless our hero would have preferred a garret, for the spirit has no relish for period.

'What is your name?' said he. 'Sonia?'

'That's it, dear,' she said.

'Good God!' he thought. 'How remarkable!'

His hostess was prepared to put herself out for his enjoyment. 'Well, dearie,' she asked, 'what do you want to do?'

To assist him in making up his mind, she regaled him with one or two movements of a dance, which does not entail any

whisking about of the feet, and is not mentioned in the pages of the Master. To still her, while he collected his thoughts, he placed an arresting hand on her abdomen, which he discovered to be very hideously soft.

His spirit soared at once to the highest levels. He made her one of the very finest speeches imaginable, in which he described carnal feeling as something he had outgrown, before going on to discuss the intertwining of their future lives, and the salutary effect of each upon each.

She listened at first with every appearance of gratification, which it chilled his heart to see. Soon, however, her appearance underwent a change. The fact is, she had thought him drunk to begin with, but soon she was forced to the melancholy conclusion that he was mad. Those Puritans, who hold that the one state, while it lasts, is much the same as the other, would be contradicted by ladies of this sort, whose tragic experience of madmen it is, that they are creatures of words rather than of action, and not addicted to carrying large sums in their pockets. What added to this particular damsel's mortification, was that she was newly emerged from a necessary retirement of some weeks, which had left her with a positive horror of a preaching verbosity, and with an enthusiasm, equally fervid, for silence and strength.

Our hero had got as far as describing a life of self-imposed rigours, which he ventured to contrast favourably with the room in which they were sitting, its pictures, and the incidents which, it appeared, those pictures reflected. He alluded to the charming little *ménage* Raskolnikov had embarked on with a whore, and the inspiring marriage Stavrogin contracted with an idiot. At this point he was interrupted by a blow in the face, the vindictiveness of which appalled him.

He was stricken with horror, also, to observe an extraordinary change of expression, on a countenance which he had observed to be plump and kindly, and an incredible harshness and velocity in tones which he had known only as the cooing vehicle of endearments.

Nevertheless, he took the first blow very well, though it was

the cruellest he had ever received in his life. He went so far as to expostulate with a gentle fervour, and to make no attempt to defend himself from the next, which was as like to the other as are two shots from the same gun, *i.e.* the second is a little the harder. After that, it must be admitted he resorted to dodging, which breathed his charmer pretty hard, till, closing with him in the vicinity of the door, she took his tie in her left hand, and approached the other very dangerously to his eyes. Her conversation was such as to cause him to despair of ever bringing her to her senses: he next considered his own, particularly that of sight, of which she seemed so anxious to deprive him.

Whether he had in mind, or not, the fact that Dostoevski is not yet done into Braille, it is impossible to say; anyway, he gave her the gentlest push in the world; she collapsed very suddenly on the floor and began to scream 'Murder! Murder!' in the most terrifying manner imaginable. Willoughby darted through the door, and down the stairs, on which he missed his step, and had to jump as one jumps in a nightmare. A man tried to stop him; fortunately he had the impetus of his descent, he bowled the fellow over, and escaped into the street, where he found himself unable to move, he was trembling to such a degree. This was his salvation, the crowd took him for one of themselves. Soon after, he walked slowly away, heedless of the remark of another young lady, who said to him: 'I don't like that sort of thing. Do you?'

He got home, flung himself on his bed, all in proper style. Next day he thought he was going mad: he had fits of shuddering, and his stomach was knotted up with terror and disgust. Towards evening he took up a volume of Dostoevski: its very binding produced in him the revulsion that a whiff of stale whisky arouses in the awakening drunkard. For a whole week he could read nothing but the daily papers; in the end they cured him of his lunacy on the homeopathic principle.

CHAPTER XV

Results of enthusiasm – Odd fish · A tasteful drawing-room – Black Stock shows his ivories – A fresh and tender look – Peculiar effect of a sneer – Reminiscences of childhood – I wish you would

It is the universal failing of mankind, to refer its ills to occasions rather than to causes. 'I will never again,' said Willoughby, 'propose marriage, in the name of universal love, in terms so tactless, to a creature of that sort, picked up on the corner of Shaftesbury Avenue and the Charing Cross Road. I must have been insane.'

'Never mind,' said he smugly, 'better be mad than smug, as Baiye is!' The fact is, he was extremely sore against Baiye, whose sneer still hung on, Cheshire cat-like, when all the rest of him had woundingly withdrawn. And Willoughby, though he was now a little shy of *the Russian*, was still infatuated by the realms of the spirit, in which it seemed he might cut a magnificent figure, with no more equipment than the courage to do so. He was certainly brave enough to scorn a vast number of things, admittedly at rather long range: money, position, suavity, and compromise were the chief of them.

Though Baiye had gone, our hero now had friends. These were people of the greatest charm, but, I know not how, they were of the sort that seems to need accounting for. It is easy enough to account for how they came into Willoughby's life. Revolt was in the air in those years. Customs to which no cultivated person had ever adhered, books none such had ever read, pictures never looked at except by short-lived duty, poor old men at whom even their contemporaries had laughed, even the wretched aspidistra, were dragged up to be rebelled against. Willoughby, whose ignorance had kept his scorn as pure and abstract as can be conceived, was now taught in the upper flats of Bloomsbury, and the drawing-rooms of Bayswater, to sneer at the Royal Academy, wedlock, the bour-

geoisie, the rhyming head master, his own grandfather, and several other institutions, to none of which a person of taste ever alludes.

Now instead of carrying this chitter-chatter about in his mouth like a spaniel dog, our enthusiast must needs *worry* it. He could not hear of someone lunching with a politician, or a certain sort of editor, or any distinguished, money-grubbing old fool, but, 'What?' he would cry, all his shyness gone, his eyes indecently ablaze, 'What? Do you sit down to table with such a man as that? I can't understand you. You were saying just now that these people have degraded ... well, I don't know – here you are giving your hand to the very chief of them.'

'Oh, come! come!' the victim would reply, who perhaps hoped for a job from the old buffer in question, or who'd run a mile to meet Judas Iscariot if he wasn't so out of date. 'Oh come! One's got to live in the world, you know. Besides, there's more points of view than one. Get him off his subject, old Sir James is very amusing. These old devils know the world.'

'I don't know a point of view that makes black white,' Willoughby would say, his face by this time as red as fire. 'At least ...' And there his voice would dry up, always on the worst possible word.

Very well, the conversation would be changed. Willoughby would go away to sweat half the night at the thought of his rudeness; the hostess would stay behind pursing her lips; the victim would depart sucking his tongue for venom; the other guests would forget all about it, unless perhaps there was some odd fish in the party who found more pleasure in frankness than in the rules of the game. You may be sure, if there was one, he was a very odd fish indeed. Such people generally wear vacant looks, or are hideously emaciated, or are eternal students, or they have theories of their own, or possibly they have some private use for a single-minded and desperately honest young man. People of this sort would wait till the front door had closed behind them, and then ask Willoughby

if he was walking their way. He was in that year of his age when one is invariably walking anybody's way.

Our hero was halted at all the principal coffee-stalls, taken to café bars in Greek Street, to the all-night Corner House, up the foody staircases of lodging-houses, up the stone and criminal staircases of Soho, into basements, mews, bed-sitting-rooms, bachelor suites, artists' rookeries, and sometimes to the trimmest little villas in Battersea or Brixton, where all within would be of the most conventional description, except for a table laden with relics of breakfast, lunch, and tea, or a negress playing patience in a kimono, or some little trifle of that sort.

He was asked if he was studying art, which the poor wretch took as a compliment; if he had yet turned his attention to Social Credit; how long he thought the present regime would last; if he had been analysed; liked Nigger carving, the drama, the male form; would he care to take home a manuscript to read, or go to Paris to collect some packets of powder, a new photographic invention, so secret that even the customs officers must not suspect its transit.

The beauty of all this is not very obvious, yet our hero perceived it, and loved it at first sight. He had never been so happy in his life. He was a little romantic, though he would not have thanked you for telling him so. What's more, the odd fish who took him up were mostly very excellent people, apart from being a little crazy and a little unreliable. The few crooks among them did Willoughby no great harm, for they were too eager to warn him against one another. He was even prevented from getting the powder from Paris. In fact, all that his experience of the Bohemians cost him was a little money which would have been wasted anyhow, a good deal of time, and the good opinion of the more respectable half of his acquaintance, who lived within their comfortable incomes in comfortable houses, gave little parties, attended the *Beggar's Opera*, had country cottages, enlightened views, holidays on the unfashionable Continent, brought back excellent earthenware, and were in all respects admirable, save that they were conies.

Willoughby would not have regretted them at all, except for the astonishingly healthy girl-students who frequented these circles, with whom he longed to become better acquainted.

Very well, the last of his respectable acquaintance was a lady by the name of Posselthwaite, Cheyne Walk, Chelsea; a lovely house inside, everything in perfect taste; you'd yawn your head off. There was the handsomest refectory table in London, some superb pots and platters, two Whistlers and a John drawing, music, and a visit paid two years previous by A.E.

Willoughby having met this lady, and having replied mysteriously to her inquiry, what did he *do*, had been invited to tea, and, as he did so extremely little, he went. And this was one afternoon in April, a pearly afternoon with a soft hint of mist over the river. 'How I admire,' he said, 'your five Whistlers!'

'Five?' asked his hostess, with the smile which she always accorded this pleasantry, and Willoughby indicated the two on the wall, and the three tall windows which looked upon the river. He was getting on.

This was received so graciously that he at once lost much of his shyness. A provocative was there, in the shape of a refined fellow, dressed all in black, with a black stock wound about his yellow neck, side whiskers, teeth like piano-keys: this fellow had had a daub rejected by the New English Art Club, and had come by a violent hatred of all things modern.

Willoughby chancing to mention Picasso, Black Stock took him up very short, and gave him to understand that he was a mere whipper-snapper, deluded by a charlatan, and also that he was a charlatan himself, and little better than *so-called*. All this he conveyed in the politest manner imaginable. Willoughby felt extremely grateful, but could not resist attempting a little defence of Picasso, in the course of which he alluded slightingly to the Royal Academicians.

He did so in the utmost innocence, and with as little sense of danger as if the allusion was to garrotters, for though his reason told him that both types of individual had a real existence somewhere, it seemed to him equally improbable that he

could find himself in company with either of them. Black Stock, however, had once had a picture hung at the Academy, and since then he had taken all references to that institution as being personal praise or affront. Accordingly he showed his piano-keys in something very like a snarl, and treated Willoughby to a most insolent and patronising rebuke, which our hero found it impossible to reply to, in terms within the rules of the game. He turned as red as a lobster, bit his lip, and said nothing.

Black Stock tyrannically pursued his advantage and referred to all modernism as Bolshevist art, *so-called.*

'And even supposing it is?' asked Willoughby, with a little too much emotion in his voice.

'Only that there are some people who make dupes of ignorant and uneducated young lunatics in order to bring mob art, and mob rule, and mob murder, into England.' said Black Stock with a very poisonous glance.

'I don't know what mob cubism serves,' cried Willoughby. 'I know the mob, the tradesman's mob, that the Royal Academy serves. And I think we should be well purged of it, even at the expense of a little murder by another mob.'

'Oh! Oh! Then we have one of the unwashed fraternity here,' cries Black Stock, with a rather cracked laugh.

'Look'ee,' said Willoughby, speaking unconsciously in his uncle's voice, 'I know that you are not calling me unwashed, mister. Are you?'

'Why, er ... no,' says Black Stock. 'No need to be personal.'

'Nor would, I hope,' said Willoughby. 'if I had presented myself here with a face as black as a sweep's. But as to the people who sleep out there,' says he, indicating the Embankment, 'you are not, I am sure, sneering at them for being unwashed, for it is enough for any decent man that they are hungry and miserable. I have long looked forward to the day,' said he, 'and I now rejoice to see it so certain and so close, when they will take a terrible revenge (being what they are) on the people who have made them what they are.'

'We were talking of art,' said Black Stock, with an insuffer-

able air of rebuke, 'I do not usually wrangle politics in front of ladies.'

'Are you sure they take such old-fashioned gallantry as a compliment in these days?' asked Willoughby.

'I am sure Mr Corbo does not mean there will be a revolution,' said his hostess, rather letting Black Stock down. 'Poverty is a very terrible thing, but I hope we can get rid of it without that.'

'There is a yet worse thing than poverty,' cried Willoughby. 'There is wealth. Wealth in the hands of the bourgeoisie, the stock-brokers, the shopkeepers, who use it to nourish every vulgarity of which mean man is capable, who have degraded every possibility that civilisation had ...'

'But do you think a revolution would cure that?' said a reasonable person in the background. 'After all ...'

'I hope it will cure it,' said Willoughby, 'I believe that man, if freed from the curse of money, hypocrisy, snobbery, might become a better creature. But confronted with this vile spectacle of greed and cruelty and stupidity and vulgarity, I do not ask for a cure. I ask only for a means of destruction.' And he looked very hard at Black Stock.

A very charming young girl of twenty, whose whole life had been spent in delightful surroundings, and among kindly, cultured people, but whose tender heart was much oppressed by the thought of human misery, experienced at this last sentence of Willoughby's that stirring emotion that thrills even the most pacific of us at the sound of a fanfare of trumpets.

'But surely,' said Miss Posselthwaite, 'there will never be a revolution in this country?'

Willoughby could not resist a regrettable impulse.

'There are too many comfortable bourgeois,' said he, 'for a successful communist revolution. But what we Nihilists hope for is an unsuccessful one. It would *clear the ground* better. Do you like Switzerland?'

'I don't think we need to take our young friend's prognostications too much to heart,' said Black Stock, in a tone of singularly offensive magnanimity,

'I'm sure I hope there will be no revolution here,' said Miss Posselthwaite.

'I think that we, who love art, and civilisation, and beautiful things, will be enjoying them in this delightful room for many years to come,' said Black Stock, with a great display of ivory.

Willoughby felt himself expressly excluded from the anticipated gatherings, and his hostess extending no word or look to rope him in, he drifted to the other end of the room, to where it chanced the young woman sat who had taken him so seriously. This young woman had smooth dark yellow hair, red cheeks, and her teeth were so white and her parted lips so red that her mouth looked like a little Quarrenden apple from which one small bite has been taken. She looked at him as he approached. Sitting down, he had observed that her face had nothing at all metallic about it, no trace at all of any effort to appear sophisticated. She seemed above smartness, which was a great recommendation to Willoughby, for he despised smartness as sincerely as he feared it. In fact, she wore an expression of great candour and sincerity, a fresh and tender look, and not only that, but she wore a minimum of make-up, and knickers of that non-coquettish type, which, when they appear in certain circles, may be taken as a sign of a good bringing-up which has not yet been brought down. Willoughby conceived a brotherly affection for these knickers.

He was moved, also, in a way he was not inclined to admit, by the look of freshness and tenderness, of simple goodness, which has been referred to. On principle, he permitted himself a vulgar sneer, as he turned away to take a cigarette. 'As attractive in a young woman as in a lamb cutlet,' he said to himself, as young men will, repressing, as if it were an impulse to sneeze, an impulse to tears.

The reason for this was, that when Willoughby contemplated any virtue not native to his beloved barricades, he was afraid to do anything but sneer, lest he should be a sentimentalist and a hypocrite. At such times he was careful to use the vilest phrase possible, and immediately became the victim of an excruciating nostalgia for something he may have known

when young, but had forgotten. This spasm was frequently severe enough to produce the convulsed beginning of a sob. 'I have,' said Willoughby to himself, when this happened, 'I have a soft streak in me somewhere; possibly a streak of insanity. I must beware of it.'

On this occasion, finding the young girl's eyes upon him when he turned back towards her chair, and these eyes being very soft and candid, he did not repress his peculiar yearning as quickly and successfully as usual, but some trace of it hung on, and he looked at this stranger as if he might find whatever the lost thing was, in her.

They then began a conversation of which the libretto was nothing much, but the score was all that could be desired. Willoughby was surprised and delighted to learn that the name of this attractive damsel was Lucy Langton, and that she lived in Smith Square with her father, who was at the Treasury. He told her of old Walter Burfoot and the neglected garden, and she told him of her old nurse, who was now their housekeeper. It seemed that intimacy could go no farther: nor could it at that moment, for the guests had been going, and now the remnant of them rose with one accord. 'May I telephone you some time?' said Willoughby, with a look of great interest. 'I wish you would,' said she.

CHAPTER XVI

A tolerant view of bulb-lovers – An unfortunate misapprehension – Prunus and pyrus – Unconventional presents – Lucy Langton – A good way to spend a day – A voyage to China unnecessary – I am glad of it

WILLOUGHBY walked home along the Embankment, full of that strong elation which is the first symptom either of love or influenza. He saw the comfortable ugly houses with daffodils in the windows, and his heart with pleasure filled, and, 'They may be fools,' said he, 'these bulb-lovers who say every spring,

"The hounds of Spring are on Winter's traces," but, after all, it's *true*, and where else can a young girl find so much beauty to grow up in, without coming into dangerous contact with real artists?'

The river was of the most delicate colour; the sky over it was neither like a flower-petal nor like silk, nor like anything else at all, but it had that quality which we describe as aqueous though not as watery, and the river was pinkishly skyey, and very smooth, and it was half-past six on a soft April evening. Willoughby was lost in admiration of the little leaning plane trees, and of the iron railings at the Embankment's edge, and when these gave place to a stone balustrade he was pleased with that also.

'*I wish you would*,' said he to the evening air, in the most feeling tone. A young woman, who happened to be occupying that section of the atmosphere on which Willoughby's smiling recitation fell most directly, was so unfortunate as to place a misconstruction on these words, and went her way with a stony expression, looking about for a policeman, and destined never to know that she had come face to face with poetry, and had nearly given it in charge.

When he got home, Willoughby examined his possessions: they were not many, and most of what there were were no great shakes. However, he had the mug with Lord Nelson on it, which his uncle had given him because he liked it so much, and he had a little water-colour, an inconsiderable Renoir, which Baiye had given him to correct his taste, a function which he considered it to have fulfilled. He had also a very pleasing *Gulliver's Travels*, taken absent-mindedly from Kent Court, the big book of Piero della Francesca reproductions which he had purchased himself, a little old silver box he had found in his father's trunk, and a blackthorn stick of singular beauty. Surveying these, he perceived what a crime he had been guilty of, in keeping them from their rightful owner, and he rejoiced in the prospect of restoring them where they and all other beauties obviously belonged.

All the same, he was a very Machiavel, and had profited

from his books. He did not telephone the engaging young woman the very next morning, and finding himself in grave danger of doing so, he jumped upon a bus in Knightsbridge to put himself out of temptation, which it very obligingly did, at the entrance to Kew Gardens. How happy we should be, and what a store of horticultural knowledge we should possess, if every time we were in danger of an indiscretion we took that excellent bus to Kew Gardens!

Willoughby, however, was betrayed by a grove of prunus and pyrus, which were just coming into bloom.

There was that hint of formality, of the mediaeval illumination, in their branches, that even wild fruit trees, unpruned, invariably possess. The sky was such a blue, the blossom was as white as soap-suds, and, to add the last unbelievable, inevitable touch, the grass was green. Willoughby, who had survived the more exotic onslaught of a group of Magnolia Stellata, was overcome by the astonishing resemblance of this radiant grove to an expression he had observed on the face of Miss Lucy; what's more, there were some daisies in the grass. He hurried up to a uniformed garden man, one of the pleasantest-looking fellows imaginable, and asked him where was a telephone box.

The man immediately told him. Willoughby rushed off, warming his pennies in his hand.

Miss Langton was at home: a servient female voice, which Willoughby recognised at once as that of the dear old nurse turned housekeeper, told him so. She spoke the literal truth: in a moment Lucy's voice came over the telephone. Willoughby, like an old man who looks at an ancient, clumsy photograph, was amazed that so living a beauty could be conveyed by such a contrivance.

'Hullo!' he said. 'I'm at Kew.'

'Is it Mr Corbo?' came the reply.

'Yes, of course,' said our hero. 'I'm at Kew.'

'How nice,' she said, 'to be rung up from Kew.'

'You would think so if you were here,' said he. 'That's why I'm ringing you up. I wish the telephone could show you a

grove I've been walking in; it's all in flower, and you must see it to-morrow.'

'Oh dear!' she said. 'I've promised to go out to lunch to-morrow.'

'Oh dear!' said Willoughby. 'Look here, this is one of the things that are more important than lunch. You've no idea what it's like. It won't wait beyond to-morrow' (which would have been a damned lie, for the grove was not yet in full bloom, only Willoughby believed it). 'Look here,' he said. 'It's one of the few things that really matter.'

'Perhaps I could bring my friend,' said Lucy doubtfully.

'No,' said Willoughby, and was immediately overcome by terror. 'I mean ...' said he. 'No, I don't. No!'

'It's a very old friend of mine,' said Lucy, 'who wouldn't mind. Perhaps I could put her off.'

Willoughby considered this last sentence to be the finest thing he had ever heard in his life. Even the penultimate word was impeccable. He arranged to call for Lucy at half-past ten in the morning, and hared about like a madman for the rest of the day.

From his Pimlico lodging to Smith Square, Westminster, is at most a quarter-hour's walk, but Willoughby had a burden to carry, and it would certainly never do to be late. Accordingly he gave himself three times as long, and arrived on the doorstep of Lucy's little house, which had a green door, brass on it, and window-boxes to the windows, at a little before ten o'clock, for he had not lingered by the way. An old gentleman, who came through the hall as he was inquiring for Miss Langton, observed our hero with some interest, for it is not every day that one sees a young man carrying, unwrapped, a water-colour, two huge books, a china mug with a silver box in it, and a blackthorn stick. However, this old gentleman had to go off to the Treasury, and hastened past the unconventional visitor, who stared at him with an infinity of awe and benevolence, but who, nevertheless, stared.

Willoughby was set waiting in the hall, for the maid imagined him to be an assistant from an old curiosity shop. Lucy

came down the stairs in a yellowish sort of frock. 'Why!' she exclaimed. 'These are yours,' said Willoughby with some embarrassment.

'But ...?' said she. 'Look here. Come up to my room.'

They went up the white wooden staircase, a little uneven; there were prints of some merit hung on the wall, glimpses into extremely pleasant-looking rooms, bulbs on the window-sills in the landings. On the second floor she showed him into a large low room.

'This floor is my own flat,' she said. 'My father is not allowed up here. Do you like it?'

'It's the nicest room I have ever seen,' said Willoughby with much conviction.

'But, tell me ...' she said, looking at his burden again.

'These things,' he said, 'had better be yours.'

He put on a commanding look, which splintered on his face like thin ice, and this made his eagerness seem a desperate eagerness, as a broken gruffness makes shyness seem more shy. Lucy was one of those odd creatures who feel no triumph in inflicting pain; she had wasted a thousand opportunities of snubbing defenceless enthusiasts: here was the best she had ever had in her life, and she wasted this too.

She said: 'These are lovely things, and they must be worth an awful lot of money ...'

'In that case,' said Willoughby rudely, for he was not yet sure he was not going to be hurt, 'you'd better sell them. I don't want them. I'm not going to have any more pretty things.' This was a very cubbish speech, but Lucy was not old enough or wise enough or stupid enough to mind it.

'I always take the silly, ordinary view first,' said she. 'Or I always talk as if I did. We're going to Kew to see your trees, and it's a lovely day, and anyway nothing in the world is really ordinary, is it?' The fact is, Lucy had twigged the implication in Willoughby's remark, that these were all the pretty things he had, and from thinking him a very lavish young man of money, she now saw him as one who gave his all on a certain impulse, a conception of vastly superior poetical value. She

was so taken up with the poetry of it, that her thoughts danced ahead, dragging her words out of step: she talked nonsense, and, before she had done, her thoughts had darted well forward, and had seen whatever there was to see, which must have been something like a rosy dawn, judging by the reflection that appeared on her face.

Willoughby had the grace to blush himself: each was conscious of the other's mantling cheek, and the sensation was as if those cheeks, incredibly gently, had touched. This was an embarrassing sensation, but so delicious as to compel undivided attention, and the conversation lapsed.

At last a very gruff voice spoke impatiently out of Willoughby's mouth: 'Well, there they are.'

'Thank you for them,' she said, not very loudly. 'After all ... I know why you gave them to me.' It was not exactly how she'd meant to put it, but Willoughby was extremely pleased. 'I believe you do,' he said, in the quiet and even accents with which one handles a delight as precious as a frail vase put suddenly into one's hands. His face lit up with an utterly unguarded happiness, such as Lucy had never seen but in the face of a child, and which, surely, anyone would consider a very pleasant sight indeed.

'I am in love,' thought Willoughby, and Lucy could not help thinking that some slight affection motivated his behaviour. As for her own feelings, she was not so egotistical as to speculate on them at all, but she thought it was a lovely day, and that it would be very nice to walk in a grove of flowering trees with a pleasant young man who had given her a water-colour, a mug, a silver box, two fine books, and a blackthorn stick, these being all his possessions. And, after all, there are very many worse ways of passing the time. It must be admitted, though, that Lucy could not think of a better.

They went to Kew, travelling on the top of the bus, which was an open-topped bus in those days, and may be still for all I know.

On the way they pointed out to one another various objects

of interest, such as people who looked nice, and barrow-loads of flowers.

They discovered that they had many tastes and memories in common, which is always very gratifying: they discovered also that each knew or liked something with which the other was unacquainted, which came as a revelation. Willoughby, indeed, found that that extraordinary, lost, radiant thing, for which we have observed him to feel an occasional keen nostalgia, was not a feature of his own childhood at all, but the very essence of Lucy's. He experienced a longing to enter this Eden, which he knew without having known, but as he did not consciously propose to himself any means of doing so, he missed the amusing reflection that Eden has only one gateway, and that to get in we must take the same path as led our first ancestors out.

Willoughby and Lucy talked a great deal about their respective childhoods, which is always a sign that things are in a fair way. For the rest, there was more breeze than yesterday, but it was a soft breeze, and there were a few soft clouds blowing about. Lucy's dress fluttered, it was impossible not to be aware that she possessed arms, legs, etc. Willoughby's straight, harsh, sooty black hair was agitated in a manner which she did not find displeasing. They not only looked at the grove of prunus and pyrus, but also stood by the lake, and inspected the willows and the water-fowl, which put them in mind of China, and they agreed that, in suitable company, it would be highly delightful to visit those parts. They had, however, the highest opinion of England in spring, and since the chief attraction in the Chinese fancy was a home-grown product, it seems likely that they belonged to that select order to whom little rooms are everywheres.

Willoughby took Lucy home by the bus. 'Our bus!' he exclaimed when it came in sight of the stopping-place. 'Our bus!' she echoed, heaven knows why.

She was a good, sweet-natured, generous, nice, innocent girl, and scorned all policy, especially such as bids take without saying, 'Thank you, I am glad of it.' Accordingly she thanked

Willoughby on the doorstep, and gave him a smile which said, 'I am glad of it.'

CHAPTER XVII

Purifying influences – A dell on Hampstead Heath – Lucy looks round – A charming old woman – Ireland for the English – An extremely white shoulder – Have you been playing Bach?

WILLOUGHBY carried away this smile with a care that caused him to bump into a perambulator and a lamp-post. However, he did not drop it.

Nothing could be more gratifying to a young man well schooled in the theory, and eager for the practice, of the seductive art, than to receive such a smile from the sincerest eyes and the sweetest mouth in the world. Alas! he had had a thousand instructions in how to proceed, but now opportunity was to find him out. To put it in a nutshell, it was as though Woodcock Brown, the famous game-shot, had been metamorphosed into St Francis of Assisi just as the long-awaited shy one curled up out of the wood.

Willoughby felt no desire at all to squeeze, tumble, and carnally possess this extremely desirable young creature. Or if perhaps after all he did feel such a desire, he recognised it only as one more worthless thing that he might cast under her feet. The possession of feet implies ankles and knees: knees, interesting in themselves, must be somehow connected with the body: Willoughby had no time to speculate on such truisms of anatomy. He would have been the last to deny, though, that, under her yellowish dress or jumper or whatever it was, there must be the prettiest young breasts in the world. In fact, now I come to think of it, the day had been breezy, but his only thought was of those pinkish apple-buds, innocence itself, on which, if one fancies oneself unobserved, one presses the softest and lovingest and most reverent kiss.

His whole idea of heaven was, that he might walk with her

again every day, and say the same things, or nearly the same; and perhaps at that moment when they sat on the grass, and talked again of the daisied sod that had been put in the lark's cage in Hans Andersen, she might touch him with her fingers on the cheek.

It is given to all of us to have heaven once or twice in our lives; Willoughby now had his share of it, for in a day or two Lucy came out with him again, and after that they went out together nearly every day, for Lucy had no fear of making herself cheap: she did not hold herself so dear.

Willoughby did, however. There are two sorts of men in this world, those who will raven only after that which is withheld from them, a perishable attraction, and those, on the other hand, who say neither 'Thank you' for ill usage nor 'Hang you' to kindness. These find in a straightforward frankness something which transfigures gratitude itself. Willoughby was of this latter kidney, and, most young women having treated him as of the former, according to a nearly universal custom, he was astounded that Lucy should never disappoint him for coquetry's sake, and he adored her for it every new day. And every new day he adored her to the fullest of his capacity, and every new day that capacity increased, a phenomenon which he shortly explained to his beloved, and on which they speculated very gravely.

For the fact is that by their third meeting Willoughby had determined to reveal his love, and had planned out a number of little devotions in the faint hope of inspiring a like interest. He calculated that these little services must occupy at least a couple of months; then there was to be a period of hints, extended over a fortnight or so, which would, as it were, break gently to Lucy the fact that ... etc. He was thinking of two or three alternative speeches for the final *dénouement*, and had in mind as many different settings. These things engrossed him to such an extent (for he sometimes bejewelled his rehearsals with imagined responses on her part), that he actually became absent-minded in her company, and, while they sat on Hampstead Heath on their third afternoon, his

eyes remaining fixed upon her, he was away in the unbelievable future, and when he came back she was there, and looked at him, and smiled.

Willoughby felt such a spring gale of affection blow over his heart, that he knew not what to do but throw his arms round her neck and give her as frank and straight and loving a kiss as ever young girl has received in the history of the world.

Both had noticed, without noticing they noticed, that the dell they sat in was extremely secluded. Lucy was as happy as her lover, and sweetly kissed him back. Not till exactly halfway through the third second did she feel a little fear of a watcher, which made her hastily glance around. 'Don't look round,' said Willoughby, 'What does it matter? Let the whole damned world see.'

'I can't help being shy,' said Lucy. 'I wouldn't like anyone to see.'

'But it spoils it,' he said, 'to look round afterwards. Darling! Kiss me again.' Lucy looked round first, and put her arms round his neck and gave him the tightest squeeze, and a rough, eager, girlish kiss, in which he found nothing to complain of at all.

If there are circles in heaven, they were now in the innermost one, like the blessed Cherubim and Seraphim, who are content with the joys of the spirit, and, having the apparatus of kissing, desire no more. All descriptions are inaccurate; as a matter of fact they did not kiss again, but walked off like the blessed Babes in the Wood, holding hands, and wishing they could sing like the birds, lest you should think they never could recapture. ... However, they could not sing like the birds.

An old woman, observing them, smiled. 'What a nice old woman!' cried Willoughby. 'I hope,' cried Lucy, 'she has a house and a clock and has not to walk the roads.' The reference was to a poet of Celtic leanings. Lucy liked *A Shropshire Lad*, Yeats, Hardy, and some romantic little landscapes by Augustus John. She had spent many holidays in the moun-

tains of Connemara, and showed Willoughby a photograph of herself, with a handkerchief about her head, standing outside a cabin. Willoughby thought of the enormous hills pale under the dark blue vault of the night sky, the air as pure as starlight, and Lucy walking with her head among the stars. He also thought of English orchards, in whose tall weeds the spit-flies were, that had stained Tess's arms with amber stains, and he thought there were probably some left to stain Lucy's arms: he thought of the dappled sunlight tumbling on to her handkerchiefed head, under the massy boughs. His every country memory burst into bloom to garland his charmer; he did not cease to admire the metropolitan austerities of modernism, but he learned to love certain provincial notions of values, much as if he had found his Lucy in a cottage garden, whose charm only then became apparent to him.

We have left our lovers being smiled at by an old woman: they were also smiled at during the month of May by bus conductors, shopkeepers, waitresses, and a variety of other people, and on a number of occasions they said to one another: 'Do you think he guesses?' and were inclined to attribute more penetration to the observer than the case required. To tell the truth, they were the most obvious pair of lovers that ever walked, and they looked so extremely young and simple and pleasant that most of the smiles they elicited were sentimental ones.

They passed three or four weeks in this fashion, and every day was a celebration of some sort. Willoughby found it necessary to purchase a large number of bunches of flowers: some of these cost only twopence, others cost a pound. However, he managed to borrow a tenner here, and two or three pounds there, and would have considered himself the most mean-spirited ingrate that ever Fortune had benefited, had he doubted that she, who had bestowed upon him the jewel and nonpareil of all the world, could think of denying him a windfall of a few trivial quid with which to pay his expenses. And perhaps her kindness was greater than he realised, inasmuch as Lucy had no desire for diamonds.

'I want to give you something,' he said, 'to wear.'

'You've given me these,' she said, touching some violets.

'I mean something you can wear always,' he said. 'Something that will become part of you.'

Lucy wanted something of that sort from him, and said so at once: her only proviso was, that it should be something inconsiderable, so that she might like it for its own sake alone, by which she meant, for his. 'I don't care what it is,' said Willoughby, 'so long as it's beautiful enough. I should like it to be a necklace, though, so that it could go about your neck.'

This reasoning was sufficiently sound; they discussed corals and turquoise and garnets. All these were eminently suitable; Willoughby's objection to them was, that other people had given and worn them before. At last he starts up. 'I know,' he says; 'I shan't tell you, but I know the perfect thing. I wondered what on earth I should do these two or three days you're away. Now I know.'

He wouldn't split, but as soon as Lucy's train had gone out, bearing her away for those two or three days, our hero sets out afoot, for things must be done properly, and he walks away for dear life, and sleeps under a haystack, devilish cold, and next morning comes out on the sea beach between Worthing and Bognor, walks along sand and shingle, and on the fourth day he limps into London, telephones, and goes at once to see Lucy, with his nose skinned, his shoes all mealy with dust, and some bits of twig and litter still sticking on his coat from his last night's lumpy bed.

'Look,' he said. 'Here's your necklace,' and pulled out of his pocket a number of small squares and ovals of glass, smoothed and dimmed by the water and the sand, till they were the colour of something found in the moon.

'I walked all the way to the sea for them,' said he, bursting with pride, 'and all the way back.'

'You *boy*,' said Lucy. 'What a marvellous thing to do! Nobody else would think of it.'

'Do you like them?' said he.

'They're lovely,' said she, on a note hearable elsewhere only

in the deepest warbling of water. What's more, she put down her white teeth on her cherry lip, and fixed her eyes on Willoughby, and these eyes brimmed and glistened.

'I shall have them fixed together with little links of black iron,' remarked our hero. 'I've not seen you for three days.' The first of these sentences was uttered in a measured and casual tone; the second was not. He had reason for speaking with extreme rapidity, for his full-stop was a kiss.

Now Lucy's lips received this salute with a response infinitesimally and infinitely different from all her previous responses. Willoughby cried 'Ah!' as if he had been stabbed to the heart. They were in the little sitting-room; there was a very nice old divan there, covered with fresh linen, and on this they seated themselves, as flushed and trembling as can be imagined. Lucy hid her burning face on her lover's breast, and raised it again, and hid it again, and so forth. At a moment when her head was lowered, Willoughby perceived under her dress a shoulder as white as curds and whey, and superior in fragrance. He pulled back her collar, and pressed his lips on this delicious object, and felt her tremble in his arms.

He was intoxicated with delight, raised her up to face him: 'My sweet, sweet thing!' he said. She parted her lips to reply, but said nothing. She had on a tight velvet bodice, dim blue, with buttons down the front. He looked into her eyes with rapturous seriousness, and receiving in return a glance equally grave and sweet, he fumblingly undid the top two or three of these. 'I want to kiss your dear heart,' he observed, and Lucy desiring the same, he opened the bodice, and perceived, nestling in a girlish slip, a pair of young breasts, pretty enough to melt a heart of stone.

Lucy put her arms round his neck.

They spent an hour in this sort of dalliance, or perhaps a little more even than this. From the point of view of these modern times, their conduct was shockingly incomplete: my only excuse for them is, that they were out of time, in one of those seconds of eternity, which pass like a soft flash, and fill a lifetime afterwards.

If still they must be blamed, Willoughby must bear it, for Lucy at that moment would have withheld nothing from him. Possibly he should have been psycho-analysed; his unworthy conduct may have been due to some early-acquired inhibition, or to some guilt complex come through having prattled so villainously during the last year or so. Probably this had warped his whole attitude towards sex, so that he looked on it in an old-fashioned way, and hesitated to take full advantage of the delicious abandon with which this young and trembling thing surrendered herself to him. He may perhaps be recommended to mercy on the grounds that from this hour he suffered intermittent pangs of remorse for his immasculine puerility, and a constant torment of desire to make up for it.

At the same time, our most rapturous experiences are not always the most commendable. Willoughby and Lucy now had no sense of sin, either of omission or commission; they had spent the best hour they had ever spent in their lives, or, for that matter, ever were to.

Willoughby had meant to go earlier. He usually left Smith Square a little before Lucy's father returned, for it was the custom in that house for Lucy to go down to pour her father's tea. Willoughby had not met this good man, though already he loved him dearly, because Lucy did. And the reason he had not met him was this: that there existed a wise and kindly convention between father and daughter, to the effect that Lucy need not parade her friends for inspection, and no inquisitor could have contrived a more ingenious method of surveillance, for until now Lucy had never known anyone a week without desiring to introduce him at home, and this young man had visited her six or seven weeks, and she had scarcely mentioned him.

Accordingly, when they met Papa in the hall, he had a good look at Willoughby, noted his very dusty attire, and remarking that in his face which interested him even more, he gazed next at his daughter, whom he observed to wear the same rapt expression, 'Hullo, young people,' said he, 'have you been playing Bach?'

Hearing they had not, he looked at Willoughby with even greater interest. 'I had been looking forward to making your acquaintance, Corbo,' said he. 'Lucy, do you think Mr Corbo would care to come and dine some evening?'

Willoughby expressed the greatest eagerness. Not to be outdone, Mr Langton showed a flattering desire that the date should be an early one. If it would not be unconventional to the point of rudeness, he said, he would have suggested the very next day. Willoughby insisted that he had no sort of engagement. 'Well then, Corbo, let it be to-morrow,' said the old man, and Willoughby went away rejoicing at this particular attention, which, nevertheless, he might have suggested of being a little *too* particular, had he heard Mr Langton telephoning to cancel quite an important appointment, all to make the acquaintance of his daughter's new friend.

CHAPTER XVIII

Dinner with Mr Langton – An affable greeting –
A little Horace – Drawing him out –
A sullen look – A choice of profession –
Quite a revolutionary – Indiscreet expressions –
A chat with Lord Stumber

VERY few things are absolutely perfect, and Willoughby found that the prospect of an evening with Lucy's father was not one of them. Nothing had seemed more desirable than to meet the person who meant so very much to his beloved: what slightly marred the prospect was that this involved that person meeting and forming an impression of him. Willoughby was perfectly confident that his astonishing and probably unique passion for Lucy would be obvious, and must predispose her parent in his favour: nevertheless he could not dismiss from his mind the glance he had received in the hall, and the more he thought about it the more unaccountable this glance appeared to be.

It brought into Willoughby's mind all that he had heard and read about parents. He could not deceive all himself all the time, and was forced to recognise that parents were usually extremely worldly people. Willoughby was not at all sure of the impression he would make on an extremely worldly person. He was sure of one thing; that if worldliness should endeavour to interpose between him and his Lucy, worldliness must be fought to the death. 'I don't like the thought of an *old* man even knowing about Lucy and myself. How horribly he must think of it!' said he with a frown.

He wondered what he should say on the question of marriage, or if he should speak about it at all. He had talked of it with his sweetheart once or twice during the last week or two, but their terms had been lyrical rather than precise. Their intentions might have been expressed in a phrase that has been used before, though with a slightly different import: 'We will live like the blessed angels.'

He telephoned at lunch time. The old housekeeper came to the phone, and told him Miss Lucy had gone out to lunch with her father, and they were going to spend the afternoon at Lord's. Willoughby experienced the emotions of a lover and of a taxpayer, and thought for a while of what he should say at dinner, and then of the glance he had received in the hall, and then of an insistent longing (which he had become aware of overnight) to be married by special licence within the week, and again of the glance he had received in the hall, and then of certain deficiencies in his financial status, and finally on the necessity of fighting worldliness to the death, on which he concentrated for the rest of the afternoon.

In the end it was time to change, but by this time he was a little wrought upon by all his anxious fancies. 'What is the good of dressing up?' he said. 'I am different, and had better not pretend to be otherwise.' Now, in these days his clothes by this time had that pleasant look of freedom and ease that one associates with the absence of a hat.

Mr Langton greeted him with great affability: this affability had one slight imperfection, and that was, that it was not quite

sincere. In fact, the good gentleman had had a very interesting conversation with his daughter while they were watching the cricket: it was as light as air, yet in the course of it Lucy had innocently revealed some opinions her father had not remembered her to express before. He had the deepest love for his daughter, as she had for him. His was so deep as to admit of a very peculiar sort of jealousy. This was mixed up, in a way that would have interested a more detached observer, with his hatred of everything that could be called cubbish or half-baked, or destructive, or left wing. Moreover, being at the Treasury, he had a good deal of bitter experience of life on two thousand a year, and considered three thousand to be very much superior. He hoped that Lucy would, at some comfortably remote date, marry the right sort of man, and he entertained even this hope with a very moderate enthusiasm.

Still, he greeted Willoughby in a very affable way, and soon began a conversation intended to *draw him out*. He had the most courtly manners, of the sort that prescribe an appearance of great interest in the experiences and tastes of the person one is addressing. This interest is often displayed at a first meeting by a series of inquiries, and these inquiries must of course assume a common background. It is unfortunate if they should all be answered in the negative, but this is very rare when both parties are of the right sort, and the questioned can aid the questioner.

'This,' said the old chap, while they were waiting for the gong to sound. 'This was taken at Chamonix, Christmas before last. My ski-ing days are over, of course. I suppose you're keen?'

'I've never skied,' said Willoughby.

'Ah, I suppose you climb then,' said Mr Langton.

'No,' said Willoughby.

'Fond of Switzerland?' said the other.

'I've never been there,' said Willoughby.

'Ah, yes, of course! You're a great connoisseur of art, I hear,' said his interlocutor. 'I'm afraid I've only one thing likely to interest you. That,' said he, indicating a little picture

in a heavy frame. 'It came to me from an old friend of mine. Do you like his work?'

'Whose is it?' said Willoughby, after a prolonged inspection. 'It looks very good. Guardi?'

'Guardi? Why no. Canaletto,' said Mr Langton. 'Do you know Italy well?'

'I've never been there,' said Willoughby. 'Do you know,' he added, feeling his host was about to mention France and Spain, 'I have never been out of England.'

'Is that really so?' said Mr Langton. 'Then you have a great many pleasant experiences, and instructive experiences, before you.'

Lucy was in the room, and she looked up at Willoughby, a very whisper of a look, as if to say, 'Won't that be nice?' but Willoughby felt that he had no great desire to visit foreign parts.

Mr Langton continued to put himself out to entertain his visitor, or to entertain himself by putting his visitor out. He talked about books, and trotted off to get his little Horace. 'This is my constant companion,' he said, 'and I don't ask a better. If you don't mind an old fogey presuming to advise you ...?'

'Of course I don't, sir,' said Willoughby.

'You've still got your Latin in your head,' said the old chap. 'Don't let it go. You'll find it your most precious possession when you're my age. Do you like that thing, "*Hoc erat in votis* ..." How does it go?'

'I'm afraid I forget,' said Willoughby.

'Oh, surely,' said the old man. '"*Modus agri non ita magnus.*" My memory's failing. Here's the page. Lend me your young eyes, will you kindly? How does it finish?'

Willoughby, a little red about the ears, spelled out a line or two. 'Ah!' said the old chap. 'Is that Cambridge? Have they altered the pronunciation again?'

'I don't know,' said Willoughby. 'I was not at Cambridge.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' cried his inquisitor heartily. 'I was at Oxford myself, and it may be prejudice, but ... Well, perhaps you feel the same. Not Balliol by any chance?'

'I was not at Oxford,' said Willoughby.

'Indeed?' said Mr Langton, in a tone of the liveliest interest, and with a glance at Willoughby's trousers. 'Then probably you're taking up medicine.'

'I don't know,' said Willoughby with some hauteur, 'that anyone of my name has been a doctor.'

'A noble profession,' remarked the old man as the gong sounded. 'I have a brother in Harley Street.'

'Yes, indeed, a noble profession,' said Willoughby hastily, 'but somehow ... well, somehow doctors run in families, don't you think, like diseases for that matter?'

'And neither runs in yours,' said Mr Langton. 'Let me see. I *think* I met a Mr Corbo once. Or was it a Colonel Corbo? Might it have been your father? Uncommon name.'

'My father was Lord Ollebeare,' said Willoughby.

'Have you many brothers?' said Mr Langton with a certain quickness.

Willoughby was observant on this point, and now he was sure he was being baited, and did not reply. Lucy asked her father who the very tall man was, who had been playing for Kent that afternoon. Willoughby was mindful of her kindly intent, but not as grateful as he might have been, for no man likes to be protected by his women folk. Besides, Mr Langton, having replied to his daughter, founded another question on the interruption itself.

'You played cricket, I expect,' he said, 'at school?'

'I was not at school, sir,' said Willoughby. 'The fact is, I was brought up at the house of an uncle of mine, who took very little interest in me, possibly because I happen to be illegitimate, or else for some reason equally good. He did not bother to see to my education, so I am very ignorant of cricket and Latin and the Continent.'

'How very odd!' said Mr Langton. 'How very odd of him! Well, well. We saw an excellent game this afternoon.' And he chattered away about cricket as if to cover up any slight confusion that Willoughby might feel. Our hero, however, put on a very sullen look.

Recovering, he did his best to bring in the two or three points in his life of which Lucy's father might possibly approve: he mentioned the domestic architecture of the Cotswolds, one or two little features of Ollebeare, the pleasures of shooting over an estate that was neither too large nor too small, but the old man did not follow up these lines, but continued to ask questions in the politest manner, and they were all questions to which Willoughby had to return brief and unsatisfactory replies. Towards the end of the meal, these replies became tinged with the very faintest hint of truculence, and after each of them the old man would blink for some time at his fork. ('Have you never seen a fork before?' asked Willoughby under his breath.)

Mr Langton was now well assured that Willoughby was a pretentious and uncultivated young man, of the sort that might delude a girl of twenty, but had no chance whatsoever of deluding the world to the extent of three thousand a year. When they were seated in the drawing-room, he showed great interest in Willoughby's situation, and frankly mentioning the privileges of his age, he asked him if he had ever done anything, and what was his choice of a career.

'I spent some months,' began our hero, 'as secretary to an extraordinarily foolish old man, who nevertheless had been entrusted with an office of great public importance, of which I saw the workings pretty clearly.'

'Would it be indiscreet,' said Mr Langton, 'to ask what office that was?'

'It was Lord Stumber and his League,' said Willoughby with a laugh. But this laugh died away when he perceived an expression on the countenance of his host, which, had they been playing poker, might have saved him a great deal of money, had he had a great deal of money. He wished he had not used a scornful expression.

'We are serving,' said Mr Langton, 'on the same committee. He will be interested to hear I've met you.' Willoughby turned pale and red, and was conscious of a scrutiny, and gave himself him up for lost.

It was a peculiarity of our hero's nature, that on those occasions when one gives oneself up for lost, he wished, like all of us, that the earth would open up and swallow him, but after a few minutes he wished still more heartily that this unusual fate would overtake his adversary. Accordingly his hackles began to rise; he felt himself the prospective victim of unjust prejudice, and took an increasingly aggressive tone, and poor Lucy said never a word.

Mr Langton seemed very much interested in what Willoughby was going to do. Shortly afterwards he asked him another question.

'I have not yet chosen,' said Willoughby. 'And to be frank, I find the matter a very difficult one.'

'Yes, I expect you do,' replied Mr Langton. 'Though there are plenty of instances of men having begun at the bottom ...'

'From what I have heard of those men,' interrupted Willoughby, 'I have not the slightest desire to join them in their present eminence. I would rather spend a good youth than a good old age. Besides, one cannot have a good old age unless one's youth has also been good. These fellows were mean, hard, narrow money-grubbers all the while they had none: what can they be but mean, hard, narrow money-holders now?'

'I think Willoughby is right there, Father,' said Lucy.

'So do I, my dear,' said her father. 'Perfectly right. But I was not proposing the career of a ... I had in mind, rather, a young colleague of mine at the Treasury, who entered in the lowest grade of the Service before the war, and by sheer hard study he has passed several examinations, of which the last has always been regarded as next door to impossible except to an Honours man from the Varsity. Well, he is now in a very comfortable position, and in my belief he'll have a secretaryship before he's done, perhaps not of the Treasury, but of one of the other first-rate departments. I remember him when he was no more than a sort of office-boy, and now ... well ... he is an equal, and a jolly good fellow too.'

'That is a very great attraction, I'm sure,' said Willoughby

in rather a sarcastic tone. 'These are democratic days, so perhaps I might venture to hope for the same privilege. But ...'

'It is no longer possible in the Service,' said Mr Langton. 'But there is business, in which it is easier to get a footing, and ...'

'Do you mean trade?' asked Willoughby with an air of astonishment.

'I don't mean shopkeeping,' replied Mr Langton. 'I had in mind such a thing as a firm of stockbrokers, or ... or say any large company – oil, wool ...'

'That is what I call trade,' said our hero, 'except that the first is plain pickpocketing. I could not have to do with that sort of thing.'

'Indeed, young man? You have very high standards, if you don't mind my saying so,' replied his host.

'But, sir, I'm not thinking from my father's point of view!' cried Willoughby. 'Though that would be reason enough.'

'*Indeed?*' said Mr Langton, who had another brother a stockbroker.

'I'm thinking of it from the moral point of view,' said Willoughby, 'I think these people who grow fat on buying cheap and selling dear are the most hateful cancer in all modern life. I would like to see them hanged.'

'Why, you are quite a revolutionary!' said his host, with a face as pale as a winter's moon.

'Yes, I am,' cried Willoughby. 'There's another thing too, though. These jobs you mention entail sitting at a desk. Even if they were not part of the capitalistic machine, I would not sit at a desk. I would rather be a tramp, and walk the jolly roads.'

'It *is* an alternative,' remarked Mr Langton. 'Then I suppose your prejudice against both desks and (what is it?) the capitalistic machine, would prevent you from studying for some profession, such as the law?'

'And if that did not,' said Willoughby, 'I would rather be hanged than be a lawyer.'

('Upon my word!' thought Lucy. 'My poor uncles!')

'Do you know,' cried our hero passionately, 'what a lawyer has to do?' (Mr Langton moved his lips.) 'He has to stand up and make it worse for some poor wretch, whose notions he and every other man can see and understand, and he has to damn this fellow with all the false and hackneyed jargon that ever hardened men's hearts to cruelty, and see him jugged and ruined for some twopenny crime, that's no crime at all save by some savage law that all of us laugh at. Why, judge, jury, and all may go straight out, and half of them do the same things themselves. Think of the Oscar Wilde case! What's more, supposing there is some poor wretch on his trial for murder, against whom the evidence is black, but yet of the sort that looks blacker in the eyes of a jury-box of grocers than of him who's been taught to sift it. Very well, he will speak now high, now low, now he'll pause, then let fly with his privileged insolence at some poor muzzled fool who witnesses for the defence, then flatter the jury with a sneer, then tickle them with an obscene pathos – oh! he does everything, and all to make dullards believe what his own weasel keenness perceives to be false. With that, he will wither up every just plea to mercy, or let innocence itself go hang. Or, in the other extreme, having taken the fee of a manifest monster of iniquity, he will again lie, thicken his voice, call on every false sentiment, as eager to defraud justice as he was to prevent mercy. I know there are arguments that there's one such on each side. I hope I am not one of those who see only black and white. All the same, I say the man who does what I have described, or who puts himself in the way of doing such things, is a villain.'

With that he paused, quite puffed. Believe it or not, his hands were trembling.

'But, Willoughby,' said Lucy, 'that is not a solicitor.'

'My dear,' said he incautiously, 'I know of two sorts of family convenience: the solicitor is one: I would just as soon be the other.' (Mr Langton knitted his brows.) 'What is more ignoble in any man than his need to guard himself against being diddled, to deal close over a lease, to press a needy

debtor, or, if libelled, to try to get money as a cure, instead of giving blows? There are a dozen things of this sort that cling to property, and make a vile part of the man that has it. A number of such men will unload this excrement of their substance upon a pitiful fellow who'll take it for hire, so he is compounded of the worst of all his clients: he must serve not only the necessary nastiness of honest men (no savoury thing), but be jackal to the cruel and the mean and the sneaking; such men as you or I would not speak civilly to.'

'Well, well, well!' said Mr Langton, 'I see we must agree to differ. Dear me!'

'But do you not think, sir,' said Willoughby, with all the friendly candour in the world, for his outburst had relieved his feelings, 'do you not think that I should do better to live on my pittance – a couple of hundred a year – than to join in furthering the forces that have ruined the world? Even a really noble job like a doctor's, or a sound job like a farmer's, seems to me only to be a staving off of the final crash, which I personally hope will come. I could work for that, or I can continue just studying books and art and life, and go out in the fields in spring-time, or to Kew, and go to the Mediterranean perhaps, and try to be one of those people who may preserve the seeds of beauty through the deluge. Don't you think ...'

'I think you had better do exactly as you please,' said Mr Langton.

Willoughby was sensible of a certain coldness underlying this obliging remark. He felt, though, he had better continue the good work, and justify his whole position. Accordingly he talked of life in general, values, morals, and so forth: he spoke very well, only sneered half a dozen times at respectability, used the word *bourgeois* once or twice, and showed himself a wastrel, a Bolshevik, and probably a libertine. Mr Langton listened very attentively, and noticed that his daughter did likewise.

In the end Willoughby left. It was still rather early, but the conversation had flagged. As drinkers feel their intoxication on encountering the outer air, so Willoughby felt a qualm or

two as soon as the front door closed behind him. He reviewed the evening very scrupulously, and was soon under no doubt that Mr Langton regarded him as a very foolish and ill-bred young man, and, being incensed at this idea, he went on to hope he thought him a dangerous one as well.

This hope was not unreasonable, and indeed it was fully gratified. Lucy's father regarded him as a peril to any young girl, if not to society, as indeed he was. And this opinion was to be very much strengthened within a few days, by a little chat he was to have with Lord Stumber.

CHAPTER XIX

A wise parent – Budleigh Salterton – This is terrible – A pink tree – Something turns up – Lucy goes abroad – A dangerous correspondence – Disturbing transports – An unconscious impulse – Give me up

Mr Langton was not a parent of the barbarous old-fashioned sort, who would lock a young girl up in a room. On the contrary, he placed no sort of barrier between Lucy and her lover; in fact, you would have thought, from all he said, that he had no suspicion of the tender ties that bound them. It might have been deduced that he dismissed the idea as equally fantastic and repulsive. He talked a good deal, however, of Lucy's mother, who had died a year ago, and of his loneliness, and of a few fears as to his health, and he moved heaven and earth at the Treasury in order to get his leave a little earlier, so that he might take Lucy away to the Tyrol for a couple of months. And he got his sister-in-law to ask Lucy away for most of the intervening fortnight.

Our hero was not baffled by this first move. He borrowed another tenner, went to Budleigh Salterton, and lurked about the place. Unfortunately there is all the difference in the world between meeting in happy freedom and lurking about the place, and Lucy was particularly sensitive to this.

'It seems absurd,' she said, 'that you shouldn't call on my aunt, but she would be sure to write home about it, and father would at once guess that we're in love. I ... I don't think he's quite ready for it.'

'Upon my word!' said Willoughby rather warmly. 'I'm ready for it, God knows! And I hope you are. *His* readiness or otherwise seems a very secondary consideration.'

'No,' said she. 'You must be patient, my darling. You've grown up wild and free (and it may be best, as you say), but to me it's not only a principle. He's a person, and I know him so well, and it's been so bad for him since mother died, and he's been so wonderful to me, and I'm so extremely fond of him.'

'I don't know,' said Willoughby. 'I'd go through a lot rather than upset anyone who's been good to you. But (I must say it) I distrust that sort of goodness. And so at heart do you. Otherwise you would put it to the test. We would go to him at once, and tell him how much we mean to one another, and if that goodness was real he would be glad of it, for it's the most beautiful thing in the world.'

'It is, indeed,' cried Lucy. 'But old people are different.'

'To be different from the most beautiful thing in the world is not the best claim to consideration,' observed Willoughby.

'I see your point,' said Lucy. 'And you know how I feel. But do try to see his point of view also. Do, because it means so much to me.'

'I will do anything,' cried Willoughby with fervour.

'He doesn't understand you as I do,' said Lucy. 'You are something new to him. Not that he's ever said a word about you,' she added hastily, seeing Willoughby frown. 'But I can see you puzzle him.'

'I think he knows that I love you,' said Willoughby, 'otherwise he would not bother enough to be puzzled.'

'Then he certainly knows that *I* love *you*,' said Lucy. 'For it's not easy to hide it, and I've often told you what extraordinary intuitions he has about me.'

'Then what are we going to do?' said Willoughby.

'I don't know,' cried Lucy. 'I was so happy, and now I feel miserable.'

'If he makes you miserable ...' cried Willoughby in a fine fury.

'No,' she said. 'It's not him, it's you.' (Willoughby was thunder-struck.) 'Or no, darling, it's not you – it's just *it*. I didn't want to hurt you, but I guess more than I've said. I can see that he's got a sort of prejudice against you, and it would be the end of the world for him if ... if ...'

'It would be the end of the world for me,' said Willoughby, 'if anything came between us.'

'And so it would for me,' she cried. 'But I can't help loving him so much.'

'More than you do me, it seems,' observed Willoughby, more in sorrow than in anger.

'No, indeed,' she said. 'Truly. Truly. But somehow. ... How can I explain? It's like hating to see a dog run over, even more than a man. That's it. We can understand, and he can't.'

'But this is terrible!' cried Willoughby. 'We began talking so pleasantly, and suddenly you are saying this. I've told you how I want you – ever since that time. Is *that* why you've never let me hold you so close again?' he demanded with great rapidity. Lucy began to cry. They were sitting under a hawthorn tree in the little park, and it was raining. The tree was a dirty pink; Lucy wore a pale blue mackintosh.

'I don't know,' sobbed Lucy. 'Don't be angry with me. You don't know how I feel.'

'Don't cry,' said Willoughby. 'I won't have you cry. Please don't cry. We love one another. Something is bound to happen.'

What happened, actually, was the arrival of Mr Langton. He had just had his interview with Lord Stumber, and had paid Willoughby the compliment of a visit at his lodging, with which, incidentally, he had not been very much impressed.

''E's out of town,' the landlady had said. 'I've got the

address on the 'all-stand 'ere: Two Pigeons Hotel, Budleigh Salterton.' Mr Langton had taken the very next train, arrived at his sister's, and learned Lucy had gone out. He had then called at the Two Pigeons, and learned that Willoughby was out. He had felt a little restless, had walked aimlessly about the environs of the town, had a nerve-racking escape from being run over, and had at last stumbled on the little recreation ground, where he had seen a blue mackintosh beneath a dirty pink tree without the faintest quiver of aesthetic delight.

He approached just as Willoughby was bidding Lucy not cry. Our hero's tenderness was delightfully apparent. 'I think,' said Mr Langton, 'that you'll be in better company with your father, Lucy, than with this young man. I spoke this morning to Lord Stumber,' said he to Willoughby, who exhibited traces of confusion. 'I think you had better return to your lodging-house. And if you have any further desire to call at Smith Square, Mr Corbo, be so good as to ask for me, and not for my daughter.' So saying, he took Lucy by the arm.

'Stop a minute,' cried Willoughby. 'Lucy knows all about that.'

'Lucy, you will spare me a scene, I know,' said Mr Langton, observing some inclination in his daughter to take part in a discussion. 'If you have any decency at all,' he remarked to Willoughby, 'you will not molest us now.'

'Hang it,' said Willoughby with some warmth. 'Am I to see ...'

'You may see what you please,' said Mr Langton, raising his voice, 'as long as you see no more of my daughter.'

'Go, Willoughby,' cried Lucy in terror. 'You shall see me again, I promise you that. I'll write. Don't make things worse. For my sake.'

'All right, my dear love,' said Willoughby. 'I'll stay at the Two Pigeons till to-morrow, and afterwards I'll be in Pimlico.' And he departed without taking any formal leave of Mr Langton, who, for that matter, showed no great desire for the courtesy.

Willoughby returned to his room at the inn, sat on the bed, recalled innumerable instances of love being stronger than parents in the long run, and, having reassured himself on this point, he gave himself up to thoughts of Mr Langton, and in these thoughts there was no sort of sympathy or understanding at all.

As for Lucy, she accompanied her father home, and they spent the remaining hours of the day in a series of discussions. Mr Langton was very far from being a fool, and he was not in the least a tyrant. He sincerely believed that his daughter's happiness would be in no way furthered by marriage with a young man of doubtful antecedents, of Bolshevik tendencies, a confessed wastrel, and guilty of the little peccadillo of attempted rape. Lucy, on the other hand, believed that Willoughby had the truest heart, and the sweetest nature, and the noblest ideals, and the most lovable face in the world, and she thought she would die if she was parted from him. Mr. Langton gathered as much, and having a great respect for the instinct of self-preservation, took care not to arouse it by too arbitrary a repression. He sought, however, to raise up a higher instinct in Lucy's tender bosom, by suggesting very movingly that such a connection would hasten his own end.

Lucy believed this implicitly, as, indeed, so did her father. Her distress at the idea was so manifest as to convince him he might rely on it. In the end a compromise was agreed upon. Mr Langton withdrew his objection to Lucy keeping her promise to see Willoughby again. She on her part agreed not to do so till she returned from abroad, and she promised also that she would take no fatal step without at least her father's pre-knowledge, a point on which she made no demur, for she could not imagine herself doing so.

Further than this, neither would go. Lucy retired to cry her pretty eyes out, and her father to consider how he could make the best of the two months to come.

In the morning the following note was handed in for Willoughby at the Two Pigeons: fortunately he had had his breakfast before he received it.

My dear beloved,

It is just as we feared. I have had to promise not to see you till we come back in August. But I would not promise not to write, nor not to see you then. Do understand, my darling dear one, and don't be angry with me. You know I love you best in the world. I can't write properly now, but write to me, and I'll write to you, every day. It will be all right in the end, I know – it must *be – if you love me as I love you. Write to me and tell me so.*

Your loving, loving, adoring
LUCY

There were three small crosses appended to this epistle. Willoughby beheld them with rapture, and sat down and expressed the noblest and sincerest sentiments on several pages of paper. Lucy, receiving this, was enchanted by the self-sacrificing ardour of her lover: it gave her hope of a certain compromise, and she wrote back in the tenderest strain imaginable, but this compromise peeped out from the back of all she said.

Willoughby meanwhile had spent two nights thinking of his beloved with the utmost enthusiasm. This was as it should be, but it is surprising to what transports one's thoughts can raise one at such times. Rising unrefreshed, he studied Lucy's first letter again. 'If you love me as I love you,' he murmured. 'Good God! I think it's the other way about. If she loved me like this, nothing would prevent her being with me at this moment.'

He forced himself to reflect that she was a girl, and young and tender-hearted, and torn moreover between two affections, of which neither, it appeared, was strong enough to override the other. This did not ameliorate his attitude to Mr Langton. Indeed, he began to develop a singularly keen hatred for that excellent man, and when at last Lucy's letter arrived, with its faint hints of a means by which Willoughby might find favour in her father's eyes, he dashed off a most forceful reply, in which he permitted himself to reflect bitterly upon the quality of a love which could contemplate his surrender to the demands of the hireling world.

Lucy meanwhile had written another letter, which did much to dissolve his sternness, but which included one or two little reminiscences, the sight of which, set down in black and white, and by that hand, drove him nearly frantic with desire to re-enact them on a less limited scale.

Altogether, the letters flew to and fro like mad: they bore love, kisses, arguments, quarrels, reconciliations, and, towards the last weeks, a certain amount of hysteria. Mr Langton was working very effectively at this end: the sultry nights were no less a forceful influence at the other.

It was as if these two influences, like the poles in electricity, made merely a conductor of the two lovers and their pretty love. Willoughby, from being a revolutionary from easy inclination, now became one at the point of the goad: he saw Lucy's father as the embodiment of all the repressions and conventions and hypocrisies that he had ever attacked, and he now found reasons a hundredfold for attacking them.

Lucy replied: 'I know, dearest, you are right on principle. I shall never again believe in all that I did before we met. But one cannot hurt a person one loves upon principle. You must see that.'

Willoughby replied with all the eloquence and sincerity in the world. Lucy read and trembled, and her lamentable weakness in not knowing what to do, gradually developed from the simplest and commonest of cerebral phenomena into a less usual and more distressing nervous one.

At last she returned. Willoughby would not go to Smith Square, so she came to see him in Pimlico. Our hero's room was in something of a litter: Lucy looked ravishing, fresh, a little sunburned, had an amazing straw hat which shed a cherry light on her face: she looked like a creature of another world.

Willoughby devoured her with kisses. She looked at his things, prattled trivialities, rumpled his hair, laughed like a throstle in song: the last two months seemed like a bad dream. They were as happy ...!

The window in Willoughby's room was extremely low, the

ceiling sloping down to about four feet from the floor on that side. He was sitting on the bed over against the hinder wall: Lucy in her flimsy summer frock passed between him and the light. 'What are we going to do?' he suddenly demanded, in a new voice, for he saw reason to believe the matter was one of extreme urgency.

The light faded from Lucy's face as if a cloud had covered the sun.

'What *can* we do, Willoughby?' she said. 'Must we talk about it now? It was so nice.'

'It should be nicer when we've talked about it,' said Willoughby; and so it should have been, but Lucy looked as if she found this remark a very ominous one.

'You know,' she said, 'I promised I'd not get married without telling father first. And I had to promise, too, that I wouldn't get married at all till I was twenty-one.'

'That's seven long months,' said Willoughby. 'And when did you promise that? You never told me that.'

'It was only last week,' said Lucy. 'I couldn't help it. He's been so understanding and kind, really, though I know you'll never believe it. And his heart's bad, too.'

'I'm sure of that,' said Willoughby, 'or he'd never spoil such a thing as this in this way.'

'Don't say such beastly things,' said Lucy. 'You know what I meant.'

'I'm sorry,' said her lover. 'The fact is, it's been unbearable here. And still is. And I can't bear it any longer.'

'Other people have waited,' said Lucy miserably.

'Damn and blast other people!' cried Willoughby in a rage. 'Nine-tenths of the people one sees have skim milk in their veins, and I've not. Or else they go and sleep with prostitutes. And it's not only a question of that. I suppose I *could* bear it, if only I agreed with the reasons for waiting. But it seems to me absolutely criminal to put such a thing as love at the mercy of an old man's mistakes. He thinks life isn't worth living except to some respectable mouse in some soul-deadening job. He thinks as long as there's money enough for a trim flat and ser-

vants and so forth, it doesn't matter about you being married to some dummy or slave. He thinks ...'

'Oh, Willoughby, we've written so much about this,' cried Lucy.

'I know I seem a brute to drag this up at our first meeting,' cried poor Willoughby in remorse, 'but I wouldn't believe letters. I shan't believe, till I hear you actually say it, that you put all the things you know are false and valueless before the one thing in the world. And then I shall know you don't love me.'

'Darling, you know perfectly well I do,' cried Lucy. 'I might just as well say you don't love me because you won't do some sort of work which would probably make father come round.'

'No, you couldn't just as well say that,' said Willoughby. 'We both know that's not right. I will *not* join in with this dirty world, nor would you have me do so for anything, if you've meant what you've said.'

'It's no worse than asking me to absolutely ruin my father's life,' said Lucy.

'Yes, it is,' cried Willoughby. 'For one thing we believe in, and t'other we don't. And anyway, what it all boils down to is this, you either love me best, or your father. I don't want you to break a promise, for that would be wrong, but tell me – I know he thinks me a dirty dog of the worst sort – has he made you promise you'd not be my mistress till you're twenty-one?'

'Why, of course not,' said Lucy. 'He'd not dream it possible.'

'I'm very much obliged to him,' cried Willoughby. 'However, what seems too bad to be possible to people like him, may seem quite right and innocent and natural to people like us.'

'I wouldn't hesitate a moment to be your mistress,' said Lucy. 'But, don't you see, he only didn't make me promise because he didn't think me capable of what's wrong in his eyes.'

'Oh, hang that!' said Willoughby. 'We have to humour his lack of understanding. We are most certainly not bound to do

anything more. Look here, sit on the other side of the table: I won't ask you this while I have my arms round you. Now. I love you as well as anybody can. I want to marry you, and I will as soon as you will. I'm going almost off my head with wanting you. It's bad for both of us. Will you, till we can marry, be ... be what I want you to be?'

Lucy bit her finger for a long time. Willoughby waited, feeling a little numb and sick with anxiety.

'I can't,' said Lucy at last. 'I'm sorry. You know I would be, if it wasn't for father. It would be too awful, deceiving him.'

'Oh, the devil!' said Willoughby. 'It comes to this. If you loved me in the way I love you, you'd be only too willing. Either you put your father first, or me.'

Lovers are extremely logical people: it is a pity life is not quite as simple as they are.

'I will not go on like this,' cried Willoughby in desperation. 'I will not be bound to you. I will find someone kinder.' He made this last remark in the tone of one who contemplates a painful death.

Lucy burst into tears, and flung herself upon his neck. 'I can't,' she cried. 'But don't stop loving me. Don't.'

Willoughby did not. In fact, her face was so hot and so wet, and her mouth clung to his so desperately, that in a very few minutes he found himself loving her almost too fervently. Like Fabrizio del Dongo, he was unable to resist an almost unconscious impulse. Lucy, however, was able, and rather tardily did.

Both scarcely knew what they were doing, and when at last they were calm enough to know that, they did not know very exactly what they had done. Whatever it was, it had not had that perfect fusion of the spirit in it, or that holy dignity, or even that passionate exaltation which people so young and so loving had every right to expect. In fact, the room seemed very dirty, and littered, and the bed was rumpled, and Lucy's clothes were torn, and life seemed a little dirty and littered and rumpled and torn, which should not have been so at all.

She said, in rather a frightened voice: 'I must go, Willoughby, I must. Stay here, please. I want to go alone.'

The last post that night brought Willoughby a letter, a most miserable note saying: 'It is absolutely impossible. I simply could not bear it. I know I'm letting you down. You must give me up.'

Willoughby rushed to the telephone and rang up Smith Square. He said to the maid: 'Tell Miss Langton I must speak to her on a matter of the utmost importance.' The maid returned and told him that Miss Langton was very sorry, but she could not come to the phone.

Willoughby felt no pain at all; all the same he cursed and swore like a madman. He sought out certain evil company with which he was acquainted of old, borrowed a little more money, and gave a non-stop party in the studio of a tenth-rate artist he had met with. What with noise and whisky and certain other paraphernalia of romantic debauchery, it was a full week before his numbness wore off, and his real torments began.

CHAPTER XX

Torments – The tears of men –
Letter goes astray –
A revolutionary reverts to magic –
Lucy's hard expression – A remembered delight –
An access of incredulity

WILLOUGHBY entered upon his torments at nineteen minutes past four on Saturday the twelfth of August, the glorious twelfth. The guns were popping away on the grouse moors; lovers were lying by their pools of black shadow on the khaki grass of Hyde Park; something too shocking to relate was occurring in a basement in the Belgrave Road; Willoughby walked the hot paving-stones with a somnambulist face, feeling nothing at all. Quite suddenly, as if the Last Trump had sounded, all that was dead in his heart sprang up: 'Oh, my God!' he cried. 'What *shall* I do?'

He hurried home. The landlady said something to him in the hall: he shook his head and hurried past her. He got up into his room: 'Oh, my God!' he said again, and made a variety of other exclamations. It was the most undignified set-out imaginable. He turned his head about, dragging, not his eyes, but his face about the walls, a peculiar thing to do. It was as if he had woken up, a thing with a blind head, in a padded cell.

He was incapable of thought, a deplorable condition. He was in travail with a costive spasm of some sort, his expression was that of a person trying very hard to remember a tune. 'What is it?' he cried, referring to the agonising cramp that knotted up his chest, face, heart, mind.

He was answered by a mooing sound, which he perceived to be of his own making. In short, he was beginning to cry. The sensation was in the highest degree pleasurable, but he was not philosopher enough to take pleasure in it. However, soon he was relaxed enough to think. 'Hell!' he said. 'Am I supposed to be a man?' He got up and had a good look at himself in the mirror, saw the tears run down his face. 'The tears of men are blood,' he remarked rather tastelessly. He squeezed out another in the interests of science. He was calm again, and noticed the sensation was not unlike the post-coital tristness celebrated in the only line he knew of Ovid.

'That's over, anyway,' he said, rather frightened. 'How strange! That's the end, I suppose.'

There came a tap at the door: 'Yes,' said he in the coolest and most business-like tone. 'What is it?'

'I thought you didn't look well, Mr Corbo, excuse *me*,' said his landlady, through the door. 'I'm quite all right, thanks, Miss Montgomery,' he replied. 'Good of you to come up. But I'm quite all right.'

This was not strictly true. Either because she had given a reality to his grief by noticing it, or because she reminded him of world and time, which is to say hell and eternity, or because a gong had sounded for the next round, or whatever it was, he suddenly found it was not the end at all, and he was in the same state as before. Perhaps a connoisseur might have found

it a little less tumultuous and a little more poignant, and a nice critic might have extended Willoughby's reference to Ovid. Our hero was neither, he looked forward to a succession of experiences of this sort without any relish at all.

'I can't live without her,' he said again and again. After a very long time, he was privileged to feel a most blessed sensation, akin to that of a martyr who suddenly realises there is something to be said for both sides.

'Damn and blast it!' he cried, in a positive ecstasy of joy and relief. 'What a fool I've been! What do I care about working or waiting or anything, if only things can be as before? Oh God! Perhaps I've made *her* suffer like this!'

He rushed out to telephone. It was ten o'clock. The old housekeeper answered him. This old woman had a very soft spot for Willoughby, as a surprising number of old servingwomen had. 'Miss Lucy's gone away,' she said. 'She's gone off a-travelling with Miss Gaunt. Didn't she let you know, Mr Willoughby? Oh dear me! I should have thought she'd have let you know.'

Willoughby being no sort of a Don Juan at all, he did not realise what an ally this old woman might be, nor even that she liked him particularly, nor that he was the only young man she addressed by a Christian name. He never thought of going round to see her, and didn't even see why this might be worth doing. All this being so, he said in some confusion: 'That's all right, Annie, I'll write a letter.' He asked the old woman how her little basement dog was, made his usual joke about drowning it, and rang off.

It was as if eternal bliss had been removed from him another ten thousand years or so, but what is that in comparison with eternity, and to one fresh from such a strong taste of the other thing?

Willoughby spent the whole night writing a letter, which you would either laugh or cry to see, printed VERY URGENT: PLEASE FORWARD AT ONCE, on the envelope, and walked round at six in the morning to put it in at Smith Square. This done, he returned and fell into a happy sleep, pleasingly un-

conscious of Mr Langton turning the envelope in his hands at the breakfast table, and at last, with a very unhappy look, for he was a gentleman of the most honourable feelings, dropping it into the fire.

The fact is, Lucy had come home with a face like death, and had begged, in one single sentence, uttered in a voice that had struck terror to his heart, to be sent abroad. He had asked her a hundred questions, which she refused even to appear to hear. She had looked at him with something he thought might be hate, and he had shown such distress that she said: 'Don't talk to me now. It will be all right, I expect, in a year. But you must go and see Marjorie, and say she is to give up that silly job, and I have had a nervous breakdown, and she is to come abroad with me at once, or I shall die, and you are to lend us the five hundred pounds mother left me, and we are to go at once, and if you don't arrange it I shall go straight out and you will never see me again.'

It is a pity she had not devoted as much decision and ruthlessness to getting what she really wanted. Still, young girls are like that. Mr Langton was terrified out of his life, he hurried about arranging everything: she was gone by Thursday, leaving her father to persuade himself that she had given up Willoughby, and would get over it, and would be his own dear daughter again. Hence he burnt the letter, and did the same with one which arrived a week later. 'It's for her good,' he said.

Lucy found Frankfort, and Munich, and Vienna, and Rome, and Sicily, and Algiers all equally good to cry in: after a while she stopped crying and went about with a sullen stare in her pretty eyes. This stare was directed at all the principles and conventions which she thought had deprived her of Willoughby, and, just as that young man had done at an earlier date, she found a stiffening of hatred pervade those advanced notions which are so dear to young people of good heart.

She wrote to her father very seldom, and then in a rather hard way, and hurt that innocent and loving parent almost as much as if she had gone off with Willoughby. And I, for one,

am glad of it, for when the others suffer, why should he go scot-free?

Willoughby, on his part, waited first for a cablegram and then for a letter. This is a peculiar form of suffering, in which the victim is the mouse, and time the paw of the cat. One dreams a letter has come, wakes, and is disappointed: hears the postman along the street, thinks he must have gone by, it is so long since the last knock. His rat-tat thunders on one's heart: that is delightful. The landlady drags her slow feet up the stairs, stops at the floor below, and descends again. That is less delightful.

One goes out, consults oracles, the numbers of buses : 'If the next is a twenty-four, there will be a letter when I get home.' It is a twenty-nine. 'But if a man gets off first, there will be a letter when I get home.' A woman gets off, but that bus is disqualified, it is not a twenty-four. Here is a twenty-four. A man actually gets off. God bless that man! One hurries home – nothing. One would curse the deceiving villain, but one has forgotten him.

Sometimes one misses two or three posts, in order to make quite sure there will be a letter. However, there is not.

Sometimes one takes up another person's letter from the hall-stand. 'My eyes must be deceiving me: it can't be Hetherington; it *must* be Corbo.' However, it is Hetherington.

Our hero had some other sufferings as well: he became a pretty expert geographer of that other world, which is unhappiness. His pains were those of a naturally warm-hearted person, whose nature is strongly biassed towards simplicity and goodness, and who has whored after strange gods, and, returning, has found these precious qualities in one creature only in the world, and, losing her, cannot believe they exist elsewhere. Such pains can be extremely severe, especially when the warmth of the heart is kept up by an excessive hotness of the blood.

Willoughby had had the merest taste of a delight which he considered to be unique. Certain little events were so indelibly printed on his memory, that when he entered his little room,

hot under the slates, it was as if they were still being enacted there, by an enviable *alter ego*, who vanished as he opened the door. The room was like this fortunate other-self's warm bed, with the imprint of Lucy upon it, and her fragrance everywhere, but unfortunately no more. Willoughby writhed, shivered, itched, burned, and even jabbered, under the stress of an emotion which he recognised as not being in the best of taste. 'Oh, shameful, hateful, bloody life!' he cried aloud. 'What a degradation! I'm going insane: I shall be arrested in the Park. Oh God! I wish I was dead.'

In his calmer moments he squared up to it very well indeed, and drove heartache, and desire, and loneliness, and despair, like a nasty four-in-hand, studying carefully what made them shy, and avoiding places where such things occurred. Thus he was careful not to open a book of poetry, and to put down novels when they showed signs of becoming tender. His greatest regret was, that he dared not go to the pictures, owing to the atmosphere of love. This was a great deprivation, because otherwise three or four hours passed like three or four hours there.

He constantly observed girls disappearing into tea-shops, turning down side-streets, seated in passing taxis, whom he thought to be his beloved. Another interesting experience was, to be stopped, at maybe eleven-thirty in the morning, just as they had opened, and he was laughing with an idle companion, with the first lager at his lips: to be stopped by an overwhelming illusion that she was calling to him, in pain or misery, from a thousand miles away.

He contracted the nervous habit of writing her name with his finger-nail, on his knee, on the table, anywhere, but it was necessary to do this at an enormous speed.

But still, he drove his four-in-hand very passably; soon he found bitterness was his best whip: he put on a rather nasty look, and believed nothing that was said to him.

What a great change this was, in this so guileless young man, that now he believed nothing that was said to him!

CHAPTER XXI

A whimsical law – A waster –
The Saveyerlaber Copper – Types of vermin –
A philosopher from Rowton House –
A toast to Progress – Innumerable small houses –
Two men in one room

WILLOUGHBY became acquainted with one of the most whimsical laws of life, and that is, that when a young man is happy and hopeful, and thinks every new woman he meets is a casket of beauty and delight, he finds those same caskets extremely hard to open. But when, on the other hand, he is disappointed in love, and sees in all other women only the impertinent caricature of loveliness, and in their every line and movement and word a culpable divergence from the one true standard, so they seem little better than natives, Hottentots, cows, bitches, and to consort with them might well be an offence against the law, and is most certainly a blasphemy and a degradation, and a very revenge in itself against his misery, and against them, and against the cruel world – when this pleasing combination of circumstances prevails, wives burst into tears in his presence, young girls talk of their appendicitis scars, he receives incredible letters, and almost invariably he has that extraordinary experience which no one can believe has happened before in the history of mankind.

All this came Willoughby's way, and he enjoyed it very much indeed. All that troubled him was, that he felt so hard about it all, for generosity was one of his weaknesses, and he liked to give as good as he got. Fortunately he no longer believed all that was said to him, and this was all the more fortunate in that so much was said, and so little of it was true.

He had the conceit, whenever he emerged from a certain tumultuous oblivion, that he had shot the rapids of grief, and was brought up in the dark calm of Lethe, with his arms not about the neck of a woman, but about some un-individual log.

He was so frank as to mention this on one or two occasions, when he was assured that the other party felt the same, owing to the perfidy of some Jim or Dennis or the like.

'Upon my word!' said he to himself. 'That makes a very sordid matter of it. One log is all very well, but there is a heartlessness and a littleness about two logs! I should compare us rather to two match-sticks, which, in obedience to some inscrutable law, always float into joyless contact on the surface of the frowsiest of ewers.' All the same, he continued his wicked ways.

Sometimes, however, he encountered little reverses, and one day he stumbled upon a reason for this. The fact is, first love and first grief are both expensive emotions. Flowers and forgetfulness are alike in two respects, they cost a good deal, and constantly need renewing. Willoughby first paid his debts by borrowing elsewhere: when he could no longer do this he interviewed his creditors, confessed he owed a hundred pounds or more, and promised to pay this off in a year by sequestrating half his income.

Now, in the circles in which he moved, a young bachelor may live on four pounds a week and be a gentleman of leisure, but if he lives on two, and is known to owe money, it is pretty obvious he is a waster. Multiply by five, and you have the world.

Accordingly it happened, about this time, that he was told, by an exceedingly attractive young female journalist (who nevertheless showed signs of developing a bleakish briskness in the course of a year or so) ... 'No.'

Her reason was, of all reasons under the sun, that he did no manner of work. This distressed Willoughby terribly: he could not turn to at half-past ten in the evening.

'I cannot respect a mere lounger,' said this idealistic young woman, 'and if I am to respect myself I cannot do that sort of thing with someone I don't respect.'

'Perhaps respect will come afterwards,' suggested Willoughby hopefully.

'No, no,' said she. 'I like you very well, very well indeed.

All the same, people say you count for nothing, and I could not bear to think what they would say of me, if I hitched myself up with someone whom so many call a waster.' This young woman had a rather large chin, and her clothes had already a pretty little touch of masculinity in their cut. 'Why, I should be pitied, *I!*' said she with a gesture. '*I!*'

'Oh, the devil!' cried Willoughby, with another. 'Come! We'll keep it to ourselves; then no one shall pity you. Perhaps you will feel that you would not be pitied, if all were known.'

He spoke brusquely, for he was a little galled at the idea of so many people holding him cheap. The young woman was accustomed to a more serious mode of address; she would have thought herself immoral if she had surrendered on such a registry office service as this. Willoughby, on the other hand, thought there had been ceremony enough. Pretty soon he was shown the door.

He went away in half a rage. The night was yet young, he was not far from Baiye's place. (Now, he had become reconciled with Baiye when first he fell in love, for, after all, one has to tell somebody.)

Baiye greeted him very kindly: 'Come in,' he said. 'I am glad to see you. I was feeling a little melancholy.'

'Why?' said Willoughby. 'What's up with *you*?' He believed Baiye to have that contemptible, elfin, good fortune of being soullessly below sorrow.

'We made,' said Baiye, 'a great mistake, a great and fatal mistake, in burning Bishop Colenso Cole.'

'Oh, indeed?' said Willoughby. 'Well, everyone has their troubles. I have just been very cruelly repulsed, and for the strangest reason in the world.'

'He was undoubtedly accessible to a suitable bribe,' said Baiye with a sigh. 'His influence, though it was never fully developed, might have been overwhelming. He was the one person who could have bridled the Reformation with conservatism. How different the world might have been!'

'Never mind,' said Willoughby. 'He's a cold cinder now. I, on the other hand, am very much the opposite. What do you

think? I am called a waster, and refused because of it. Who is it calls me a waster? Have you heard anybody do so?'

'Yes,' said Baiye. 'Everybody. Without exception.'

'Bloody fools!' cried Willoughby. 'However, I'll stand for it no longer. You must get me a job.'

'What? So that bloody fools shall not call you a waster?' remarked his friend.

'Oh, come out of that pose,' said Willoughby with some impatience.

'Very willingly,' replied Baiye. 'But where am I to come to? To join you in your peculiar antics? I hope not. Were you not in some little trouble recently, owing to your refusal to do silly work? It cost you, I thought, rather more than the good opinion of bloody fools.'

'It cost me so much,' said Willoughby, 'that now I'm broke, and don't care what I do. I intend to be comfortable. Get me a job.'

'Go to the devil,' said Baiye. 'I thought your previous refusal a very respectable form of lunacy. I shall not assist you to-chuck away the only good thing you ever bought and paid for in your life.'

'I find the last instalments too much of a strain,' said Willoughby. 'Let them call and take it away. And you – get me a job.'

'Stay the night?' said Baiye, with a friendly glance.

'Don't mind,' said Willoughby with the proper insouciance of one reprieved from the rack.

'Have a drink,' said Baiye. 'I won't get you a job, because I could only manage some ordinary respectable sort of thing, dull as well as degrading. If you're going to join the dirty herd, choose some rum way of doing it: then you may get a little fun to keep alive on.'

'Chuck me that paper,' said Willoughby.

He looked down the advertisement columns, and cried out aloud, blessing his luck. 'To hell with your help!' said he. 'What about this? To think I should hit on this very advertisement in the first paper I look at!'

'*Previous experience unnecessary. Personality and good appearance may bring YOU in £7 to £10 a week selling attractive domestic device. Tuition in salesmanship given free by experts every evening. Earn while you learn.*'

'That fellow had me in mind when he wrote that,' cried Willoughby. 'Note the big YOU.'

'I believe you may be right,' said Baiye. 'All the same, I'll give you a hundred quid if you'll take it, to put you straight again. I can't afford to lend it you: I know so few people I like.'

'You can give me one of those nasty smart shirts of yours, which have the stiff collars to them,' replied Willoughby. 'In the morning I shall nip round and put on my Stumber suit: I believe my appearance will do very well. It is a pity your head is not normal: I could do with a smugger hat. Seven to ten pounds a week! Say seven only, to be on the safe side. I know how to rub along on four: I could do it on three with a little economy. Then I can pay my debts off twice as fast, and in half a year I can retire.'

Pretty soon they turned in. Willoughby slept like a tired business man: in the morning he played the devil with Baiye's kedgeree and potted grouse.

'A little work' he said, 'would do *you* good. You would not think so much of the old devil they very rightly burned. I say rightly, because, without the Reformation, science would have been held back at least a hundred years. My little domestic device would still be unperfected: I should not have had my seven to ten pounds a week, and my creditors would have had to wait for their money.'

'The only little domestic device of which I have any approval,' said Baiye, helping himself from an electric chafing-dish, 'is one which it's most unlikely you will be called upon to sell from door to door. If you are, come and put up with me. I shall enjoy hearing your experiences in the evenings.'

'From door to door?' cried Willoughby. 'Do you think I shall have to sell things from door to door?'

'I think,' said Baiye, 'that it was a fatal mistake to burn

Bishop Colenso Cole, and I think that before very long you may come to agree with me.'

Willoughby rushed off, changed, had a hair-cut, and arrived at the offices of the Saveyerlaber Copper Company Ltd., which were in the vicinity of Liverpool Street Station. There is a wrong and a right side to many things besides Piccadilly and blankets: these offices were on the wrong side of Liverpool Street Station. Willoughby thought it quite romantic that so great a venture as this should be housed so unpretentiously. He was shown into a large dirty room on the third floor: there were two other rooms opening on to the same ungarnished landing.

This room into which he was shown was a waiting-room, already pretty crowded. 'Good heavens!' thought Willoughby. 'There's a lot of competition for this job. I hope I may get it.'

To estimate the odds, he looked about him at the other applicants, and flattered himself he had as good a chance as any. Half the waiting dozen were young men of singularly repulsive appearance; they had the faces one sees on vulgar picture postcards, *i.e.* the worst in all animal creation. These faces radiated a cheap and offensive pseudo-health, such as might have come out of a tin, which made more formidable the look of bullying glibness they all wore. These young men were dressed for the most past in jackets of imitation tweed, striped ties, flannel bags that were probably described as *natty* or *gent's super smart* in the slop-shops whence they came. One was in plus-fours, another in skimpy blue serge, with yellow gloves and a bowler, Besides these, there were an assorted half-dozen of nondescripts: nervous-looking young men with receding chins, who appeared to have seen better days, and certain seedy oldsters who, if the others got their health from tins, might have been presumed to get theirs from bottles. There was also one very broken-down old chap, whose face looked as if care had been at it with a steam-plough, the anxious lines were cut so deep. He sat in the attitude of one who has been well taught to keep himself to himself, and he looked out very doggedly from under his shaggy brows.

After a while Willoughby perceived that one of the unpleasantest young men was a very great wit: at first he had thought he was talking about his father. Pa did this, Pa did that: in the end it became apparent to Willoughby that the humorist was making a butt of the broken-down old boy, who sat looking about so uneasily.

'Eh? I reckon old Pa was swabbing away at the old dickey with a bit of bread this morning, you know. Didn't know whether to eat it first or eat it afterwards.'

'Ah, Pa's a lad,' returned a corner-boy of lesser brilliance.

'Whadjer bet me Pa's a bit frisky, eh? Likes to get rahnd about the areas when 'ubby ain't at home. I reckon he didn't spend the price of his Sunday kipper on that smart dickey for nothing. 'Ow much did it cost yer, Pa? Come on, let's 'ear the tale.'

'Good Lord,' thought Willoughby, 'the old chap doesn't seem to be enjoying this very much. What's more, it looks as if Baiye was right about the house-to-house stuff.' He conceived an indescribably low opinion of the humorous young man.

Meanwhile the old chap was shifting his dogged eyes about in the greatest discomfort. ''Ere, look out, Pa,' cried the humorist. 'I thought I heard the boss come in. D'yer mind if I put the old tie straight in the shine of yer coat?' So saying, he approached rather too near the old man in order to give point to his jest.

'You let me alone,' muttered the old chap, in a voice that suggested he had been baited for a long time.

'Don't get rorty, Pa,' replied the joker, 'or else I'll have to borrer that dickey of yours, see. Won't yer lend it to me, just to see the boss in? 'Ere, let's have a look what's underneath.'

Willoughby was annoyed by the inhumanity of this behaviour, and, more obscurely, that it should be displayed before himself, which he felt to be disrespectful in the extreme. He therefore approached the young man, and said to him in a very civil tone, but with perhaps a less civil glance: 'This old gentleman finds you offensive. Go and sit down.'

The humorist put on a very truculent face, and asked Wil-

loughby who he was, and was proceeding to some further discourtesy, when Willoughby took a quick look at his brazen mug to choose which point on it he should hit, and, his intention being very apparent, the jackanapes shrugged his shoulders and shuffled off, making a few inconsiderable remarks for the benefit of his fellow-vermin.

'I will sit by you, sir, if I may,' said Willoughby to the old man. 'Then you will not be bothered by that fellow again.'

'It's very good of you, sir,' said the unfortunate old chap, in a very formal way. 'But you should not have given yourself so much trouble. I.... I ... I was just about to teach him a lesson myself.'

'No trouble at all,' said Willoughby, congratulating himself very heartily on the fact. 'It appears,' he reflected, 'that one has to be in the very act of hitting them, and then they will go away. That is worth remembering.'

On the other side of the room there was some loud talk of later developments outside. Willoughby ignored this, and soon the door opened: a spotty youth looked in: 'First come, first served,' said he. 'That's me,' said one of the smart rabble, and disappeared in the wake of Spotty-face, and was seen no more.

The candidates were interviewed one by one: none of them returned to say what his fortune was. In the end there was only Willoughby and the old man: the old man was called for and disappeared. Willoughby's turn came last. He was shown into one of the back offices, where there was a slick fellow sitting at a roll-top desk.

'What name?' asked this worthy.

'Willoughby Corbo,' replied our hero.

'Well, Mr Corbo,' said the manager, or whoever he was. 'You want to sell our little Saveyerlaber Copper. The Saveyerlaber is one of the biggest ideas on the market: we want salesmen of push, energy; somebody what's going to get the orders. Y'know what I mean.'

'Oh, ah!' said Willoughby, in whom this fellow's brassy cockney brought out the Burfoot note as surely as acid turns litmus red.

'Scotchman?' asked the manager with interest. 'Scotchmen do well at this job.'

'No, I am not a Scotsman,' said Willoughby very precisely.

'Pity,' said the manager, with whom our hero did not agree on this point. 'Got a baby car?'

'No,' said Willoughby.

'Pity. Refs. O.K., of course,' said the other.

'I'm afraid I've no references,' said Willoughby, after a moment's thought. 'I ...'

'Never mind. Pushed any sort of article before?' continued the manager.

Willoughby shook his head.

'Pity,' said the manager. 'Here. This is not what I say to everyone, if you know what I mean. Between ourselves, see? Would you like to put a bit in the old Co. and make a spot of money? Eh? Money for jam!'

'I might if I made the higher figure you mention,' said Willoughby. 'At present I've none to spare.'

'O.K.,' replied the manager, drawing down his roll-top desk.

Willoughby observed this final-looking action with some dismay. He felt that none of his good points had come out in the interview.

'That's the lot,' said the manager in a listless tone.

'Well, er ... as a matter of fact ...' began Willoughby, racking his brains for some way of recommending himself.

'Six pip-emma in front for the demonstration to-night,' remarked the manager. 'That's the ticket. Good morning, Mr Corbo.'

'Upon my word!' thought Willoughby as he descended the stairs. 'What fellows these business men are! That chap had me sized up: I talked like a fool; I suppose he was watching me under the surface all the time. Made his mind up, perhaps, as soon as I got into the room. Decision! And I've got the job! I've got the job!'

He went down a side alley to cut through to the Underground. In this side alley he saw the poor old man standing, with a pair of crustacean spectacles on, reading the bill of fare

at the door of a singularly dirty cook-shop. The old chap had his nose not more than six inches from the abominable jelly-graph; he moved his lips as he read, and the customers, passing in and out, jolted him from his precarious eye-hold two or three times in the deciphering of a word.

Willoughby felt a wave of pity overwhelm him at the sight of this poor old man, who had turned up so game and hopeless after a job that had gone elsewhere. He went up to him, greeted him with a great deal of courtesy; asked him if he'd favour him with his company at a modest lunch.

The old boy replied in a no less formal tone: 'You are very good, sir,' he said, using the address Johnsonically. 'It would be a pleasure to me to make your better acquaintance. I shall be very glad, sir, to join you at lunch.' And with that he made to enter the door.

'Don't let's go in here,' cried Willoughby in consternation. 'There's a big pub over at the corner, where we can probably get something wholesome.'

'I'm afraid I have to consider the exchequer,' replied his companion. 'And the fact is, sir, the exchequer is very low. The wrapper-scrapping, as I expect you are aware, is not at all what it was.'

'But, sir,' said Willoughby, 'you are lunching with me.'

'Yes, sir,' replied the oldster, 'and I should be very pleased to celebrate the occasion with something a little out of the ordinary. But, as I say, the exchequer won't stand it.'

Willoughby was stricken to the heart at this glimpse of a world where hospitality is so very limited. 'My dear sir,' he said, 'I shall be greatly hurt if you are too proud to be my guest.'

'Oh! Oh! Oh!' cried the old boy in a flutter. 'Well, sir, that's extremely kind of you, I'm sure. I ... I ... I don't like accepting hospitality I'm not in a position to return. I should not like you to think the worse of me. ...'

'Come,' said Willoughby, 'I see you are a man of parts and a man of integrity, and the combination is rare. Be so good, sir, as to let me entertain you to lunch, as a gesture of respect.'

'Well, sir, if you put it that way ...' began the old man;

and Willoughby, changing his mind about the pub on the corner, bustled him into a taxi, and directed the driver to a famous City chop-house. 'After all,' thought he, 'I have a job of from £7 to £10 a week, and this is really a very nice old man.'

The place was full of meaty-faced stockbrokers and their kind. The waiter looked rather unfavourably at Willoughby's companion: Willoughby considered him a dog for doing so, and spoke to him as such, and he scuttled about as such. 'What a filthy world this is!' thought our hero, 'where poverty is greeted with insolence. However, I am prosperous and thick-skinned, so at least I shall have the best of it!'

As a sample of this best, he ordered salmon, saddle of mutton, apple-tart and cream, Stilton, and pints of first-rate bitter beer. The old man appeared to have an excellent appetite. 'That,' said he, when all was done, 'that was the best meal I have sat down to for a very long time. They do not serve such meals as that, sir, in the wrapper-scrappers' restaurant near the King's Cross Rowton House. I don't know if you know it?'

Willoughby did not, and was informed that wrapper-scrappers were those who made a living by addressing envelopes: many of them had quarters in Rowton House, and took their daily meal at the cook-shop the old man referred to.

'You would be surprised,' said this worthy, 'at the quality of the conversation there. We have men from all sorts of professions among us: many of them are intellectuals brought low by some little weakness or other. There is one who was an engineer, and knows Nietzsche from A to Z. We discuss Darwinism, comparative religion, science, literature, logic – you should come along one evening. For I can tell that you are an intellectual yourself, by a certain remark you made, which raised my opinion of you very considerably. You said that a combination of parts and integrity was rare, a very good subject for discussion. Being an intellectual, and therefore broadminded, you will not mind my saying it is most unusual to find philosophy in one who is apparently a member of the bourgeoisie.'

'As a matter of fact,' said Willoughby, 'I am not exactly a member of the bourgeoisie. That seems an absurd thing to say, but hang it! when they're all round us ...' And he looked with no great admiration at the stockbrokers in their neighbourhood.

'I offer you an apology,' said his companion. 'But I really thought you were. And certainly I meant no offence, for though I am no friend to high society, I look forward to the day when every worker will be dressed as well, and speak as well, as any of the spoiled darlings of Fortune whom we here see about us. I know one of these gentlemen very well, by sight,' said he, lowering his voice unnecessarily. 'Over there, in the corner. Mr Lippman, that is, and in his office they say he's a millionaire. I had a temporary job there once, on the filing, and he walked past where I sat, every day. The old man in the very corner.'

Willoughby turned his head, to please his companion, but did not look, to please himself.

'There will come a day,' said the old fellow impressively, 'when men like that will be no more. When all they represent in purple and fine linen will be the birthright of every worker in the Social State. Their mansions will be turned into communal houses of rest and refreshment for us who labour in the sweat of our brows: others will be art galleries, halls of science, centres of maternal welfare, no doubt, and, still more important, of evening instruction. I look forward to the day, sir, when the weaver will turn from his loom, and the horny-handed smith from his toil, and even the wrapper-scrapper will lay down his pen (if wrapper-scrappers still exist, but I hope it will be done by science), when every worker, when he has contributed his daily share to the common wealth, will turn to such a meal as this to which you have been kind enough to entertain me, and to such an intellectual conversation as I have enjoyed with you. And I should be glad, sir, if you would join me in drinking to that day, unless your political theories forbid you, in which case of course you will realise I respect them, whatever they are.'

'I think we are in agreement,' said Willoughby, who, however, was at that moment, though entirely unconsciously as yet, converted from Utopianism. 'Let's drink. But let's do it properly. We'll have some brandy and a cigar.'

'Upon my word!' said the old man. 'It will be a fine day for the workers when all I have prophesied comes to pass.'

The old man's name was Hendred. 'B. A. Hendred,' he said, 'and I wish it was Hendred, B.A., for I believe in the power of education. Still, I've so far managed to cling to my library: I have Huxley, Spencer, Bradlaugh, and Prince Kropotkin – *Fields, Factories, and Workshops*, and a good many others of the classics. If ever you want a good book ...'

'I am much obliged to you,' said Willoughby.

'It's a pleasure,' said the old man. 'We are now comrades in misfortune. ...'

'No, no,' said Willoughby. 'I got the job.'

'And I hope,' said Hendred, 'we'll come out of it better than my last experience of ...'

'What, is he deaf?' thought Willoughby, 'I was lucky,' he said, in a louder tone. 'They've given me the job.'

'After all,' said the old chap, 'we are philosophers.' And with that Willoughby gave it up, and bade him farewell.

In the evening, however, he discovered the old man was not as deaf as he had appeared, for, when Willoughby arrived at the office for his tuition, there was old Hendred, and all the others as well.

'What's this?' said he to the old man. 'Have we all got the job?'

'Oh yes,' replied Hendred, with no great show of enthusiasm. 'They take anybody on.'

'They must have a tremendous organisation, then,' cried Willoughby in amazement and awe.

'No, no,' replied the philosopher. 'Not so very large.'

Before Willoughby could further pursue the subject, a man addressed the company.

'Now gents,' said he, ''ere we 'ave the Saveyerlaber Copper.' He placed upon the floor a portable box of nearly two

feet each way, which at his touch appeared to fall to pieces, and revealed science's latest gift to mankind. With that he proceeded to describe it in glowing terms, speaking in a small raucous shout, with a bored, mechanical jocularity, and placing great emphasis on every third word or so, as if he were no better than a politician. Willoughby wondered fantastically if it could have been a similar delivery on the part of Mr Gladstone that caused Queen Victoria to feel like a public meeting.

'That,' said the demonstrator at last, 'is the Saveyerlaber Copper. But you ain't trotting these around, gentlemen, just to show the ladies how to do the washin'. What you got to do is SELL. Commission as stated, fifteen *per* cent. Sell twenty of these 'ere coppers in a week, that works aht somewhere rahnd abaht the neighbour'ood of Easy Street. Well, gents, I ain't here to-night to show you 'ow to sell this little device to Mrs Nooly-wed, 'oo wants to keep her sitting-room curtains clean. Eh? Get me?'

Apparently they did.

''Ere! If every missus was Mrs Nooly-wed, every street, my friends, would be Easy Street. Now you take it from me. I been on this lay longer than some what's 'ere's 'ad the cradle-marks off their you-know-what. Know 'ow I started? Sold the Dad a pore man's friend, day I was born. That's me. Eh? Get me?'

'Upon my word!' thought Willoughby. 'That may have been a very easy sale.'

'Take it from me,' continued the huckster, 'there ain't no Easy Street for the travelling salesman. Wot I'm 'ere for to-night is to demonstrate to you 'ow to deal with the obstinate customer-to-be. 'Ere! You knock at a door. Old Ma, she issues forth ahter the Proodential, 'as a squint at yer through the letter-box, more'n likely, before she opens the door a crack. Eh? All *right*. ...'

He proceeded to outline a scheme for the subjugation of old Ma. 'I shall never be able to do that,' thought Willoughby. 'Perhaps I could try a rather more human line, which would, it seems, be a novelty. It might result in tremendous sales.

Twenty times fifteen per cent on two pounds nineteen and sixpence ... let me see.'

At the end of the demonstration Willoughby was allocated a handsome section of Battersea for his activities. The old man, being given an adjacent district, suggested they might work together. 'For I think,' said he to Willoughby, 'you are new to the game.'

'I only wish,' he said, 'I could have got a North London section, for then I need not have changed my Rowton House. They're a different lot altogether, south of the river.'

'Look here,' said Willoughby, carried away by an impulse, I have a little room that's nothing very much. In fact, it's a vile box. All the same, I could get another mattress. It seems a pity you should have to shake-down in such a place as that while you're waiting for your commission. Supposing you put up with me till the money comes in.'

'That may well be some time,' said the old man. 'I don't like the look of that heavy box myself, to carry around.'

'All the more reason,' said Willoughby, 'why you should rest comfortably at night.'

In the end it was arranged that they should set up housekeeping for a week or so. 'At any rate,' thought Willoughby, 'we shall chatter at night, and maybe I shall sleep better.'

In a day or two, Willoughby had arranged himself a very comfortable mattress on the floor. The old man brought his library, which he congratulated himself on keeping from the twopenny box: Willoughby was a little more inclined to congratulate the twopenny box. Hendred brought also a gigantic packet of envelopes. 'Heavens!' said Willoughby. 'You are well set up for stationery.'

'These,' said the old boy, 'will last me till to-morrow. I reckon to do a thousand in a day and a half, and that is six shillings.' Saying this, he seated himself at the table, and, spreading out the sheets of a directory, he began to write addresses on these envelopes, which Willoughby now perceived to bear a semi-heraldic configuration, to wit, a truss vert, between two statements improper.

'That looks a very dull sort of job,' he remarked, when the old chap had bored his way into the third hour of it, with no more speech than the occasional muttering of an address.

'It has consolations,' returned the philosopher, 'to a man of well-stored mind. Look here: Mrs A. Edwards. I had a son called Edward: died of typhoid, same time as I lost his mother. That takes me back very nearly thirty years, you see. After a few more, we come to this name, Langley Street. Well, that means nothing to you, I expect. But there was a chap called Langtry I knew very well, terrible boozer; he was on the wrapper-scrapping when first I took it up. Dead twenty years, I suppose. Time flies.'

'I see,' said Willoughby.

'Here's Edwardson,' continued the old boy. 'Hm! That's strange. And here's Effers; we used to catch newts when I was a boy, call them effets; fifty-five years ago, that was. Here's Naboth Lodge, Kew, do you see?'

'I see,' said Willoughby. 'Yes, I see.' He saw, as a matter of fact, a little grove of prunus and pyrus and one thing else, to which, however, it seemed useless to address an envelope.

They went two or three more evenings to the little extension lecture on salesmanship. Willoughby grew more and more appalled at the gang of bravoes who were to be launched on the suburban housewives.

'Is there no law against this?' he inquired of the old man in a whisper.

'Law?' returned that worthy. 'Why, this is said to be very good for trade. Until the underdog,' said he, indicating the specimens of that animal who were present, 'until the underdog is on top, there will be no law in England against anything that is good for trade.'

For the moment, however, Willoughby's gaze was entirely engrossed by the underdog, who was not himself displaying any great aversion to that blessing.

At last Willoughby and his friend set out on the actual business. It was January, hellishly cold, and the box containing

the Saveyerlaber Copper was not too friendly to the fingers. They entered upon a street of small houses, in every one of which there was no doubt a fireside, love, little hopes, little cares, hard times, bright times, the wireless, kiddies, and a great many other things: all that makes England big. Willoughby, however, did not penetrate as deep as this: he found himself at the far corner in what was, after all, perhaps a very short time. 'Good heavens!' he said.

To cut a long story short, he kept it up for a fortnight. By the end of this time his face had a peculiarly flattened feeling, owing to the large number of doors which had been shut upon it. He had obtained a certain number of interviews, generally with the wives and mothers of our race, but occasionally with husbands who seemed to have the strangest notions concerning the motives of door-to-door salesmen. He was purged by means of pity and terror from the least desire to sell the Saveyerlaber Copper; and this was just as well, for there was no sign that ever he would sell one.

'I believe,' said he to the old man, whose luck was scarcely better, 'that these devils advertise their £7 to £10 a week in order to get all the poor down-and-outs to cart these things round, at no cost to the company, and at next to no profit for themselves.'

'What else did you think?' asked Hendred. 'I could see you had some notion in your head.'

'And there is no law against this!' cried Willoughby. 'I, to-morrow, could set up some shoddy device of this sort, and send every whiner and bully I could deceive into it to badger these wretched, terrible women; rake in a profit on what little is sold, and care nothing that there was never any hope of my nasty dupes ever seeing a quarter of the commission I held out to them.'

'No,' said the sage, 'you could not do that, for you have not the capital. Besides, there was a fellow made three pounds a week on average at some such game. I had him pointed out to me in a pub.'

'They said seven to ten,' cried Willoughby. 'That fellow,

by putting that advertisement in, has told me a deliberate lie. I will show him whether he can do that to me.'

'Hold on,' said the old boy. 'If you are to beat everyone who puts in a lying advertisement, you will spend a few minutes of every week in the office of some big firm, and the rest in hospital or quod. Besides, that manager fellow has his living to earn; you can't blame him. You had better beat the directors, or the shareholders whose interests they serve, and these may be very nice people, apart from being capitalists.'

'There is no honour in this country,' cried Willoughby, in the accents of a spoilt child crying for the moon.

'Oh! *Honour!*' replied the philosopher. 'One mustn't ask too much. All I know is, that my eyes are rested now; I shall go back to the wrapper-scrapping, and if you take my advice you will return to whatever you were doing before.'

CHAPTER XXII

Mouse and sparrow – A distinctive smell –
The rats don't squeak – Comments on a party –
The perfectibility of man – A country excursion –
Nothing to be done – Ferdy Guttenberg –
A most beautiful young woman

WILLOUGHBY took the old man's advice, though not till after he had tried for a number of more respectable jobs. He was the more resigned to his failure to secure one, though, on fancying he beheld, on the faces of all concerned, whether it was office-boy or manager, in Oil Trust, Wools and Worsteds, or Insurance, a certain *something*, which he believed to be the workings of the same spirit as reached its ultimate and purest perfection in the Saveyerlaber Copper Company. 'At any rate,' he said, 'that speech which did me such disservice with old Langton, eighteen months ago, was, after all, true.' And with that he sighed, as he always did when his thoughts turned upon that excellent gentleman or any of his family.

He and the old man did not at once separate. It was as if a mouse and a sparrow had met in a prison cell, and each, considering himself to be the unfortunate prisoner, had decided to make the other his pet. Willoughby thought the old chap amiable but a little stupid, but he took him out of himself as people of his own sort did not. Old Hendred thought Willoughby a little mad but amiable, and he took him out of Rowton House. Each believed he had the best of the bargain, and tried to make up for it, which is a very good foundation for companionship.

When Willoughby had first taken this room, the house was degenerating. It had now ceased to do so, for the sufficing reason that it had reached the extreme of Pimlico decay. The lodgers were those who minded nothing but high rents. The mild and usual smell which Willoughby had once ascribed to the corpse of his father, was now intensified into a column of stench, which reared itself up through the house, and made floors and walls and ceilings seem comparatively impalpable, like wreaths of smoke in a powerful beam of light. This smell stood coldest and greasiest on the staircase, where each room poured its individual contribution as into a common sewer. A connoisseur might have detected the several elements: the smell of madam's room, who slept in her clothes; the smell of the young lady's room, she on whom three Japanese gentlemen, in a simply terrible state, had called one lively afternoon; the smell of the new people's room, who never washed their dishes, and the smell of the other rooms where slops, food, garments, and all manner of dirt festered undisturbed. The front and larger top room, which opened on Willoughby's landing, accommodated a charwoman and her five sickly offspring, and the smell from this one was very bad indeed. And all these smells were but infused into a yet more powerful medium, as flower scents are into ambergris, and that was the smell of the house itself, composed of filthy waste-pipes, burning fats, simmering shifts and drawers, wall-paper sandwiched sevenfold with grease, unchanged bedding, diseases, dirty bodies, and, sourest of all, the flat, unlovely bug.

There was only one thing which existed on an intenser plane than this delicate *fumet*, and that was the scream that now and then struck through it as easily as it itself struck through lath and plaster. However, these screams were very rare, for in Pimlico, as opposed to Clerkenwell or Wapping for example, *the rats don't squeak.*

Suicide is infinitely more common than murder in Pimlico. How could, and why should, a Pimlico dweller kill any but himself? The tired population of the worst houses, hopeless actors, unsuccessful blackmailers, unaccountable widows, door-to-door salesmen, unfrocked, debarred, struck-off professional men, wrapper-scrappers, bankrupts, young ladies who have been deserted by coloured gentlemen, the clinic's clientele, the pawnbroker's suppliants, the barmaid's sycophants, the tipster's dupes, the scurf and excrement of the age: all these turn on the gas-tap as easily as you please; they are removed with the minimum of fuss; they have no relatives, and the landlady inherits the unpawnable silver-knobbed stick, the bottles, and the copy of *Maria Monk.*

It may be inquired why Willoughby had not left this place long ago. The fact is, one does not move from Pimlico. Besides, the landlady had the very greatest respect for him, drunk or sober. She regarded herself as a trusted retainer of the lordly house of Ollebeare. 'I knew the young gentleman's dear father, the Lord,' said she to her cronies, 'which art in heaven, and this one should be the Lord himself if everybody had their rights, for a civiller-spoken young gentleman never walked the earth and knew better days.' Willoughby, thus almost deified, was the very toad's-head jewel of the house: he rallied the old trot whenever he saw her; she fagged for him at all hours; and whoever knocked on the wall to quieten him at night, did so at their peril, while *his* knock was instantly obeyed.

When it is considered that the paraffin smell of the primus, the tobacco smell, the smell of carbolic and of a tweed jacket, did wonders in keeping the house smell at bay, and that screams were *life* to Willoughby, it will be realised he could

not have hoped for better quarters under eight-and-six or even ten shillings a week.

The old man thought the place was as snug as could be desired. He and Willoughby fitted in as do puffin and coney in the same burrow, or as diverse wildings in the same narrow cage. Their intricate paths crossed and recrossed, but brought no collision. The old man had the upper shelf in the meat safe; Willoughby had the lower. The old man's snack was always the same, a big rasher, red as paint, well doused with vinegar, except on Sundays, when they made holiday and common banquet.

Old Hendred paid his scot very scrupulously: he scrapped his wrappers from morning to night, and some weeks he earned a pound by it, and some, twenty-five shillings. Willoughby had his two pounds, of which, however, half was gone the day he got it, and half the rest on the following day. They lived in no great luxury but had enough to take a glass of beer in the Feathers at the close of the day.

Our hero was not much called upon, but went out fairly often. He would come back late at night and grope about for the matches, sometimes encountering the wrapper-scrapper's false teeth, which that worthy placed on the table beside his bed. A strong sense of mortality, pleasingly free from regrets, prevailed upon our hero on encountering this false skeleton's false smile.

The old man looked on Willoughby's excursions with some misgiving, particularly before he had learned from the landlady who his companion's father had been. It must be confessed he thought him in the transitionary stage, between gull and crook. His curiosity worked on him so strongly as to overcome his very scrupulous discretion: he asked Willoughby where he went and what he did, if he didn't mind telling him.

Willoughby amused himself by giving the old buffer a very detailed description of a party he had been taken to overnight.

'No offence, my boy,' said the old man, 'but if I were you I should be a little more careful what company I kept. There

was a young fellow, son of a friend of mine who had a nice little news and tobacco business: this son of his got going to a house of that sort somewhere out Harrow Road way. Well, he got properly mixed up in it; a decent young chap too. One night the whole lot got pinched, and he was for it. It all came out in the papers; his old father was never the same again, and his trade went back, because people won't ...'

'This is not quite the same thing,' explained Willoughby. 'These people can well afford to play a little roulette, at least most of them can. And everybody gets tight now and then, these days. As for the two girls I spoke of, they're really most respectable people; in fact one of them happened to be the Honourable —,' and he mentioned a name very often printed in the illustrated weeklies.

'Why! You are greener than I thought,' cried the old man. 'You get taken to some place in a back-mews, where there's a lot of gambling and drinking and women taking their clothes off. And some tart tells you she's the Honourable —! Why, you want a nursemaid with you. About as honourable as she is respectable, I should say. I hope you had nothing to do with her, or you may have brought away more than you think for. The Hon —! Ha! Ha! What duchess do you think that is, who sits in the Feathers in the evening?'

'You are as right,' cried Willoughby, 'as one madman, addressing another, in a mad world, can possibly be. You are right, Uncle, and her parents, and Debrett, and their Gracious Majesties the King and Queen themselves, are wrong. Oh! what a fine life it is, where a man need never go to the play! Come, Uncle, it's time to rest your peepers, and come out for a drink and a discussion.' Willoughby now addressed the old boy as *Uncle*; he had objected to the sales tout referring to him as *Pa*, but between one thing and another there is often all the difference in the world.

Their discussions were a great feature of life in those days, and were conducted with formality by old Hendred, on every evening that Willoughby spent at home. He remembered exactly where the last one had left off, even though it had gut-

tered in a yawn and expired on a snore at three o'clock in the morning. They were mainly political: the old man derided Willoughby's revolutionary notions as being childish in the extreme. So they were. Our hero's solution of all our difficulties was a rising in which most of the rogues would be slain on the barricades, and the remainder hanged on trees. With the surviving half-million or so he had the idea of beginning a new England in which every man was as good and as happy as Burfoot and Bucknell, with the State (which perhaps had harsh, straight, sooty-black hair) as lord of all the manors. This appalling notion was overlaid of course by a vast deal of up-to-date terminology and vague issues; Willoughby scarcely recognised it when their arguments had laid it bare: at last he acknowledged it as his own, claimed it was a pretty child, but was forced to admit it would never make a mucher.

The question was, what else? The old man had all the theories at his finger-tips. Willoughby distrusted them all: he saw in them an infinity of villas and poultry farms, and a population that would be better dead. 'What you propose,' he said, 'is scarcely twice as good as what exists at present. I would not move a finger for anything less than a hundred times as good.'

The old man thought education would work marvels, and men would become like gods. In the end all their arguments were raged about the perfectibility or otherwise of mankind. Willoughby, who did not believe in it, found them amusing; the old man, who had all to lose, got terribly worked up if he could not refute each new attack. 'This dream of mine,' he said, 'has kept me going all my life long. Even when times were very bad, as they were during the war and after, I have never felt downhearted long. I have fought ...' etc. Willoughby was greatly interested in this, and longed to try his strength against an illusion which had survived such redoubtable odds.

They argued for six months; the old man became very dejected. Willoughby had shown him in black and white that evolution is not necessarily a continuous process. He was the

very reverse of cruel, but who could see an old man going off his feed, merely on account of an argument, without experimenting to see how far the effect could be carried?

However, he was put off his stroke a little by a numerous invasion of bugs, which the summer heat had brought out among the charwoman's brood, and which now strayed into the hinder room in search of richer pasture.

'I don't mind one or two,' said he, 'but there is such a thing as fair odds. I must now renew my tissues, or I shall be a very colander of a man. I am going away, Uncle, for a few weeks. I shall go and walk about in the country.'

'I wish I could come with you,' said the old fellow; 'I have not been feeling at all well lately. I cannot sleep, and everything seems to weigh on my mind. Still ... Send me a postcard, and if you're anywhere near Kiddlesdon in Oxfordshire, go and have a look at it and tell me how it is, for that is the place where I was born.' So saying, he turned to his wrappers.

Willoughby had his roughest clothes on; he cried farewell all the way down the staircase. 'Have a good time, sir!' cried the landlady from her dungeon. He rushed out; it was the eighth of June, the air was as soft as milk, and the sky was blue and gold.

Willoughby spent a month and more wandering about at his leisure. He looked at old Hendred's birthplace; a shack city of tin bungalows and railway carriages had engulfed the little stone village. Education's shop-walkers were heard over the wireless; all the way down the dusty street Willoughby could hear the solemn priggish gods preaching out of their tin temples, while the villagers hoed their spuds, not listening, but liking the noise. He walked on into the setting sun: 'The old chap will be pleased to hear that mankind has advanced so far towards perfection in his native village,' thought he.

A day or two later he looked in on his uncle. Lord Ollebeare received him very kindly, asked him how he was living. 'I am living very thin at present,' said Willoughby. 'I out-ran the tailor, and now I am living on half the money you send, in order to get clear.'

'It is all the same,' said his uncle, 'as long as you have enough to eat.'

Willoughby described his strange companion. 'We have long arguments,' said he, 'about socialism and so forth. It seems a pity one cannot hang all the rogues without giving England over to the honest mechanics.'

'In any case,' said his uncle, 'it is too late to talk of hanging all the rogues. They pretty nearly deforested England during the war. As for your honest mechanics, a rogue is nothing to them. I would rather have a dozen rogues. There have been rogues at Oxford ever since it was built, but have you seen Cowley? As for socialism, in these parts they prefer to be governed by grocers, so socialism must be a terrible thing. Myself, I know nothing about politics, and care a damned sight less. All I say is, I've seen a good many sorts of men, and never one who was worth a tinker's curse, to himself or anyone else, save he was either a gentleman of culture or a peasant on the land. Such may not always be happy, but their lives are the best we have any knowledge of, if only they are not interfered with. The people of this village are a mean, backbiting lot, and work-shy's not the word for them. What's more, there's one for sure, maybe two, have been at my pheasant's eggs this season. Nevertheless, rather than any harm, by which I mean any "improvement" likewise, should come to these people, I would, if the lifting of my finger would do it, submerge London, Birmingham, or any other town you may mention, six hundred fathoms under the sea. The reason is, I'd be content enough to be brother to any man in this village, even the rascal who robbed my nests. But when I see the people in any big town, I want to kill 'em, as I'd kill a rotten sheep, out of pity. I know I'm a little eccentric.'

'I'm not at all sure,' replied Willoughby, 'that I am not a little eccentric also.'

'Our people are a happy lot,' pursued his uncle, 'and the happiest and the best of them all are those old men who were never taught to read and write. Save 'em from the greedy devils who made slaves of them last century, and the bloody

fools who'd improve 'em in this, and there's no better state for the average man to live in. It keeps his nerves quiet, d'ye see? It's *natural.* What animal can live as men do in these days? However, the young ones are all going to the bad.'

'They're certainly not as merry, nor yet as polite,' said Willoughby.

'And they've neither guts nor wisdom,' rejoined his uncle, 'and they'll never learn. Do you think those three smarties of old Coxon's will ever make men like their dad? I knew him when he was their age: quite a different creature.'

'They're bigger, though,' said Willoughby.

'Ah!' cried Lord Ollebeare, 'and so's that damned yelping pack of bench dogs (I can call 'em no better) that that nasty shipping man spends his money on. Twenty-seven inches, the dogs. If ever you take to hunting, my boy (no bad thing in strict moderation), don't follow anything taller than twenty-four. Anybody can rear a dog big and soft, and fit for nothing. And it's the same way with men. No, the old sort was well enough. I can't say the same for their masters, but, see, you've got to breed a good store of blockheads, it seems, or nasty miserable wretches, if ever you're to find a Fielding or a Gibbon. Only no need to treat the blockheads altogether *too* well, as we've done in the past, and let 'em eat up the labouring man. Oh no, none of that. Cut their bloody heads off if they try that. What I say is, we lived very well about the time this house was put up, the first part of it, that is. We lived as well as Englishmen can, and that's well enough, in spite of the Greeks. Whatever was wrong then might have been put right, by a little sense and a little feeling. However, it was not, and now 'twill never be.'

'I don't need to ask why,' said Willoughby, to whom this passage came as a *sanction*, or release. 'There is nothing to be done.'

'Nothing,' said Lord Ollebeare, 'save to live like a fish in a pool that's drying up. I feel the shingle on my belly already. You, boy, shall be high and dry.'

'They'll have to gaff me out of this, then,' said Willoughby

with an approving glance about him. 'Maybe they will. If not ...'

'They will offer you,' said his uncle, 'so much an acre. When they start building along the road from Kildep to the Stow Road, as depend upon it, the —s must and will, they will offer you so much an acre.'

'If the —s build all the way from Land's End to John o' Groats,' replied Willoughby, 'and brick this place all round, and offer a thousand an acre, I'll not part with an inch, not if I starve first.'

'I hope you speak the truth, boy,' said his uncle. 'You've only told me one lie so far, I think. It is true we don't see much of one another.'

After a day or two Willoughby moved on. He got as far as Severn, and then fell a prey to melancholy. No lad who has been crossed in love for a girl of a certain age and type can wander unscathed from Ludlow to Wenlock Edge and in the neighbourhood of the Wrekin, Clun, etc., without certain musings, too tender to laugh at, and yet impossible to mention without a smile.

Accordingly Willoughby fled south, and found himself still pursued. He woke up in a brackeny wood, more alone and more cold than he had ever been in his life. The sensation was the more poignant in that he woke from a dream in which things were altogether different. 'If I wander alone,' said he, 'much longer, between hedges so extremely full of wild roses by day, and so strongly scented with honeysuckle at night, I shall find myself in love again.' This last word may be taken as evidence of an obstinate fortitude which our hero had not possessed a year ago.

He therefore turned east, and hared it back to London, muttering to himself as he walked, and rejoicing in a blister that did much to divert his thoughts. Unfortunately it broke in the neighbourhood of Salisbury, and he thought a great deal between there and London. He had a rough look when he arrived, and when he had changed his dusty clothes, and taken off his thick boots, and had a bath and a hair-cut, he still had a

rough look, a very rough look indeed. It is not surprising. An impressionable young man cannot spend many weeks in the exquisite boredom of beauty seen alone, sleeping on the ground, contemplating the imperfectibility of mankind and the astonishing persistence of the pains of love, without coming back with a new look on his face, and Willoughby's nature being what it was, in his case this look was rough.

Sometimes one repeats for the thousandth time an experience long dulled by familiarity, and it is as if one came to it with virgin senses, and a heart capable of wonder and admiration and awe. So it was with the smell of his lodging-house, which Willoughby now seemed to inhale for the first time, and he did not look forward very eagerly to the second. In fact, having changed, he rushed out, and telephoned to Baiye, who was out of town; to two or three other people, who were engaged that night; and at last to Ferdy Guttenberg, who was at home, and who was giving a party, and who begged him to come along.

The Guttenberg house was a very large one, at the cheaper end of Bayswater, and on most nights every room was lit up. It would be unjust to describe Ferdy as one who gave many parties; it would be more accurate to say he had given only one party in all his life, but that one had been going on for some time. Generally the good Ferdy was there, for he hated to miss a party, but if by any chance he was absent the party still went on. He had no one there but his dearest friends; indeed, it could not have been otherwise, for to enter the house was to be enrolled among their number. The strange thing was, that there was no one so crabbed as to fail to reciprocate: in all London there was no one who wished Ferdy any harm.

All this had to be paid for. Ferdy was a designer of stage *décor*, who combined a greater degree of naïvety and talent than any other artist who had ever lived. He would approach the most gifted painter at the party at any given moment. 'I've got,' he would say, 'to dwaw a beastly thing for that ballet Archie's putting on. Dwaw the lines for me. You know I can't dwaw.' The painter would dash a few hurried lines on

the paper, Ferdy would trot off to a second painter: 'I've got to put some colour on a thing,' he would say. 'It's got to be gween and purple and silver. Shall I make the girls' bottoms silver? Come and put it on for me; I'm no good at all with a bwush.'

The second painter having complied, the result would be the sketchiest thing imaginable, like the inspired hieroglyph one makes on the telephone pad. Ferdy would rush away in a fit of enthusiasm. 'Here you are, Archie,' he would say, 'I hope you *gwasp* it. This has to be kept light, do you see? These things have to be shiny.' The result was the most brilliant *décor* ever seen on the stage, and Ferdy's house would be kept going for another month.

Much in the same manner, everyone contributed to his party, which was the best in London. There was a sort of buffet in a room in the basement. There was a gramophone tune in the air, mixed with expensive scent, the smell of flowers, the colour of bright textiles hung on white walls, the powder of violent electric light, cigarette smoke, alcohol, the noise of the telephone, the bell: it was impossible to tell which was which. There was always someone in a bedroom who had suddenly felt unwell, someone who was in terrible trouble, someone who specially wanted to meet you, someone whom nobody knew, someone in the lavatory.

Willoughby liked this place and its owner as well as any he knew of. He drifted from room to room, but he had been away six weeks, and the population was largely a new one. At last he poked his head into a small white box of a room, sputtering with unshaded light, which contained almost nothing but an African mask staring from one chalky wall, and a red divan. On the divan, however, sat the most beautiful young woman Willoughby had ever seen in his life.

CHAPTER XXIII

No more fencing – Mercuries of the bottle and glass –
The continent of pleasure – Willoughby's lodger –
Aboat on the Serpentine – Not always –
Vicious as a vixen – Explorers fall out –
Frances bounces

THIS extremely beautiful young woman was a very cool card. Not only had she been forgotten in this room by Ferdy, who had gone to bring someone to meet her, but she had been educated at Vevey and Fontainebleau, and in the very best hotels of Paris, New York, Vienna, London, Berlin. In such places they know what's what. Her name was Frances, her father was a cosmopolitan magnate, her mother had been divorced when she was five; her father had now just married a woman who was probably a spy. Frances had come to London in the hope that she was in love with an Englishman of increasing tediousness; she had a flat overlooking Regent's Park, and she was exceedingly bored.

This beautiful young woman, who was exceedingly bored, saw a young man enter the room, who wore a very rough look indeed. It will be remembered that our good Willoughby had a countenance somewhat too expressive, though not in the least like that of an actor. Now here was a young woman whose tragedy it was, that the mode did not permit a wrap made out of a bearskin.

They got on famously. Within half an hour their conversation had reached that delicious pitch of light intimacy which appears so very vulgar when transcribed. Nevertheless it must be mentioned that Willoughby told her he had a passion for those archaic busts, of the earliest Mediterranean decadence, which enable us to believe in thin and athletic girls who smeared the paint surely and carelessly upon their sunburnt skin. 'I fancy,' he said, 'that they, too, had crystal eyes, and were good at all sports, ski-ing, tennis, surf-riding, poker, love.'

A little while afterwards, he expressed a wish that he was rich and famous, and asked if she would marry him if he were a duke. 'I should marry anybody who was a duke,' replied Frances. Willoughby was charmed by her admirable good sense.

'But supposing,' said he, 'I was only a snivelling baronet, creeping along on a few thousand a year? Would your affection stand for that? Or, to get a little nearer the knuckle, supposing I was on the borderline of starvation, a confirmed waster living in a bug-infested attic?'

'Then I should certainly not marry you,' replied Frances. 'But we might live together.'

'I feel,' said Willoughby, after a short silence, 'that it would be an absolutely fatal move to exhibit the least trace of the astonishment and joy that fills my heart. Let us understand one another clearly. We have been *fencing*, as they say in the novelettes. We are beyond question the two people in the world most gifted with good taste: if we go on *fencing* we shall become disgusted with ourselves and each other.'

'Do you know,' remarked Frances, wrinkling her brow as though in search of memory, 'I believe that may explain a lot.'

'We will say exactly what we think to one another,' said our hero, 'in order that we may do exactly what we like. And apropos of that ...' Here he asked a singularly outrageous question.

The reply being satisfactory, he went out upon the landing and looked over the stairs till he saw one of those people pass below, who are the Mercuries of the bottle and glass, and who, though they would be properly insulted if a starving man asked them to run for a plate of meat, will break off any conversation, get up from lying on their backs, leave their own glasses untasted, to go anywhere, at any moment, to bring a drink to anyone who is still capable of swallowing. Seeing one of this persuasion, Willoughby called out to him: 'I cannot come down,' said he. 'Be a saint and bag me a bottle of something with a kick in it. Swedish Punch, or Arkavit if you can. Two glasses.'

This being procured, Willoughby poured out for himself

and his charmer: the Punch was as white and sweet as a snow-storm musical-box, and as thrilling as the Aurora Borealis. In a short time their eyes sparkled like frost, in which the red sun kindles a fiery spark or two.

'Perhaps,' said Willoughby, 'we shall be the first two people in history to explore the continent of pleasure in so disinterested and scientific a fashion. All the rest, who have become primitives in the last two minutes, have been in search of treasure, or the Island of the Hesperides, or that of the Lotos Eaters, or the locus of Eden, or the abiding place of the Ark, or the golden fleece' (as he uttered this last phrase, he experienced the sensation of one who takes a swig at what he thinks to be a glass of water, and finds it to be vodka of the fieriest description. Frances was dark. However, he went on bravely). 'Such people find Americas for Indias, or, all for record-making, circumnavigate pleasure in eighty days, and having seen nothing but deserts and waste waters all the way, find themselves back where they started, with barnacles on their bottoms. They suffer hell through desertion and mutiny; they round Cape Horn in a battered condition; they ... By the way, your tongue must now be sticky with this drink, like a Chinese fruit in syrup.'

'Wait a moment,' she said. 'You're not a poet, are you?' This was the question Lord Stumber had asked, doubtful of Willoughby's efficiency.

'Good God, no,' replied Willoughby. 'I'm a man of sense, I'm a waster.'

'Come then,' said Frances, with a glance equally compounded of fire and ice.

After an interval, Willoughby resumed his discourse. 'I am,' he said, 'a waster for political, social, moral, artistic, philosophical, individual, creditable, and interesting reasons.'

'I will not ask you, then,' said Frances, 'why you light a cigarette. Listen: never tell me *why*. You have an honest face, and though I shan't believe it myself, I may think you do.'

'You would believe me if I told you why I'm strongly inclined to see you home at once,' said Willoughby.

'So you shall,' said Frances. 'But not at once. Not to-night even. I've had a girl friend staying with me, who doesn't go till the morning. I said good-bye to her, and told her I was off to an all-night party, and wouldn't be back till after breakfast.'

'I see,' said Willoughby.

'However,' said Frances, 'they will be gone by eleven.'

'I believe,' said Willoughby, 'that to-morrow is going to be a blazing day; one of those days on which, even in a shadowed room, every object glows with such a light that it seems alive and watching. On such a day ...'

'In the evening,' said Frances, 'we might go somewhere low but expensive. I'd put a lot of make-up on, only rather badly. ... You know.'

'Drink, you devil,' said Willoughby.

'Half,' said Frances. 'To-morrow night, or some night soon, we'll drink rather more. Let us go and join the party, or they'll think we've been flirting.'

As a matter of fact Willoughby's mouth bore traces of some little exercise in that direction, so much so that a young gentleman who encountered him half an hour later was encouraged to make a suggestion, which our hero found more than usually diverting.

The party waned a little in the small hours. There were an indefinite number of little bedrooms on the upper floors of the house. These contained the very minimum of furniture; a bed, rigorous to the eye but sumptuous to the limbs, a striped mat, some aggressive work of art, and on each bedside table a pleasing still life – a black glass jug of water, a Gollancz cover, cigarettes, aspirin, all the heart could desire. Frances and Willoughby were each accommodated in one of these vivifying cells: our hero was by now so weary he scarcely felt the need to restrain himself from sleep-walking.

Next morning he was beside himself with joy. 'What a privilege,' he cried, 'to handle such a work of art as that!' He was not referring to the admirable piece of Benin work on the chest of drawers. 'It must be a liberal education, more especi-

ally as we are already on the very frankest footing. It is as though some speed king condescended to explain the working of his car. What a footling comparison! She would despise it, though in one way she is a positive little Sunbeam. She probably never condescends to reflect. She just does everything with that mindless efficiency that is the natural and perfect accompaniment of such looks. Her face, without being in the least stupid, has no *mind* in it at all. And how vulgar such an intrusion would be! As if one painted expressive eyeballs upon the staring blindness of a Greek god. Or scrawled some "thought" from Tennyson on a perfect vase. What a noble thing emptiness is! We have nothing worthy to substitute for it. It is only in empty shells we hear the eternal sea.' This was really bordering on the poetical, but the fact is, Frances was an extremely beautiful girl.

Our hero was brought down to earth by a sudden misgiving. 'Supposing she was making a fool of me?' he thought. 'Or had had some drinks before I arrived, and now repents all she said. To see her disappear at 150 miles an hour; to be left marooned in the third-rate: I could hardly endure it!' He made himself this suggestion at first, only by way of a sharp sauce: pretty soon he had convinced himself it was a very plausible one.

Frances' demeanour at breakfast took our hero a peg or two lower, which was as low as human life can exist. She looked as fresh, as cool, as calm, as clear as can be desired: unfortunately these qualities do not always reflect the emotions they arouse. She addressed herself to the housekeeper, who presided at the breakfast-table, for Ferdy was still abed. To Willoughby she spoke with the greatest politeness, and the greatest brevity. 'I believe,' thought that unhappy young man, 'that this piece of toast will choke me. However, I shall not mind that.'

When she prepared to go, he rose also: he thought he might as well see the last of her. They had no sooner stepped on to the pavement when she said, in tones as cool as ice: 'I am not going to hop from one bed into another. We must go for a walk in the Park.' A most fortunate numbness, the result of

shock, prevented Willoughby from making a fool of himself. He was even able to note that the thing he most cruelly desired of all things in the world had been put straight into his hand, and it was the thing he desired second of all things in the world.

Man is a complex animal. As they went across the hot, scorched grass, on whose wide spread the fat trees stood, each in its island of bluest shade, Willoughby, accompanied by a girl as beautiful as one of the lesser cats, and committed to conduct of the utmost unreserve, still put his left hand to his breast now and then, a gesture of ingratitude to the gods, and not complimentary to his companion. He did so to hush into orderliness the hot and ragged aching of his heart, a quite physical pain, which always became lively in parks and public places. This pain, though, as if it were a regular and obliging lodger, was so extremely good as to sink into an orderly an even quiescence, so that a thick veneer of pleasure might overlay it.

Once it had done this, Willoughby could forget this permanent guest, as a landlord can take up his newspaper again. At once our pair became the happiest creatures in existence, as they were, on average, the comeliest. Willoughby had walked five hundred miles; both had eyes as clear as crystal; their glances were at once lively and contented. You would never have thought that one was a worthless young blackguard, and t'other little better than a whore. In fact, you might have quoted from the classics, providing your classics are not those of old Hendred, who believed in the perfectibility of man.

Very well, our young people went on over the tawny grass: the chestnuts near at hand were like round bouquets of dark glossiness, on their islands of blue shade. The groves of elms in the distances were flat as those screens of trees, which may be observed in the background of a Poussin. On such a day, whoever walks in Hyde Park, and comes upon the gravelly edges of the Serpentine, is either dead, or experiences a desire to go out in a boat. Willoughby and Frances were alive, and

bent upon the satisfaction of all desires, however unconventional. The wide lake was empty, the boats sweltered at their moorings. 'The delay is extremely annoying,' said Willoughby, 'but there is no doubt about it, we must go.' He explained that they must never miss any sort of pleasure, because that was what they were for.

'I have the heartiest contempt,' said he insincerely, 'for those who, grabbing too soon and too greedy at the greater delight, let fall the only just less.'

'If my stepmother is really a spy,' said Frances, 'I'll get you a job as consul somewhere.'

A stone bridge, opulent with the vulgar beauty of palaces, divides the pleasure of rowing a promised mistress on the Serpentine, into two unequal parts. The banks are low on that side where the boat-sheds are, and the pale, enormous water rises like a shield, on the boss of which rests the boat, at the end of the first argent curve of its arrowy wake.

There, in the middle of the lake, the bluest day is steel or water-coloured. Staggered trees, and people like threads, dissolve into the faint banks slipping off from the rim of the water. The boat's thrust slows, and stops. Drops fall in three or four important ticks from the lifted blades, and slow, and stop. Time has run down.

The young woman leans back, obliterating a whole row of the paper-thin trees, which are the colour of cloud. Besides being of heroic proportions, she is, I assure you, round and coloured, in this world where everything is flat and thin, and all the tawny and the glossy and the blue is reduced to water-vapour and water-shine. One gazes in delight and surprise, until she appears to be altogether too Olympian, and though, like Frances, she may be as slim as a weasel, she seems of a stuff solider and vivider than anything in life, and her every projection is so arrogant and round, and her smile so pales the heavens, that one wonders if one's day can survive the impact of this goddess, and, moreover, if she may not capsize the boat.

These sensations succeeding one another in Willoughby, and

he being a man of action, he struck into the vapoury water again, and the boat wallowed, and moved heavily, and then swiftly, and ploughed the illusory ridge of the lake, to where a different water lay flat and calm under the stone span.

Here it was the colour of forgotten bronze, immortal in a palace garden. Our hero was no respecter of colours; he parted this proud, strong green, and pressed into the womb of the bridge, which had its own space, time, silence, and sound, all very delightful.

Bursting through, they shot into the very heart of that charming little world on the other side. Nothing could be a suddener change. It was as though they had died and gone to heaven.

It was a positive little enamel, of the most elegant description. The banks joined the shallows in a spread of flags; there was a golden gravel path, children, emerald grass. Here and there, where this smooth emerald chose to roll itself into a Chinese curve, up from the porcelain tints of the water, willows bulged out in glassy green, like bird-cages designed by a nature so civilised as to know how to be ridiculous.

'Look at the ducks!' cried Frances. These, too, had evidently died and gone to heaven. Nothing could be less like the two or three that had passed the boat, colourless and troubled as migrating souls, on the desert infinity outside. These were tricked out as gaily as you please; they paddled to and fro, had their little conversations. 'They are very wise ducks,' said Willoughby, 'and they know there's such a thing as world enough and not too much, and the same applies to time.'

Frances being of the same opinion, he put the boat hard about, which swirled in crystal like a rutting swan, and flew back to the pier.

They took a taxi: in a certain space of time they had arrived at Frances' flat, which she had taken furnished from some people of rather luxurious tastes, and which overlooked Regent's Park.

'I sent my things round,' said Frances, 'by district messenger early this morning, and sent word to the maid that I

should not be having any meals here, so she is gone till tomorrow.'

In order to show that he also was capable of being practical, Willoughby lowered the blinds, so that the sun might not fade the carpet.

The room was nevertheless decidedly hot; before long Frances found it necessary to remove her frock. She wore a slip of a dull apricot colour, which harmonised admirably with her goldy skin. 'Upon my word!' cried Willoughby, in a tone of the liveliest enthusiasm. 'Do you always wear underclothes of that colour?'

'Not always,' replied this engaging young woman, suiting the action to the word.

There is some dispute among the philosophers as to whether the delights of love are better experienced or imagined. They are certainly better either than described, so let us divide the moot best with Willoughby, who will not dispute our share with us, and leave the third to the devil.

It must be mentioned, though, that our hero's pleasures were pierced through at one point by a surprising consideration. He became aware, for the first time in all his vicissitudes, that he was being unfaithful to his Lucy. A delicious tremor passed through him on recognising this achievement, which he had believed to be impossible.

He visited his charmer during the months of August and September, and lapsed abominably in the payment of his debts. In fact, he contracted some very promising new ones, for, among the many inestimable benefits he derived from his new mistress, one was the ability to think on a large scale. For this and other reasons, he found it desirable to affect the cynic. One of the other reasons was, that Frances, who was as slim as a weasel and as lovely as a star, was also as vicious as a vixen. Willoughby himself knew how to get into a rage; they were on terms of the utmost frankness: what with all this, and the advanced nature of her ideas in times of peace, and his nostalgia for the unknown Eden, and so forth, it was decidedly necessary to be a cynic.

This enabled him to look very dispassionately on his passion for Lucy, 'I was happy then,' he said to himself, 'and I really believe I was good, but now *I know*. There must be something very noble in man, in that one would rather *know*, even considering what there is to be known, than return to one's lovely joyous innocence, in which, however, one quoted the Irish poets with enthusiasm. There is the whole of the history of mankind, and its tragedy, for the more it knows the wickeder and more miserable it becomes, and it is too noble to turn back. That is the other side of Baiye's sneer – that man has sold and bought Eden in desirable building lots, for the sake of having an extra twopence a week if he is a master, or, if he is a slave, for the sake of having a bungalow as smart as his neighbour's. Both are true, and each is a sufficient argument against the perfectibility of man. However, I must still have a good deal to learn, for though I am wicked I am scarcely miserable at all.'

He applied himself to his studies with great perseverance. On one occasion, in the interests of science, he took Frances to Kew. 'Let us get really tight,' said this villainous young blackguard at the close of the day, 'and maybe I'll tell you a secret.' He put on an indescribable smile as he said this. He remembered that other indescribable smile, which he had put on when waiting for the little what's-her-name, and which was also that of the crucified Spendius. At once his whole life spread out like one of those charming little distances, routes to the Cross, that one sees in a primitive picture. 'What a long way I have come!' thought he, with a fatuous sense of achievement.

Another little parallel he indulged in about this time was to exchange reminiscences of childhood with his paramour. The parallel was not quite as close as it might have been, nor was the exchange a very even one. In fact, all Willoughby could offer was the episode of the little girl in the arbour, and that he had to distort slightly to render it presentable. No man likes to receive more from his mistress than he is able to return: it makes him bad-tempered.

'I think you have missed a great deal,' said he, in a very peevish tone. 'One should have a period of innocence, if only for the pleasure of regretting it.'

'I shall regret yours, if it is going to make you talk like a prig,' replied his charmer, 'but without any sort of pleasure.'

'I'm not talking like a prig,' replied our hero, 'but like a connoisseur. The prig does not appreciate innocence; he demands it out of timidity. The jaded gourmet, on the other hand ...' And he smacked his lips.

'You talk like a silly pretentious fool,' said Frances, annoyed at this unfaithful relish.

'No, no,' said he, with something of his rough look. 'Every man likes to think of his wench as she was when still she had the bloom on. And I cannot conceive you as a baby in a cradle.'

'Are you jealous of little boys?' said she, with something of a sneer. 'I thought it would amuse you.'

'Hang the little boys!' said he. 'But if you want to know, that soldier business, at the age of fourteen, sticks in my throat a little. Merely as a matter of taste. Where did it happen?'

'One summer holidays,' she said. 'In a nasty, pokey little house my father took in some pine woods somewhere. In England it was. Leith Hill – that's it – in Surrey.'

'What?' cried Willoughby. 'Then you were the little girl in the arbour.'

'I'm afraid I was not,' said she. 'I had nothing to do with any little boy at that time, I assure you. I was mad about Claude. It's true I used to go out to a summer-house place in the evenings, to wait for him, and, oddly enough, I remember a little ragged boy came up once, and kissed me. But Claude appeared and gave him a thrashing. It was not at all as you describe. Still, all the little girls in England go out in their night-dresses some time or other. I wonder you didn't meet a dozen, not one. Besides, you said it was at Reigate. Isn't that in Yorkshire?'

'It's nowhere now,' said Willoughby in some confusion. 'At least, it's under the red-brick lava from this Vesuvius, like another Pompeii. Still, it may have been in Yorkshire for all I

know; one really knows very little in this world. All the same, the coincidence is stranger than you realise, for decently brought-up English girls do not behave as you think.'

For some reason he was in a villainous bad temper, a fact that Frances was good enough to point out to him shortly afterwards. They had a little discussion on the matter, one thing led to another: he spoke with an excess of energy about a young man with pale crinkly hair, who sometimes visited the flat: Frances ignored his singularly abominable insinuations concerning this young man, but asked very quietly *the name* of the young woman in the love affair he had once mentioned to her. On his refusing to give it: 'You dirty beast!' she cried, 'What do you take me for?'

'For a very pretty viper,' said he, for he was much mortified at the turn the discussion had taken.

'And do you know,' said she, 'what I take you for?'

They went on in this manner for a considerable time. In the end, Frances so far forgot herself as to strike Willoughby upon the cheek, claws out. Our hero had passed the red-hot stage, and was now in a chilly fury. He flung his arms round his charmer and spoke in a sort of whisper in her ear. 'If I cared twopence about you,' he said, 'I would give you the thrashing you've needed so badly ever since you were a nasty, spoilt, pastry-fed, costive, precocious, perverted, under-bred, cosmopolitan child. However, it would be a *bore* to beat you. ...' He added one or two remarks of the greatest indelicacy, and picking up this perfect creature, this work of art, this fellow explorer of his into the continent of pleasure, he threw her — over tip on to a divan covered by one of the exquisite marine designs of Dufy.

This divan was as well sprung as it was well covered: he had flung her in a magnificent arc, and she bounced in the most appealing manner. Willoughby stamped out of the flat vowing he'd never see her again.

CHAPTER XXIV

Mechanisation of the wrapper-scrapping industry –
Ten days' argument – A profitable hobby –
The beggar's pleasure – A surprising note –
God! How she's changed! – A difference between the sexes

He returned at once to Pimlico. On the way he captured an image that had been eluding him. 'She is like a yacht,' he exclaimed to himself. 'It seems rather absurd to cast a yacht away merely because it takes one for something one most certainly isn't. However, she would have been my ruin.'

'Now, I suppose,' he added rather dolorously, 'I shall not be ruined.'

He found old Hendred in very low spirits. 'I do not like the look of things at all,' said that worthy. 'The firm I told you of, whose circulars I have addressed pretty regularly for many years now, they've installed a sort of machine for the regular job.'

'Ingenious civilisation!' cried Willoughby. 'That invents work so horrible that one welcomes its beastly machinery!'

'Welcomes!' observed the wrapper-scrapper. 'They're now giving me only their odd jobs, little things of no importance. I scarcely knock up a pound a week, and it looks to me as if before very long they'll stand me off altogether. It's a black outlook, and what makes it worse is the feeling that one is losing their confidence, that one is a failure.'

'Hell!' remarked Willoughby. 'Still, don't break your heart over it. This room will continue to exist, Uncle, and there will always be a ration of some sort in the meat safe.'

'I hope you are right,' said the old boy, 'I could not accept your generosity, but for your sake I sincerely hope you are right. All the same, there has been a man calling here every day this week.'

'A man?' cried our hero, as if it had been a tiger. 'A man? What sort of a man, pray?'

'A man like other men,' replied the wrapper-scrapper. 'Except perhaps that he appeared to be owed money instead of owing it.'

'What a terrible combination!' cried Willoughby. 'Give me a scrap of paper. I must do a little arithmetic. I wonder who the devil that can have been. I've missed a few weeks in dubbing up to the shops, I'm afraid. I wish to God I had not opened so many accounts when I was at old Stumber's. Still, I will pay a little more in future: if these calculations are correct, one can rub along quite happily on one pound a week instead of two.'

'Let 'em County Court you,' said Hendred. 'Then you may not have to pay as much.'

'I might, though,' said Willoughby, 'be spoken to severely by some beak or other. The older I grow, the less appetite I have for being spoken to severely. Somehow the rights and wrongs no longer interest me at all. I may well deserve it, be very remorseful, vowed to amend, yet if I were spoken to severely I should forget all that, and behave so badly as to get jugged for contempt of court. Better pay more on my own volition than less on a severe order. Besides, it would be immoral and dishonourable of me to seek sanctuary in clemencies designed for fools and exploited by knaves. But then all you Socialists are immoral. In future, please remember that I am a Tory, a man of honour. That is to say, a waster of honour.'

'You speak like a fool,' cried the old man. 'Socialists are not immoral. They believe in justice, which is the foundation of all morality. It is in Socrates. Even if you are right in saying justice is impossible (which you may be, for I am beginning to feel I do not understand modern science at all), even if it is impossible, it is a noble ideal, and I do not know what I should have done all these years without it. The Conservatives are immoral. Their programme. ...'

'A Tory has no programme,' said Willoughby. 'He realises it would be hopeless. But he dislikes tinned food.'

They argued for ten days. Half-way through this period Willoughby became unusually serious. 'My dear Uncle,' he

said, 'I know perfectly well that my attitude is one very generally taken up by poseurs and fools, and even by undergraduates. I am very vividly aware that not only the big-chinned tearful men who write newspaper sob-stuff about loving hearts in Mr Everyman's little home, but the majority of intelligent people also, would call my notions frivolous, insincere, shallow, half-baked, would-be clever, so-called cynicism. But that is no reason for recanting. Either man is vile, or he is not.

'I cannot for the life of me find grounds for thinking that he is otherwise than very vile indeed. The idea was put into my head some years ago, and if you like I will admit I first harboured it as a pose; I was certainly more eager for a noble attitude, than for ideas. I soon found it a very inconvenient attitude, not only hated very generally (which I should have enjoyed), but despised. All the same, I could not then abdicate it except upon reason, and I can find no reason.

'I have considered the love in the little house of Mr Everyman: how terrible to think that Mr and Mrs Everyman love one another! Have you ever considered all that is implied? Where they are both nice people it is not so unpleasant, but how rarely! And do we spare the wood pigeons because they coo? What's far more important is, that there are smiles, wit, jollity, a good song, a table well made, a meal well cooked, a pleasant conversation afterwards, and also such things as beauty, bravery, honour. The list is enough to warm one's heart. However, it is easy to cool it again. Go out into the streets and look at their smiles, when you can find them. You can read their wit in the evening papers, or hear it in a saloon bar, where their jollity also prevails. Their songs do not improve. Their tables you may see in the furniture shops. Their meals are what they are. They are beautiful in the proportion of one in a hundred, at most. They are brave in herds in their blind wars: that salesman was probably brave then, but when they are alone they are not so very bold. As for honour, everyone is a hireling these days, and it is almost impossible for a hireling to be honourable.

'It used to give me pleasure to contemplate these little

deficiencies. It made me feel superior. Now I perceive that I am contemplating myself. I identify the hateful elements in man by looking into my own greedy, treacherous, sentimental, hypocritical heart. I measure them by something else, however, and it would be a pity to renounce that something else for the ease of the heart I have described to you.

'I believe, and so does my old uncle in the country, that there was a way of living in which the best elements came out, and outweighed the worst. But that is all over. Their wit, their songs and all the rest of it get more and more deplorable. They may be better fed in a few years, but I will not say grace for them.'

'The present decline in culture is entirely the fault of the capitalist machine,' began the old man.

'I think not,' said Willoughby, 'and that is why I am now a Tory. I am not a Conservative; I hate the shopkeepers as much as you do. But I believe that shopkeeping is like the staggers, and man's present degradation is like the fall. I believe both result from a law of nature, as you call it.'

'Oh dear! Oh dear!' cried the old boy, who had great reverence for that sort of law.

'We either have immortal souls ...'

'Oh no, no,' cried the Rowton House sage, horrified at this suggestion, to which he would have preferred a return to the tree-tops.

'... in which case only virtue counts and progress is a delusion,' continued Willoughby, 'or we are essentially the same as all other animals, in which case a law, analogous to that of diminishing returns, makes all progress beyond a certain point a delusion, so that only virtue counts. I say point, but imagine rather a wavy line across the stream of our development, which would include the double-barrelled twelve-bore ejector, hand made, but not the steam-engine, and better neither than both. However, we might have chosen.'

'Hand made?' said the old man. 'These are the ideas of William Morris, an artistic visionary. It is true they are beginning to address envelopes by machinery ...' said he, with the sneer of a very Luddite.

'You have not heard me say,' observed Willoughby, 'that I have any hope of a return, or love for fancy dress.'

'No,' he continued with emphasis. 'Man, ordinary man, is fitted only for labour and ignorance and innocence. See him,' said he, with a gesture in the direction of Lambeth, Kennington, Camberwell, Peckham, Catford, and the outer suburbs. 'See him when he has left it. What's more, your plea of poverty doesn't hold water. See him,' said he, with a gesture in the direction of Belgravia, Knightsbridge, Park Lane, and Mayfair. 'See him when he is richer than Croesus, richer by thousands of years of culture, the telephone, speed – anything you like. Have you heard of the Bright Young People, every one of whom has been educated for over twenty years?'

'They are in a minority,' cried the old man, prepared to defend anything.

'The rest are their imitators,' replied Willoughby. 'Except the intelligent ones, who amount to one in a hundred, and live in Bloomsbury, where they all kip in, and share out the kids at Christmas. And, of those, one in a hundred possibly should not be drowned. Nevertheless, I still believe we should burden a small section, the smaller the better, to judge by results, with idleness and literacy, in order to warm a nest for the hatching of those things which are greater than man. I say *should*, but I have no hope whatsoever of anything being done. Man will go on snatching at the next convenience – that is the law I speak of. And because he is mostly greedy, lazy, lustful, inquisitive, in the very roots of his being (these being the qualities that kept him going like every other animal that survived), because of this, a like proportion of his works will pander to his vices, and further degrade him – that's the law. If a shopkeeper is a convenience, he will make a god of the shopkeeper, and give up. ...'

'If you have no hope,' said the old man, 'what are you going to do? I do not know what I should do if I had no hope.'

'It's a very odd thing,' said Willoughby, 'but now that I believe in everything that is the opposite of whatever I believed before, I shall do exactly what I have done before. I

may try a little more to be virtuous, for I have a vague feeling that the old notions of virtue may be salutary though absurd. One becomes *real* by practising them, like a character in a novel, whom the subtle analysis leaves still a shadow, but whom we believe in when he gives his coat to a beggar, or some bloody foolery of that sort. I was always a little inclined to the *sentiment of honour*, for example. I shall now perhaps practise it on more conventional lines: never tell a lie, or overlook an affront – all that. It will keep me morally fit, as some people believe hiring yourself out to do another man's will keeps up the morale. I might even think of that, but I fancy it is entirely inconsistent with the sentiment of honour.'

'That word has an aristocratical sound,' said the old man. ...

They went on like this every evening for five more days. Willoughby even went out to borrow books to batter the old optimist with: he had never done anything so thoroughly in his life before: he spoke with an almost un-English seriousness, attacked the matter from the oddest points of view: some would have said he was inspired, or had a complex, or had been wrongly conditioned in infancy, or was the victim of heredity, or was mad, or something of that sort.

The old man, however, found it very hard to deal with. There is, in all people of sound disposition, a soft spot for the belief that man is an agricultural animal. Besides, everything was repeated ten times over: the old boy was immune to the language of suggestion, sarcasm, poetry, rhetoric, intuition, epicureanism, and so forth; but sooner or later each argument took what he thought to be a logical form, and then he budged a bit. In the end he was scarcely an optimist at all. 'It is all very well,' he said, 'but I have had a dream ...' etc. 'You ask me to give it up.' He even used the words '*I cannot.*'

What's more, our good Willoughby, with that destructive fury that rages in all who are bit by a certain kind of fly, took care to undermine his belief in the leaders of socialism and science. The philosopher received with a good deal of equanimity his statement that there was never one of 'em who knew

Lafitte from Margaux, or a Renoir from a Cézanne, or what little girls were made of: what he could not stand was the thought that one now preached dictatorship, and the other the possibility of a mind behind the universe. He felt he was betrayed on every hand, and began to collapse. He began to mutter abominably, as he walked alone in the street.

Meanwhile, Willoughby had his days to himself, and no longer having even his bus-fare in his pocket, was less able to spend his time in what George Moore chose as an education, and what the rest of the world calls idle talk. 'I shall have to put myself to study,' he said. 'I shall have to go to classes, pass an exam., and go to the University when I am clear of debt. I must learn everything thoroughly, in order to take up a profitable hobby. I will go as far as a profitable hobby. The question is, what? I must be very careful not to let myself believe I should be an artist. That would be a terrible thing. On the other hand, there seems to be nothing else but to be a sawbones, which I'm not made for, or an explorer; but I might be followed by a film man or the Saveyerlaber Copper. If there was any chance of coming into Ollebeare in reasonable time, I might go to some place where I could learn to farm. I wonder if Uncle George would let me be a sort of bailiff till he cripps. But they said it would cost a fortune to clean the place, and patch up the buildings and stock it, and so forth. Still, I might write to the old boy. It would mean giving up seeing people; one has to work day and night at that game. Hell! On the other hand, honour may rust for lack of use, for no one ever affronts me, and I never know when I'm going to tell a lie till I've told it.'

All this happened in those ten days. Willoughby was still pondering a tactful letter to his uncle, when two little surprises came his way. To begin with, he met a man whose face he did not at first recognise, at the entrance to Victoria Station. 'I had wondered where you had got to,' said this worthy. 'Do you remember lending me five quid on that little stunt of mine? I told you if ever it turned up trumps I'd pay you back ten. Well ...'

'Good Lord!' said Willoughby. 'But didn't you have tremendously long hair in those days?'

'Maybe I did,' said the other. 'Look, I must bolt for my train. Here you are, and many thanks indeed. Look me up some time. I'm in the book. After all, you believed in me when most people laughed. Except Lottie, of course. She's dead, poor girl. I expect you heard. God Almighty, I must fly! Cheerio!'

'Now what the devil *was* his stunt?' said Willoughby. 'I remember lending some hungry devil a fiver once. Well – here's two of 'em.'

Our hero had a thousand ideas for disposing of this windfall. However, he saw a singularly decrepit figure advancing towards him in the street. This figure had all the appearance of an owl out by daylight, and was followed by some of the young fry of Pimlico, who diverted themselves by imitating its gait, its stoop, and its mutter. 'You are,' thought Willoughby, 'rehearsing your future part.'

Then seeing who it was: 'Upon my word, Uncle!' cried he in surprise. 'Is it you? What are you doing out at this hour?'

'I could not stick at the scrapping,' burst out old Hendred. 'My nerves are bad. I thought maybe a ride on the top of a bus would put me right.'

Willoughby, looking at him with more attention than one usually gives to a room-mate, and in a better light than existed in the room, felt that the bus-ride would need to be a very long one. The old fellow's eyes had a beat look about them.

'Two minutes ago,' he said, 'a chap gave me ten quid he owed me. What do you think of that? I was going to spend it on debauchery of the worst type, but rather than have a sick man in my room, I think you'd better take half, and have a few days in your native village, or better still – yes, far better – by the sea.'

'Why, it's very good of you, I'm sure,' said the unfortunate. 'I'm sure I don't know. Maybe it would put me right. I feel very poorly. Things weigh on my mind. The wrapper-scrapping is in a bad way, and I'm not up to it. I've got no heart. I ...'

Willoughby had expected a long argument. 'The old boy must be very sick,' he thought. Pretty soon it was arranged that Hendred should go off towards the end of the week, when he had done the batch of work he had in hand.

It was burning September weather, and a Wednesday. The sky was heroic, millions of particles of soot smouldered in the blue like gold sparks, the river writhed low and gleaming under the sun like George's dragon, the Wren spires stood up everywhere like pillars of ash. The streets rustled with dry heat. One had the agreeable illusion that a carelessly flung match would set the whole town ablaze, and, what's more, one felt no great inclination to fling the match.

Willoughby had walked along the Embankment as far as the city, to take the beggar's pleasure in hot stone and the sight of a river. On his return, he *thought* Pimlico looked different. He entered the cheesey hall. 'There's a note for you,' cried the landlady. 'It's on the dust-pan, sir, on the window-sill up the first flight. I was going to bring it up ...' and so forth.

Willoughby took up his note from off a pile of fluff and certain vilely crocused egg-shells: he recognised the writing. An incredible quiet descended.

'*Dear Willoughby*' [said the note], '*I was afraid to ask for you. I want to see you. If you will see me – I'll wait an hour at the little tea-shop place round the corner – the one called the Belvedere. I do so hope you'll come.* L.'

'The only thing is,' observed our hero after some time, 'I feel so very cold and sick.'

Before very long he had voice enough to shout to his landlady. 'What time did this note come?' he cried in a rather hollow voice, leaning a little on the basement stair-head.

'Oh, a long time ago,' answered the old trot. 'Before Mrs Piper went. It was a-put in at the dore.'

'And at what hour, Miss Montgomery?' asked our hero, in carefully regulated accents.

'Oh, well, before Mrs. Piper went,' replied the pythoness. 'Because she was in Madam's room. It's her day.'

'Miss Montgomery,' said Willoughby, 'it's now nearly half-past twelve. Did this note come before or after half-past eleven?'

'Oh, well before,' replied the landlady. 'Just about the hour, I should say. Eleven o'clock. Because ...'

'Thank you,' said Willoughby, and was gone.

He was perfectly well aware; it was utterly impossible; he had no hopes whatsoever; he had stood things as bad, and could again; if she was gone it would make the last two years *real*, of course; still, it was absurd to have hopes. It did not occur to him that he could write and explain.

Willoughby opened the door of the little restaurant with some force. It was a sort of tea-shop of the meanest description, it had check curtains like the *Pixies* or the *Olde Oakes* of a happier world, but they were very dirty, and the place stank of ninepenny lunches it served to the girls of the government clothing factory.

These crowded the tables at the moment. Willoughby saw Lucy, looking terribly woebegone, evidently hanging on in a begrudged seat over a pot of tea.

'I was out,' he roared in a voice of thunder. 'Come out of this place.'

Lucy moved her lips. 'God! how she's changed!' he thought.

'Come out,' he said in a slightly lower tone, now being nearer. 'We can't talk here. Come up to my room.'

One of the factory girls made a comment, apparently of a highly amusing nature.

'This lady had not paid,' remarked a female of the sourest appearance, barring the door as if to withstand a rush. Willoughby put something into her hand. 'I want more than a penny,' she remarked with the utmost asperity.

'Oh damn!' muttered Willoughby, feeling for half a crown.

'Don't you damn at me, sir,' cried this elderly damsel. 'Coming in here, sitting about two hours ...'

'Hell, I've got no money,' said Willoughby, as red as fire. Lucy had passed on a few paces, for she was feeling as shaky as she looked.

''Ere, mister, I'll lend you a bob,' cried one of the factory girls. 'I know you're in love.'

'I'll bring it in to-morrow,' said Willoughby in a grateful fluster. 'Yes, I am. Thank you ever so much. I must go. I'll bring it in to-morrow.'

'Good luck to you, I say!' remarked the factory girl, who had not had the benefits of a refined education. A murmur, partaking of the nature of a subdued cheer, arose as Willoughby bolted out. He discovered himself to be plentifully beaded with large drops of sweat. 'Christ!' he said to himself. 'How nice! But, oh, my God!'

Lucy was waiting at the corner. He put his hand on her arm, to which it seemed to cleave and grow.

'I thought you weren't coming,' said Lucy. 'It didn't occur to me that you could be out. How are you?'

'Oh, very well. Very well, thank you,' replied Willoughby. 'It's a long time, isn't it? How long ago it seems! Do you remember that day on Hampstead Heath?'

The conversation rose to no greater heights all along the street. Willoughby stopped at the front door. 'Look here,' he said, 'there's an old man putting up with me. He's gone to sit in the gardens down by the river, but he'll be back about one, or soon after. Then we'll go to the Park, or somewhere where we can sit and talk, do you see?'

They went up the stairs: Lucy looked about the room. 'I remember this,' she said. 'What a fool I was! What a fool! Do forgive me.'

'What for?' cried Willoughby, taking her into his arms. 'It's me should be forgiven. Never mind. Let's both forgive. "And so throughout eternity I forgive you, you forgive me." You know. It's impossible to talk anything but nonsense. Oh dear!'

She pushed his hair back, as girls do: 'You're exactly the same,' she said. 'I knew you would be the same. I hoped so.'

'You aren't,' said Willoughby. 'You're a grown-up person now. I saw it at once. I don't know how it is. ... My pretty, pretty thing, what's made you grow up?'

Lucy put her face down on his shoulder. '*Don't*,' she said.

'Forgive me,' said Willoughby, 'I can't help babbling like a fool. Don't mind it. Look, we'll say nothing more; we won't talk at all. We can talk later. Shall we?'

Lucy nodded as well as one in her position was able, which was well enough.

'You are trembling,' cried Willoughby. 'So am I. Look, damn it! I'm crying. Ha! Ha! Tell me only one thing. You've come back, haven't you?'

Lucy said, with her face still hidden: 'Yes, yes, *yes* – if you'll have me.'

'*Have you?*' cried Willoughby. 'Oh, my God!'

'I couldn't bear it a day longer,' said she.

It was really the most deplorable scene; you would have thought they were children from the way they went on.

After about half an hour, Lucy said: 'Let's go now, or your old friend, whoever he is, will come in. We must talk. Let's go before he comes.'

'He cannot possibly,' said Willoughby, 'come in for at least five minutes.'

However, after that five minutes Lucy had her way. 'Have you had your lunch?' she said.

'Yes, yes,' cried Willoughby, 'I've had my lunch. We don't want to go into a restaurant. We'll go to the Park.'

'You're a liar,' said Lucy. 'Just as you always were. You'd always say you'd had your lunch, wouldn't you?'

'Do you think I'm hungry?' said Willoughby, looking back at her up the stairs. 'We'll buy some bananas, and eat them, not one each, but bite and bite about. Besides,' he said as they went out, 'I'm not really a liar at all now. I believe in all the qualities you used to talk about when first I met you. I ain't saint enough to be an anarchist. I've found it out at last. You'll laugh at me.'

Lucy, however, did not laugh.

'I'm all,' said Willoughby, 'for the rules of the game now. The old fogies are right, more or less. Only their reasons weren't to my taste, d'ye see? The real reasons are utterly

different – it's our villainous nature. ... What a lot we have to talk about.'

'Yes,' said Lucy.

'You are the only person I really enjoy talking to,' said Willoughby. 'There are plenty of men who argue better, being men, but we don't argue, we find things out. Oh, mingy days, that have only twenty-four hours to them! And I have to tell how I love you, and how I've missed you, and all I've thought, and, I'm afraid, some things I've done, and how ...'

'Have you done anything very bad, Willoughby?' asked Lucy, with a note of hopefulness in her voice.

'Good God! yes,' said he. 'If those are crimes one can commit walking in one's sleep. They're so unreal though. Let's get a taxi.'

'Stop,' said he to the taxi-man, 'on the farther side of the bridge over the Serpentine.'

When the taxi stopped, they got out and walked along by the small end of the Serpentine. 'I have a feeling that all this has happened before,' said Willoughby. 'Did we ever come here? Let's sit down. Are we going to get married at once?'

'It depends,' she said. 'Maybe it would be better if we lived together.'

'But ...' began Willoughby.

'Listen, darling,' she said. 'Tell me everything you've done. I suppose you've led what poor father would call an immoral life. Tell me. I shan't mind. I love you.'

'I think he'd be right,' said Willoughby, 'and I'm sorry for it. Look here, I've embraced a large number of young women, I'm afraid. I was so extremely miserable, and wanted you so much.'

Lucy put her hand on his. 'So did I,' she said.

'Did you want me?' said Willoughby. 'My God, I thought I'd never see you again. These people seemed absolutely unreal, except one perhaps. All the same, I wish to God I hadn't. I used to laugh at your idea of being all for one person, but that was when I was all theories. A taste of life alters that. I wish I'd never touched or thought of any girl but you. It's

absurd in a way, but it's one of those notions that fit our faults, and I see now how important they are. *Can* you forgive me?'

'I've said, I love you,' replied Lucy. 'That's enough, isn't it?'

'It is, with you,' said Willoughby. 'With anyone less perfect it might just be the opposite.'

'I don't care what you've done,' said Lucy. 'Not much. It's just a silly hurt one has to take no notice of. Tell me about that one. That one who was not so unreal.'

'Oh, her,' said Willoughby. 'She was a devil. She got me in a certain way, and at the time I must say I was glad to be got. What about her? She was smart, an absolute bitch in some ways, and yet she was a fine thing. I must say that. I was never fond of her till I stopped seeing her, and then in a queer way – it's hard to explain, but it's nothing to do with us. She was as beautiful as can be. Otherwise it would have been horrible, but that made it rather fine. I must tell you it was only a very short time ago.'

'I hope you won't hanker after her because she was so beautiful,' said Lucy. 'I know men are different from women. They seem to think so much of how one's made, physically.'

'You're more beautiful to me,' said Willoughby. 'Infinitely. Besides, what do *you* know about men?' he added, with a laugh. He soon stopped laughing, however.

'Willoughby,' said Lucy, in a voice of terrifying seriousness. 'I know ... I know ... You haven't changed your nature as well as your mind, have you? You did mean what you said?'

'What?' said he.

'I forgive you, you forgive me,' said Lucy, whose fingers were extremely cold.

'Oh, that from Blake,' said Willoughby. 'Yes, of course I did. But I'm so terribly in love with you. I know I shall hate it. You've had an affair. Oh Lord! Don't mind what I say. I must get used to the idea, that's all.'

'Listen,' said she. 'After that day up in your room – I knew so little, I thought I was going to have a baby. I was so upset at first, I behaved like a fool. It had been bad before,

you know. I was in such a state: I didn't know what counted – father, or you, or just hiding myself, or what. And you didn't write, and didn't write, and I thought you probably hated me. And I was afraid and ashamed to post the letters I wrote you.'

'But I did write,' cried Willoughby. 'Twice. But leave that. Tell me what happened.'

'Well,' said she, 'of course I wasn't going to have a baby. I scarcely *could* have been.'

'Hell!' said Willoughby.

'But while I thought I was,' said she, 'I had to square up to it, and I saw how right you were, and how beastly the ideas were, that made you and father and me miserable in different ways over what was harmless and good – and so forth. Well, I had agreed with you before, because I was so fond of you, but now I *saw* it. I began to hate things in the way you did.'

'Go on,' said Willoughby.

'Well, anyway,' she said, 'I thought, as you've often said, how contemptible it was for a woman to be at the mercy of conventions and circumstances, and how she ought to be a person standing on her own feet and have her own life, and damn all the sentimental notions.'

'Did I say that?' cried Willoughby in amazement. 'When?'

'Oh, hundreds of times,' said she. 'When we were down at Budleigh Salterton, and ever so many times. And you were right, of course, perfectly right, and I wish I'd seen it before it was too late. So I thought I'd try to make something real for myself out of my music. You were never much interested in it, but I was terribly keen. I thought if I could never play well enough – I thought I understood it better than a lot of people, and I could become a critic if I studied. There are not many ...'

'Go on,' said Willoughby, 'for heaven's sake.'

'Anyway,' she said, 'I went back to Leipzig, to study. And I was still so miserable. They gave parties there. And one night there was someone I thought was like you ... And I felt absolutely at an end that evening. It was ... Oh, well! We drank and sang, and – in the end he saw me home.'

'Well?' said Willoughby. 'Oh, Good Lord! I see. Never

mind. I wish it had not been like that, that's all. Don't worry. Let me swear a little. I'll swallow it soon.' And with that he gave her a rather forced smile, and squeezed her hand.

'Did you go on with him after that once?' said he. 'Just tell me that.'

'Not for long,' said Lucy. 'He was beastly, really.'

'Oh, hell!' said Willoughby. 'Was he? Beastly? Go on.'

'And then ...' began Lucy. 'Look here,' she said in a firmer voice. 'It's no good stringing this out. He was not the only one. You'd better take it I've done more or less what you have. Only not nearly as many. But more than one. But not even one of them counted.'

'Perhaps that makes it worse,' said Willoughby. 'I can't bear to think of the casualness of it.'

'It wasn't really casual,' she said.

'Oh! Oh, indeed?' cried he. 'You were in love, then?'

'You should know what I mean,' she said. 'You know how unreal it is, compared to this.'

'I must say,' observed Willoughby, 'that it seems extremely real to me. I wish it didn't.'

'It's no realler than what you've done is to me,' said Lucy, with some spirit. 'Hang it! I'm not ashamed of it. Don't look at me like that. It's not a crime. I didn't look at you in that way.'

'I'm sorry,' said Willoughby, trying to look in some other way, with the most pallid results. 'Whatever it is, we've both done the same thing. Unless, that is, things are different for men and women. People used to think so. There's this difference: that probably something – what shall I call it – *freshness*, is a bigger element in a girl's attractiveness to a man than t'other way about, do you see?'

'But,' cried Lucy, in consternation, 'you don't regard me as a sort of *peach*, do you? Whose bloom can be rubbed off? You used to say nothing was more disgusting than men who thought like that of women. You used to say that in these years the spirit must purge itself. ...'

'Oh, come,' said Willoughby, 'I know I'm being a beast.

What does it matter, after all? But I must know one thing. Tell me ...' Here he asked a question of a very particular nature.

Lucy turned an angry red. 'I did not ask you that sort of thing,' said she.

'No, no,' said he. 'You did not. But perhaps men are different. How right those devils were! And how wrong I was! I must know this; if I do not, I shall live in a nightmare.'

'Oh, well then,' cried Lucy. 'If you must know – yes.'

'Good God Almighty!' observed Willoughby in a very unhappy tone.

'Look here,' said Lucy in a strained, hard voice. 'If you are going to say that sort of thing, I see it would be hopeless for us. I was wrong to come, that's all. If you loved me ...'

'Do you think I should feel like this if I did not?' said he. 'I see clearly men are different from women. You must allow me to be angry, otherwise I shall go mad. And I shall go mad also if anything is left to my imagination. I shall dream the most abominable things. I shall catch some hint, in some phrase of yours, of a knowledge ...'

'And how will you recognise it?' said she, her very sweet red lip leaving bare, for a moment, the white teeth below.

'I must know everything,' cried Willoughby, 'in order to stare it to death. I must know, for example (tell me quickly), whether ...' And he asked a string of questions, all of a most abominable particularity.

'You will,' said Lucy, 'not know everything. Not because I am ashamed of it, but because I am a person, and even with you I have a right to my wretched secrets. Either such things count nothing compared with our love, as you once said (it was when you were telling me about that Lady Stumber), or they count a lot. I could not live with anyone to whom they counted a lot.'

'Ah,' cried he. 'You would answer if it were not *yes*. Would you not? It is *yes*, I know. Good God! *You!*'

Lucy got up, and transfixing Willoughby with a glance, which would have reminded an aesthete of two poignards

which have been left out in the dew, said she: 'Which is it to be, Willoughby? I've come after you. I've thought about you every day – every hour, it seems – since that day we parted. I've felt something here,' she said, putting her hand to her breast in almost too emphatic a manner. 'I have felt something *here*, which makes other experiences seem like – *nothing*.'

Willoughby was overcome by the magnificence of this gesture, and by the apparition of a haggard look which had been lurking in the background of her face. 'And she is two years younger than I am!' he thought.

He sprang up. 'You are the finest thing I've ever known,' cried he, 'and I love you more than ever I did. It's not your bloody crimes (for crimes they are in you, and that I *will* call them), but my weaknesses, I'm afraid of. I feel now it would make no difference if you were a Messalina. But I know myself. You know how I get bitten by an idea. I didn't realise how much I'd changed till now. I'm afraid of what may happen next month, next year.'

'Very well,' said she, with a gesture that said farewell to more than her companion.

'No,' said he, 'you're too hasty. I express myself badly, I know. I will either be absolutely square with you on this business, or nothing. I can't judge my feelings or myself in the first shock of it. You must give me time if you want an answer I know I can stand by.'

'I'm sorry you are not sure at once,' said Lucy. 'Very well, then. I shall be a here a week. I'm staying with a girl called Kenstall, Mary Kenstall, in Tavistock Square.'

'What? With *her*?' cried Willoughby. 'Are you staying with *her*?'

'Do you know her, then?' said Lucy, with a certain significance.

'I've heard of her,' said Willoughby, 'and that's enough.'

'Oh, don't be a fool, Willoughby,' said Lucy. 'You can ring me up there, or write, any time this week. I shan't wait longer. Good-bye. Don't come.'

And with that she went off, leaving Willoughby to feel

that the interview had terminated very meanly, which, indeed, was not surprising. And he felt also that it was very unlike Lucy to be staying with Mary Kenstall in Tavistock Square.

CHAPTER XXV

I can't! I can't! – Someone in the room – A positive little Sickert – The flat bug – Willoughby becomes a boy-friend – Dastardly bludgeoning of a heart – An astonishing proposal concerning Adele and Margherita – The falcon strikes – An intending homicide.

'I HAVE behaved very badly,' said Willoughby to himself. 'I ought to have hugged her, and carried on squashing this nasty feeling in secret.' There is this excuse for him: it is not very easy to hug on a seat in Hyde Park at two in the afternoon, and when the body is inactive, the imagination is busy. Moreover, our hero was of that saturnine complexion that finds jealousy such a problem in these days. He was soon convinced he was the jealousest beast in the world, and he found the crime carried its own punishment. In short, he suffered every ugly pain it is possible to conceive. It need only be said that these pains were so extraordinarily severe that, even during his off-hours, the memory of them restrained him from the telephone.

'It would be better,' he said to himself, in the longing reaction from one very lively bout, 'if we could lie together once, and pass out, damn it!' (A keen observer would have been delighted by his use of the scriptural term.) However, he was not so insane as to make this proposal to his beloved. On the other hand, he had no idea of an alternative.

On the third evening he broke down, or squared up, call it what you will, and fled to a telephone box, to announce his immediate arrival in Tavistock Square. 'Nothing else matters!' he cried, an indescribable joy shining and glistening over all the wrack of his heart.

'Is that Mr. Schölte?' asked a female voice. 'Miss Langton asked me to say she'd gone on.'

'Thank you very much indeed,' said Willoughby, hanging up the receiver. He walked very carefully out of the box, as one needs to when one is quite hollow.

'He is probably,' said he to himself, and quite correctly, 'a charming fellow, and the most ordinary of friends. She probably has a great many friends on the continent: everybody likes her. Some of them will pay visits to England, and others send letters with the news and good wishes. How she would suffer under, and despise, and hate, a cowardly glance that I should certainly be unable to control! I suppose I must think it over again. Better anything than entangle her in a *poisonous* life.'

Here is a sad thing. Our unfortunate Willoughby did not at all like the prospect of thinking it over again. In fact, his reflections had utterly exhausted him. Exhaustion induces toxins in the blood: Willoughby felt all the nausea of some poor devil who is taking the overdose cure for alcohol or nicotine. He grew pale, cold (his hands and feet were appallingly cold), he thought he would be sick, his head swam. 'I can't! I can't!' he cried, referring to further thought, and with that he turned into a pub, utterly beat, and read the evening paper.

That morning he had seen old Hendred off to the seaside. 'I hope you'll come back as fit as a fiddle,' he had said, looking in through the door of the compartment. The philosopher had not received this with his usual elaborate courtesy. 'I hope so too,' he had said, 'but I am not as young as you are. At my age there is no pleasure in sneering at things.' And he had fixed Willoughby with his rimmy old eye, with an expression such as Faust may have put on, at some of his later interviews with Mephistopheles. 'Canst thou,' he had inquired, 'minister to a mind diseased? Not with a fortnight at Margate.'

'A week-end there,' Willoughby had said, 'has been known to effect extraordinary improvements sometimes.'

'Ah, you can sneer,' the old chap had murmured, sitting back in his corner. He had become extremely crusty of late: on the other hand, it is true that Willoughby had recently been hissing like a serpent on the subject of the perfectibility of man.

Willoughby thought of the episode as one which anyone, capable of finding anything amusing, might find amusing. 'Still,' thought he now, over his beer, 'it's a pity anyone should suffer. I've spat too much venom into his ear the last few days. How we writhe!' He was referring to the human race, with the picture in his mind of a pit of uneasy vipers. He dwelt on it awhile with genuine pleasure: this *nature film* offered a pleasingly impersonal contrast to certain recent items on the programme of his little private cinema.

'I shall be alone to-night,' he thought. 'I hope I may sleep. I think I should if I did not twitch so. I'm tired enough. Oh yes, I'm tired.' He kept brushing at his eyes, or perhaps at his whole face, as if to brush cobwebs away.

He left his beer, and began to walk about the streets. The pavements still retained a little of the heat of the day, the sky still had something which was neither daylight nor day-colour: it was not dead yet. Under such a living turquoise the lamps are effulgent, exhalations of gold, fountains of it: some of it seems to run down the drain. People light a fag, pick their teeth, go off to the pictures: the young girls look over their shoulders and giggle. The streets are never so rich with life, they are murmurous; you would think everyone was happy.

I should like to convey to you what an extraordinary pain excruciated our hero's face as he pressed his way through this warmth, and light, and rustle, and murmur. You can imagine a stone statue with a face split right across, time out of mind ago. Such a split, in stone, might remember frost or fire. ...

Very well, he walked about in some discomfort; at last he decided to walk no more, and the reason was, he thought his legs might give way beneath him. He thought he had been walking for many hours: actually it was only ten o'clock.

So he turned back, got back to the stale house, dragged his way up the stale staircase, into whose reek his unprofitable days were well mixed by now: he smelt his yesterdays festering among the fat. He opened the door of his room, which was precious stuffy, being dead under the slates. It was dark as

pitch after the street lights; he took a pace or two inside, fumbling for some matches, then stopped, all his bloody hackles up. Somebody was in the room.

'Who's that?' said Willoughby, throwing up his left arm, for he was at that startled moment when there are only enemies. There was no answer. He unclenched his right hand, picked hold of the match-box, lit a flower of light: the pattern of the wall-paper clicked up round him, shadows, the bedstead: on the bed was a female figure, lying face downwards. The match, wrongly held, immediately went out. Willoughby's eye had kodaked the attitude of a beaten child, sulking in tears, a short skirt rumpled up, an inch of bare leg, a high degree of consciousness, and, most unfortunately, black hair.

He was as cool as a cucumber, and lit the little shadeless paraffin lamp (for there was no gas on the top floor). Its cheap, shack glare soaked into the darkness as might the oil itself into newspaper.

Frances, lying on the bed, didn't budge an inch. Willoughby went over, and stood looking down at her, as a man looks at the card he's backed, supposing it to be the wrong colour. At such moments one's reflections are more inclined to be wispy than profound.

'It will not be quite the same,' thought Willoughby, 'being a waster now. After that. And after all my notions of virtue. Never mind, perhaps only the damned see beauty.' He had noted the black hair, the whitish pillow, the dirty yellow wall-paper, streaked with deplorable garlands: a well-arranged square foot, a positive little Sickert. 'This is it, then,' said he to himself.

Frances did not move, she still pretended to be asleep, a pose: her face on her spread fingers, her body on her light coat spread on the bed, the inch of flesh showing.

'All right,' said Willoughby aloud, and in a very flat voice. He leant over and bit the interesting inch of flesh. Frances doubled back like a ferret.

'Hullo, Frank!' said he.

She sat up, but still didn't speak, holding her spread fingers up, looking at him from behind their frondage, pretending to be more wild than she was, and more wary than she need be.

Willoughby began to speak again. She put her paw out, to pinch his lips together. 'Not a word!' she said. '*Go on.*'

Instead, our hero sat down in the wooden chair, put his arm on the bare table: the raw light beside him caverned out his eyes, and gave his face the colour of the raw wood.

Frances, on the other hand, thrusting her lovely face up like a bloom into the light, seemed to spill the shadows off it, as if they were too coarse to cling to so bright and shining a face. She regarded our hero with a gaze of the keenest satisfaction: her eyes were as bright as diamonds, their glance had no flaw of tenderness or trouble. In fact, her amazing loveliness, electric with life, gave her the effect of an apparition, glorious in a pillar or its own light, brighter and purer than that of the nasty lamp; a frightening miracle; the radiant explosion of some other world into the deadish squalor and cheapness of the room. A little fragrance, which was by no means that of brimstone, drifted over from where she had pressed herself to the bed. Willoughby inhaled it as some sufferer might an anaesthetic. The effect was instantaneous: a softening, a relaxing, a weakening into ease.

'My God, Frank!' he said. 'How beautiful you are!' He offered this compliment rather more sullenly than the young prince did to the Sanseverina; more, perhaps, as a soul, grudgingly surprised, might offer it, on being presented to Pluto's lady.

'You look worn out,' she said. 'You look miserable. Hurrah! So you are in love with me, after all!'

'I'll show you,' said he, rising from his chair, 'exactly how much I'm in love with you.'

Frances found no fault with the demonstration. It must be admitted that Willoughby, though he spoke hard and felt hard, was moved very strangely by that perfume, in another part of his being. It represented a lost life, in which at least there were caresses, and such a light, pleasant, pretty little heartache as

you don't come by in these days. Accordingly, at a certain moment, he put down his head in a certain manner, sighed in rather an absurd way: Frances was quite moved by it.

'Ah, you hateful spooney!' she said. 'You know how badly I'll treat you if you behave like a fool. Never mind, to-night I won't. It's all over now, isn't it?'

'Yes,' said Willoughby, with a laugh you would have found infectious, 'Yes, not half! It's all over now.'

'Look,' said Frances. 'Shall I come and share your garret? What a place! I think there'd be a distinct kick in coming here to live as long as I could stand it – and you. I shall buy a four-and-elevenpenny skirt, and a two-and-elevenpenny blouse. And what shall I wear underneath? These things? Or would it be more amusing ...?'

'You can do as you bloody well like,' said Willoughby.

'Very well,' said she, as pleased as a child with a new toy. 'No need to go out now. You've dined, I suppose.'

'Oh, ah! Yes, I've dined,' said Willoughby, and began to laugh again, for, as a matter of fact, he had not.

When the light was blown out, he permitted himself to think a little more. 'It's all for the best,' he said. 'The thing has solved itself. I should only have made her miserable. Here I can keep a hard face on, say nothing, and give as good as I get. The great thing is, it's over. I'm tired, I think, in the very marrow of my bones.' It was necessary for him to repeat pretty often that it was over, for there are some fatigues that seem not to end with the effort, but to groan and echo with the memory of it, so as to make a rack of rest.

Willoughby found too many pictures on his dropped eyelids: he raised them again. Someone had switched a light on, late, in an uncurtained window opposite and far below. A bent square, as of moonlight upside-down, of a rippling, watered pattern, shone upon the ceiling. The stagnant air, palpable and flabby, seemed to sag away from the plaster, and on to the bed, where it oozed its heavy way into the living hair, new-washed with some piney stuff, on the grey pillow beside him. The light was reflected from above, her face caught it, a mask of

sleeping silver, the closed eyes like crumbling patches of dark in its heavy brightness.

He thought what a small and vivid head this was, what a clean scalp; and of her sleek body, as fresh as could be, slidden down between the frowsy sheets. 'That,' he thought, 'is delightful! They don't mind what dirt ...'

'I wish she had fur,' he thought. 'That's all. However, what is a little baldness?'

His reflections continuing in this pleasant vein, he stared at the light on the ceiling till suddenly it vanished: his eyes closed as automatically as workers knock off: he was gliding into a dream which, as dreams do, appeared not too bad to begin with, when suddenly Frances made her electric movement beside him: 'Quickly!' she said. 'Quickly! Light the light.'

'Why? What is it?' said he.

'*Something*,' said she. 'Do light the light. Quick.'

Willoughby, complying, blinked in the raw, mineral glare. He saw Frances sitting up in bed, her face very much awry: 'I've been bitten,' she said.

'It may,' said he, with great composure, 'be only a flea.'

'I felt something on me,' said she. She pushed back the bedclothes and held up her apricot shift, handkerchiefwise, in a skein across her bosom, as if in some modest instinct, thrown up by the shock.

Willoughby brought the light nearer. 'Oh yes,' he said, for already on her extremely fine skin, low down on the stomach, there were two or three puffy red lumps, which he did not find wholly unattractive.

She shifted her pretty thigh: at once the flat bug, enormous, hateful, a scuttling crust of dried blood, ran flatly over the edge of the bed. Willoughby found the sight a disturbing one. 'My room,' he thought, 'has carried the joke a little too far.'

'My God!' said Frances. 'I didn't bargain for this.'

'I should like,' said Willoughby, to cover his confusion, 'I should like to see you well pinked by fleas. I admit the bug is game too high even for my stomach.'

'I must get out of this,' she said. 'Will there be one of those things in my clothes?'

'Stand up,' he said, 'and give me the lot. I'll look through them. It's not likely. Here, take this, this is all right. I'm terribly sorry. We sometimes get invasions of these things ...' In short, he made a variety of apologies. Frances, who recovered her *sang-froid* with her dress, asked him would he not come along with her.

'You can't stay in this hole,' she said.

'I will not come,' he said, 'lest you should mistake me for the bug. Go home, and bath, and lie alone between your clean sheets. Forgetfulness will come. And so will I, at eleven in the morning, an hour at which there is no such thing as a bug.'

In the morning, however, Frances seemed by no means convinced that such parasites had retired into non-existence.

'I don't hate you in the least for it,' she said, in reply to a tender inquiry. 'But it's very odd I don't.'

'You are all I have in the world,' observed Willoughby, with what he sincerely believed to be a leer.

'I can tell you I hope so,' said she. 'All the same, I find myself glancing at your clothes, now and then, to make sure of it. I'm not going to have my pleasures spoiled by that sort of thing. Look here; as long as we amuse one another, you may as well stay here.'

'There's an objection to that,' said Willoughby.' In fact there are several. The chief is, I should want to pay half the rent. I might amuse you a little too much if I didn't pay half the rent.'

'You can pay all of it if you like,' said Frances, who was not without diplomacy.

'I told you how I was fixed,' said he.

'In that case you can't pay any of it,' said Frances. 'It makes no odds. Anyhow, I took it for a year and paid the whole in advance. Here's the flat, whether you come or not. You'd certainly come to a house in the country. I'm not asking you to live here for the rest of your life; don't flatter yourself. What's the difference between coming here nearly every night, and

having a room here? There are enough of them. I'm not going to have you coming to me from that place, bringing bugs. It's for my own sake I ask you.' And so forth. After a good deal of parley, and the drawing up of a positive charter, Willoughby agreed, for the truth is, he had no great appetite for his frowsy little room, and a very considerable one for any sort of change and distraction.

This seemed to him the more necessary in that, being a lad of spirit, he did not exactly hug the chains that had tightened up so alarmingly about him. He was no worshipper of love for its own sake; he liked too well that wit which is said to be the enemy of love, and on which the soft emotion takes such ample revenges. He was of that kidney that swears and curses when it is hurt, consequently he was infuriated, as well as surprised, to find himself suffering such misery. 'I am soft,' he said. 'I must take a course of noise and folly. Pain is a good servant, but a bad master – like all other bloody masters.'

He found noise enough, for now he was at the flat when Frances received her other friends. Most of them he had not met before; he was introduced with the utmost frankness. 'This,' Frances would say, 'is my boy-friend. Sulky looking beast, don't you think?' The young women who received this information accorded Willoughby a very special smile.

When one considers the multitude of sots who parade with so intolerable a pride the veriest smudges of womanhood, potato-sacks, mere needles, unlovely dolls, shrill-voiced contradictors, frumps, cretins, every sort of horror, and who impertinently assume one's envy as a matter of course; when one considers all these, it should not be hard to forgive Willoughby some little complacency in playing the part of a reigning lover. Perhaps the court had seen rather more of the dynasty than some would have found pleasant: Willoughby gave hardly a thought to that side of the matter. All this jealousy lay shrunken and cold under his heart, like a toad under a stone.

There is a very great beauty in being utterly lost and damned: one appreciates all the little whimsicalities. It is important, however, to shrug one's shoulders in a certain fashion

several times a day; in that fashion, I mean, that jolts one a notch deeper. A great thinker has pointed out that we never stand still, so there must always be the danger of working up, like a flint, or else becoming acclimatised to a particular circle in Tartarus, in which case one might forget one is utterly lost, and nothing is more odious than the comparative.

Our hero found ample opportunities for shrugging his shoulders: he did so on entering taxis, restaurants, the foyers of theatres, and the booking-office for the Paris plane.

'You do not expect me,' said Frances, 'to walk when I'm bored with walking. A taxi costs the same for one as for two.' Willoughby could not dispute this: in any case Frances had signalled the taxi. 'Take this,' she said, handing him her purse. 'You pay, or they'll think I'm a tart and you're my ... What's the word?'

Willoughby supplied the word with great precision. 'It would be terrible if they thought that,' he said, with a smile.

'In that case, you'd better stick to that for the evening,' said Frances, 'for I want to go on for a drink afterwards, and there'll be waiters, and two or three people may be there.'

At first, it must be admitted, Willoughby used to fumble his purse in his pocket. Before very long he produced it with a most peculiar smile. All that can be said for him is, that he treated Frances with appalling rudeness on these occasions.

'It must be like that night,' she whispered, looking at him under her lashes, 'when I put all that stuff on my face, to get the sensation of people taking me for your pick-up. Do you get a sensation?'

'I never take any notice of sensations,' said Willoughby, with a snarl.

'That is a dull thing to say,' she replied, with a pout.

It is amazing what little refinements can be introduced into this sort of thing. The object is, to deprive one's pain of its fulcrum, one's vanity. Our good Willoughby was fortunate in an abundance of proof that he was quite worthless, so that it did not matter what happened to him. Such proof, though, is like a form of art; if it is to be kept alive, it must not be locked

away in the museums and archives of the mind; there must always be another little example. Willoughby supplied these; he was prolific.

It is not to be denied that he found a very great deal of pleasure in it, of a certain order. It was akin perhaps to that of the surréaliste, who, out of the most insignificant materials – string, tintacks, the sole of an old boot – makes up a superb expression of futility, imbecility, surrender, decay.

Or, if you like to take a more favourable view of him, he had the pluck of the devil, and, his heart offending him, tore it out, or tried to, and tried to cast it from him. He knew the best way to quiet this gnawing thing was to give it a stab for itself: 'Lie quiet, you bastard!' He wounded it to the point of insensibility, three, four, sometimes ten times a day. However, the battered thing would not die. You know that sensation in nightmare, where, every time you wound the blind, slobbering adversary, it becomes more formidable, and, though smashed almost to pieces, still it will not die. ...

Frances, after a very short time, guessed that Willoughby was trying to defeat life by making himself its most futile example, and very loyally lent him all the assistance in her power. She had seen what we have called *the Tory* in him before he had announced it to himself. Indeed, perhaps it had always been perceptible, even to Black Stock at Miss Posselthwaite's. Now Frances would kill *Tory* as grey squirrel kills brown – by nature. There were two of the best-dressed girls you can possibly imagine, great confidantes of hers, always together, very supercilious to the rest of the world, very good-looking. Their names were Adele and Margherita. They admired Frances' style, her inimitable voice, the back of her neck, and Willoughby. Very well, one day Frances made him the most astonishing proposal concerning Adele and Margherita.

Sometimes, more austerely devoted to the same good end, she would warn him against some pretty hussy or other, *because she was poor*, or she would desire rather a large number of those little services which it is the delight of any man to render,

while still he pays the bills. All the same, these were positive caresses, offered with the best will in the world, for what is the good of having claws if one does not protrude them now and then, just to show one has them, and to be esteemed for not putting them to any serious use? Besides, Willoughby gave as good as ever he got, for his roughness, which was very pronounced on these occasions, had a peculiar fascination for his hostess, and when she had provoked it by hinting that he was her slave, she sometimes found herself left with the entirely disagreeable impression that part of her was his.

This made it all the worse when at last she smoked the other aspect of Willoughby's not unnoticeable vindictiveness: that he was endeavouring to batter himself into a state of insensibility on account of some influence unknown. In the ordinary way she might have extracted a singularly delicious sensation out of this; as it was, she experienced, without being at any trouble to extract it, a singularly unpleasant one.

Frances was a girl of generous spirit; she desired to share everything with her lover. What is more, their conversation was of the utmost frankness. They were people of insolence and intelligence, and in their first enthusiasm they had discussed not only all the little elaborations of physical pleasure, but the exploitation of those unreasonable nostalgias and longings, those stretched strings of the spirit, out of which very pretty music can be made, if they are torn at by a knowing and a courageous hand.

Now one cannot, in company with another person of beauty and wit and charm, explore this section of the continent of pleasure, where those delicately keen visions which are the best by-product of misery are to be found, without sharing a certain amount of *data*. Moreover, young women, even if they are so smart and so depraved as to have attained the most irreproachable style, and young men, even when they are bolting with the bit between their teeth, are still liable to occasional moments of weakness. An assumed hunger may excite the salivary glands, an assumed smile, like artificial sunlight, may set good humour a-growing and a-blowing in the

wintry space behind it. Very well, these two young people had only too often assumed a certain attitude, which is generally the result of tenderness, confidence, love. Where it is not the effect of these things, it will, in persons of pleasant nature, act temporarily at least as a cause of them. In short, there had been moments, admittedly late at night, when they were fatigued, when Frances had been rather less debonair and hard than she thought proper, and Willoughby had been positively sentimental. A further exchange of *data*, in slightly different terms, had taken place.

Frances, then, was aware that a certain young woman, whose hair was of a certain colour, whose mouth was not unlike a red apple freshly bitten into, and who had moreover the absurd but appetising qualities of innocence, simplicity, sincerity, goodness, had played a very large part in her *boy-friend's* earlier life. She knew him well enough to be sure no new element had lately come in: she was on the scent, and she was on the line: however fast she worked she could hardly overrun it.

And it must be admitted she worked as keen, and as quiet, and as close, and as fast as the best bitch that ever ran with the Quorn. She went over with Willoughby the catalogue of his acquaintances of two or three years ago, ticked up one or two likely names among them, paid her little visits: pretty soon she had the name of Lucy Langton engraved upon the tablets of her memory, with three black crosses against it. Willoughby, however, had not the faintest idea that she knew this name.

Frances mentioned it casually in any company of which she chanced to make one: before a fortnight was over, a young woman of enlightened views, yielding to the common itch of gregariousness, spoke up from a tubular armchair at the tea-party of Mr Septimus Sinclair, amateur and critic of all things musical. 'What?' inquired this young woman. 'Are you a friend of Lucy's? Strange girl! *Strange* girl! She was staying with me a few weeks ago.'

'She *is* strange,' observed Frances, seating herself on an arm of this tubular chair, and even being so clumsy as to brush

against this young woman, who wore a very neat collar and tie. 'I must say that to me she is not only strange but fascinating.'

'I am extremely fond of her,' replied this young woman, whose name was Mary Kenstall, 'but I do think she needs psycho-analysing.'

'I have always been amused by her inhibitions,' said Frances. Though I'm awfully sorry for her, too. Still, she struggles ...'

'Did you know her three or four years ago?' replied the other. 'Ah, if you had known her then, you would realise what she is up against. Of course she was a mere child, but – hang it! In these days!'

'I should hardly say she was a prude,' said Frances, 'but then I don't know her intimately.'

'She is one of my dearest friends,' returned Miss Kenstall (which was an impudent lie), 'and I can tell you that although she *talks* sensibly enough now, she still has the most ridiculous emotions. She is not happy, which is all the more significant because I know that in Leipzig there are literally dozens of people, of both sexes ' (added this young woman with a very tolerant smile), 'who are simply mad about her.'

There is nothing breeds intimacy so quickly as having a friend in common. Frances was so far moved by this soft appeal as to overlook the fact that Miss Kenstall was no better than a Bloomsbury caterpillar, a poor worm, proud of its faint chance of producing some of the artistic silk which is worn once or twice by people who know what's what. Celia had even less difficulty in overcoming her austere repugnance to a fashionable, non-serious person. They had one or two little séances very soon afterwards, at which they discussed the only subject they had in common.

'For example,' said Miss Kenstall, on one of these occasions, 'there was a young man (perhaps you know him—Schölte? Ugly, but a musical genius, they say, and his wife's a Lesbian) ... Well, he simply followed her from Leipzig, and she was as rude to him ...'

It need hardly be said, to those aware of the grades of accuracy that accord with each step in the hierarchy of Blooms-

bury Squares, that the good Schölte was an art-dealer, not bad-looking, but rather stupid, married to a wife whom he adored and was adored by, and both were the best and most ordinary friends that Lucy possessed, and that he had arrived in London a week before she did, and each had been surprised to find the other there. However, being a Hun, he had brought Lucy a bouquet, and her hostess had thought it very uncivil in her not to reward him to the utmost of her ability.

'Schölte,' said Frances. 'Well, I must fly.'

Her flight beautifully resembled that of the Peregrine, finest and fiercest of falcons. It is a heart-gladdening sight to see this bird wheel and float in the crystal wilds of the upper air; to see it mark, check, and follow its easy curve round again to that point, whence, with an acceleration whose suddenness and force there is no word to convey, it hurls itself into its mile-long glide, and, all the hills watching, and the air screaming like a Valkyr through its taut pinions, and its shadow skimming along (like death) to be in at the kill – *down* the devil goes, *crash* into the back of the partridge, *up* goes the high puff of feathers— Oh! it is a sight to gladden any heart in the world, except that which beats where stoop and shadow happen to intersect.

By the mercy and grace of inscrutable Providence, it generally happens that this single unappreciative heart is entirely engrossed with its own insignificant business up to the moment of impact. It comes as a surprise.

The good Willoughby, then, was engaged in wounding his heart to death, all unexpectant of assistance, which, moreover, he would have thought to be entirely superfluous. During these days he would frequently make a reference to the sentiment of honour, as an *apéritif* to some belladonna banquet of his own preparation, to which Frances would add a side dish or two. You cannot conceive the surliness with which he treated his benefactress on these occasions, but in this she no longer found any delicious thrill whatsoever.

At other times, he would bend his face down upon her bosom: you would have taken them for a pair of blessed turtle

doves. At such moments the female is said to survey her mate, tenderly, as from afar off and high above. Frances, who had been gratified by a glimpse of a positively tetanus expression, and who could feel the terrific muscular strain of this charming relaxation, surveyed him as if she were about a mile off, and high above.

It was her custom, once a week or so, to entertain a few friends in the evening. If companionate couples are in the habit of quarrelling, they generally arrange a few bitter words by way of appetiser before little occasions of this sort. Frances and Willoughby were no exception to so universal a rule: they generally spent dinner discussing a young gentleman with pale and crinkly hair, whom one of them seemed to like much better than the other did.

On this particular evening, Willoughby had sustained his part in the discussion with conspicuous success. This spoiled child of fortune did not relish even her most exquisite gifts. Numbers of his less pampered fellow-men would have been delighted to induce, in so rare a girl as Frances, that peculiar expression which was her equivalent for angry tears. Willoughby, like a cake-stuffed bantling, felt merely sick on reaching this positive *bonne bouche* of his peculiar privileges.

Everybody that evening was as gay as could be. The conversation was as refined as the pleasures of Petronius. At about eleven o'clock, Frances having her back to Willoughby, but he not being engaged in any conversation at the moment, as often he was not: she remarked in the lightest tone: 'Why, that reminds me of one Lucy Langton and Schölte, of whom I've just heard something amusing.'

Her audience scenting a tit-bit, someone made the obvious inquiry. 'Oh,' she said, 'it was merely something Dirty Barclay told me,' mentioning a man of a singularly repulsive nature. 'He's gone to Germany, you know. Well, he wrote me one of his maniac letters. One would think that, if such things happened to one, one would keep them very close. But you know what he's like, the slug.'

Everybody knew exactly what he was like, but desired par-

ticulars of this current example. 'Oh,' said Frances, 'only that he met Schölte (you all know Schölte, surely?) in a café over there, with this charmer, whom I believe I've met there myself – Langton, a music student, fair girl, half mad in a quiet way. Anyway, they were both as tight as could be, wouldn't let Barclay go – I can see him trying, can't you? Anyway, they took him along with them, to one of those amusing little entertainments the Germans are so fond of: in the end they stayed the night at the place, all in the same apartment. Wait till some of these people have gone, and I'll show you the letter. It only came this evening.'

Willoughby received all this very quietly. He found it necessary, nevertheless, to withdraw to his room, which was at the other end of the flat. 'I cannot believe it,' he said. 'However, it has got to be believed. I may as well face up to it.' His natural inclination, to believe ill, lest it should be fear prevented him, did him cruel service on this occasion. 'How could she be making it up?' he said. 'She did not even know I was listening. Besides – the details. No man would use actual names if it wasn't true. All the same, I shall kill him. *And* the other fellow. *And* her?

'I wish I could wipe the bloody world out,' he said.

'If only I could believe it impossible,' he said. 'I should have, once.'

The fact is, our hero was paying very appropriately for a certain little frolic of his own. 'It is the same sort of thing,' he said, 'and it appeared to me not to matter. There is no reason why it should, for nothing does. But all the same, I shall clear everything up, for *I don't like it.*' By this time, the blood in his heart had sunken so low, that the poor old idea of honour, which he had drowned in it, showed again above the surface. It is not too much to say that he saw his past life, and what he thought to be Lucy's present one, in a series of vivid pictures.

'It would be better,' he said, 'to clear the bloody stage. *I don't like it.*' His fury began to mount in him, very slowly and steadily. 'It's all my fault,' he said, with a very dangerous look indeed. 'Very well.'

At this moment, Frances looked in on him, to ask him where he had got to, and if he was not going to rejoin the party. There was enough light from the passage for her to see his face, the expression of which gave her a very definite sensation indeed. He waved his hand, and she closed the door again. 'Upon my word,' she thought, 'I closed that door rather too quickly. I shall tell him I thought he was being sick. *I say!*'

Frances, though she had behaved a little nervously, was a girl who believed in meeting the effects of too much audacity with more audacity. She loved the sense of having gone too far, and the excitement of going farther. All the same, before rejoining her friends, she stopped for a moment in the passage, with her hand to her mouth. 'He will not,' she said to herself, 'come out of that room all night. But if he did!' Frances, it must be remembered, had been working half in the dark. She did not at all like the idea of a tête-à-tête in the small hours of the morning with a young man who looked as Willoughby did, and who might either ask inconvenient questions, or, in the other extreme, none at all.

On the other hand, she was not the sort of girl to creep away out of her own place, and put up with someone else for the night.

Accordingly, 'Come, people,' she said. 'Let's have some champagne.' She was at her very gayest. The young man with the pale crinkly hair, who was a Danish athlete, and as catholic in his tastes as an antique Roman one, thought she had never looked so bewitching. He ventured to express this opinion to her in an aside.

She received it so pleasantly that this young man began to entertain a certain idea, and when at last everybody was going, he still hung behind.

'My boy-friend,' said Frances, returning from seeing other guests out, 'is in the very devil of a temper to-night. In fact,' she said, lighting a cigarette and glancing round the empty room, 'I'm not sure he doesn't deserve a bit of a *tromping* by way of punishment.'

'I shall be very pleased, dear ladee,' remarked the Dane, 'to haf the great honour of *tromping* anyone for you, in any way you like.'

It must be said, in defence of Frances, that not only did she desire a little company during the night, but she imagined that Willoughby would present so deplorable an appearance in the morning, that her only alternative to remorse (which was out of the question) would be to annihilate him entirely.

After a little parley, therefore, she offered her hospitality to the Danish gentleman, and they retired to her room, which was two or three doors away from Willoughby's.

That unfortunate spent the next few hours without troubling himself to think of Frances at all. But about the time of dawn, when he was still sitting in the same attitude as before, and had driven himself very nearly crazy by his impotent reflections, something brought her name into his mind. He remembered her quite well, but felt a good deal of nausea at the thought of her, because she was somehow connected with this deplorable affair. In another moment, the connection and other details became perfectly clear to him: he was sufficiently mad to conceive the idea that she might wipe the whole thing out by telling him it was a mistake or a joke. He started up, to rush to her at once, to implore, beg, beseech, crave her to tell him it was all wrong, in which case he was prepared to love her for ever in sheer gratitude.

In another moment he had burst into her room. 'Frank!' he almost sobbed, 'Frank!' and switched on the light. He presented so woebegone a look, that the Danish gentleman, rearing himself up in the bed, attempted a little Scandinavian banter.

'Now, sir,' said he, 'thees ees not der way to enter a ladee's room ...'

Our hero, after regarding him for a moment with the expression of a cretin, soon put on that of a criminal lunatic, for a whole flood of irrelevant emotions burst up in his heart. He advanced on the bed, very slowly, his shoulders hunched a little, and his eyes smouldering with the quiet happiness of

the intending homicide. 'The next boat train for Leipzig,' he thought.

The Dane, however, was not prepared to fall in with this view: he flung back the coverings, regardless of the modest sentiments of his hostess, rolled right over her, and was on his feet on the other side of the bed. He was in better trim than Willoughby, and a couple of inches taller: a Greek would have thought him the better arrayed for combat, an Englishman would have preferred Willoughby's equipment. What really balanced the odds, however, was a certain enthusiasm, very perceptible in all the looks and motions of our hero.

As he advanced, the Dane got in two excellent jabs in the face, of which he took no notice whatsoever. Nothing is more disconcerting than to find one's overtures absolutely ignored: the Dane exchanged his confident smile for a more wary look, and compacted himself into a slightly more defensive posture. Willoughby ignored this also, and seized upon his adversary with something of a roar. His object was to withdraw his opponent's throttle from the rest of his neck, squeezing it the while, to save him the trouble of breathing. He received a rain of blows, and lost the skin from one of his ears. He was engrossed in his work, however, and still paid no attention.

Frances did not like the look of things at all. She loved sport, and would have heartily relished a boxing match, but this had all the appearance of murder. She saw the Dane going black in the face: in her mind's eye she saw him dead, and Willoughby on the gallows, and herself on the front pages of the Sunday newspapers. At this last reflection she began to act.

There was a little occasional table by the bed, not meant for the purpose, but strong enough. By this time the Dane was collapsed upon the floor, his hands were still clawing feebly; Willoughby, however, was stooping over him as if to finish the job. Frances therefore began to beat him about the head with this little table: the blows seemed to her to be tremendous, she was afraid of killing him, but he took no notice at all. The Dane's hands dropped, his head wobbled. Frances, in desperation, struck with all her force, and by the greatest

good fortune hit our hero behind the ear, and felled him like a log.

That done, she stared at the two prone figures, utterly paralysed, for the space of a full minute. At the end of that time, Willoughby grunted. Soon he put a hand to the back of his head, shook it, regarded the Dane (who was only choked insensible), and rose to his feet. Frances shrank back.

Willoughby looked at her as if he were trying to remember something, gave up the attempt apparently, and walked out of the room, and of the flat.

CHAPTER XXVI

Slight concussion –
Suicide while temperately insane –
Our hero's nerves are bad - The smell of a kipper –
Going into training – Ollebeare once more –
Feeling the raw – An illusion of nadir –
Landscape with figures

WILLOUGHBY walked out into the early dawn, which was frosty. One has to go somewhere. He thought of Pimlico, but with a shudder. 'I went back there last time,' he said. 'Never again!'

Nevertheless, his head was banging in the most abominable fashion: now and then the street would fade out before his eyes. He could not for the life of him think of any other refuge. The key was in his pocket. In the end he came to a cab-rank, gave the address, and presumably was transported there, for he found himself in his room, supporting himself on the edge of the table. He was so unfortunate as not to recall his early infatuation for the idea of casting himself on his bed, fully clothed, at about the hour of dawn. However, this he did, and fell into a deep sleep, from which he awoke with the same headache, and with the same odd disconnectedness in his ideas of what had happened. He had, in fact, a slight concussion,

and, as all values are comparative, he could hardly have had anything better. At least it was infinitely preferable to expanding his spiritual freedom by further humiliation and suffering.

He got himself some water, and lay down again. Just as it was getting dark, one of the children from the next room opened the door, and withdrew in alarm. Evidently she told her mother: soon afterwards the landlady came padding up the stairs.

'Dear, oh dear, oh dear, Mr Corbo!' she said. 'I didn't ever expect to see you again, sir. Whenever did you come?'

'I came back last night,' he said.

'Why, sir, you've not stirred all day. Aren't you well? Oh dear! Oh dear! You do look bad,' she mooed, examining him with every appearance of concern. 'Would you like the black doctor?'

'No, I'm not well,' he said. 'I'm ill. But no doctor, Miss Montgomery, not on any account.'

The landlady offered him a nice cup of tea, which he accepted, and a stomach tablet, her remedy for all ills, which he refused. He thought she looked at him as if she had something to say. However, he did not want to hear it.

When he had drunk the tea: 'Where's old ... old Mr what's-his-name?' said he, indicating the philosopher's bed, which had not been slept in.

'Why? Didn't you know?' hooted the landlady. 'Oh, pore old gentleman! Oh dear, oh dear! it *has* been so sad. Didn't you hear? I thought you must have heard. I didn't know where to find you. About him walking over the cliffs at Margate? Of course it was an accident, only somebody saw him do it. Walked straight at it, he did, so it was suicide while temperately insane. It was in the papers, because they wouldn't ever have identified him but for one of those support envelopes from the office, so they came round here from there, and then we knew. Because he didn't come back, and you didn't come back, and I said to ...'

'Thank you,' said Willoughby. 'Thank you very much. My head's rather bad. I must go to sleep at once.'

'It's the shock,' moaned the good woman, and withdrew.

As a matter of fact, Willoughby worried very little about the old man, whose decision appeared to him to be a wise one. He would have liked a cablegram from out the inky ether of the Styx, saying, in the fewest possible number of words, whether it was the mechanisation of the wrapper-scrapping industry, or being robbed of his faith in the perfectibility of man, that had predominated in bringing him to this end. As it was, he could not puzzle it out at present. There was a good deal of food for thought, for regret, and probably for remorse, but his bosom was a chest of ice – it would keep: he put it by. Indeed, he put everything by.

Willoughby lay on his back for some days, during which it was now light, now dark, and now he had a nice cup of tea. A piece of toast and margarine accompanied this beverage, but was removed before he had time or desire to take more than a bite out of it; on one occasion there was the hideous proposal of an egg. His appetite was not equal to these delicacies; for the first time in all his vicissitudes our hero was off his feed.

His lowered condition had one great advantage to it; he no longer felt enthusiastic about his little jaunt to Leipzig; it seemed altogether too much of an effort even to think of *clearing the stage*. In fact, it was too much of an effort to think at all: he lay like a sick felon, by whose bedside a warder sits, who in this case was to conduct him from the accidental injury of concussion to the penal treadmill of nervous breakdown. There soon came a day when he rose, washed, dressed, and sat down again, ready to accompany his cicerone.

The next week or two passed in a manner interesting only to the sufferer. That supply of words, with which we name and arrange things, seemed to have dried up. He would sit, lie, or even stand, for hours, staring at something for which there was no word, something like a dirty grey wall. He could see himself running along this wall, which was the past, the future, life, any conceivable outlook: running along, back and forth, like a rat that finds no escape. At this point he would play with his fingers, waiting for a nervous paroxysm. This, when it

came, would occupy him very thoroughly for an hour or two: at the end of it he would break out into a sweat, and say, with a delicious sense of relief: 'It's perfectly clear. An incredibly distasteful effort is necessary to get me out of this hole, but the effort would last a long time. I believe in nothing that would keep me going a tenth part of that time. So I shall stay here.'

He would then examine, with a very polite look, any one of the hundred little details of his environment: a cigarette end, disintegrating in its brown aura in the waters of the abominable slop-pail; a crust, standing in a slop of tea on the bare table; his own leaden hand, the nails of which he had meant to cut last Monday. Reassured by the familiarity of these pleasing objects, he would soon sink, whether it was day or night, into an easy sleep, from which, however, he would sooner or later wake with a villainous start, under the impression that, crouched somewhere in the darkening room, were such interesting visitors as debt, mental decay, the hatefulness of the world, a little scene in Leipzig, Margate, or the neighbourhood of Regent's Park. You may depend he turned very quickly to the future for some hole of escape: failing that, to the past, life, any conceivable outlook, but each and every one seemed like a dirty grey wall, along which he ran, back and forth, like a rat that finds no escape.

There is a tide, however, in every nervous breakdown, a temporary reaction into courage and sense, which, if taken at the full, leads on to recovery.

It was now October; the mornings were nippy, rusty shafts of sunshine passed quite near the window, and struck upon the dustbins in the backyards. There struck upon the smell of squalor and decay, that stood steady in the house, the rusty, golden, invigorating, appetising smell of a kipper. This smell struck also on the squalor and decay in the heart of our unfortunate: 'I could,' he said, 'do with a kipper.'

A flock of geese saved Rome, a spider bore aloft the sluggard soul of Bruce, a dove brought green promise to the Ark; birds, beasts, fishes, every sort of fauna, have at various bitter times and difficult places revived the flagging spirit of man.

The kipper is not the least of God's creatures; on the contrary, it is one of the very best, and it is perhaps the only one, of those which happen to be edible, that may be had in perfection in Pimlico.

Our hero's soul rose up, then: he demanded a kipper. No creature is made to be solitary : he had, on second thoughts, the humanity to demand a pair. With these, he took several cups of tea, and after he had enjoyed this with a solemn fervour, that almost prompts the indelicacy of a ritual comparison, he lit a cigarette, laughed, and swore a little.

'I believe I am,' he declared, 'the most pitiful whiner that ever crawled on this earth. Here I sit, in this stew, merely because of a broken heart, and a few very unpleasant complications. What man has not a broken heart, who has heart at all to be broken? That's a trifle: consider what it must be to be maimed, diseased, hopeless, enslaved! I stay on in this nutshell, where there are nothing but bad dreams. And, after all, unless I am very much mistaken, the door is unlocked.'

He was forced to reassure himself on this point, as neurasthenics often are. However, he recovered from the qualm.

'I was a fool,' he said, 'ever to leave go my notion of old-fashioned virtue, which it took me so long to recognise as my necessity. Whatever happened, I should never have got in this state, had I had the guts to stick to old-fashioned virtue. I poisoned myself. I have made myself a cripple, less than a man. If I am less than a man I will take a master, for though the sunshine looks very attractive, I know what happens when one walks thinking along the roads. Anything to be well, though! To a man who is well, the world is a glorious place, if only he will be content with what is in his reach.'

'I will go into *training*,' he said, 'first to be strong enough to endure, and (who knows?) in a few years to be happy enough to enjoy.'

With that he got up on his pins, and went out, down to the river, and leant on the stone a long while, looking at the hurrying water, which was running brave and high, a sight always inspiriting to the heart of man.

Some honest fellows were taking the road up in the vicinity of Battersea Bridge. They appeared to bear their broken hearts with the greatest good humour: one of them was cooking a panful of rashers against the hour of twelve.

'That is the sort of work a man may do,' thought our hero. 'And without bending more than his back, which is made for it, and without soiling more than his hands, which are made to be soiled. And how soundly the devils must sleep!'

He approached the man who was doing the cooking, and without any thought of being ridiculous: 'How does one get such a job as this?' said he.

In the end he convinced the man he was serious. A certain air of resentment immediately vanished: 'You won't get no such job as this,' replied the other, and not caring to offer such discouragement entirely on his account (for these savages preserve all the outworn elaborations of a courtesy that more civilised beings discard): ''Ere, Joe!' cried he. 'Young bloke wants a job a-picking up the concrete. I dunno wot 'opes *you'd* say.'

Two of the labourers came nearer, resting on their picks, to the indignation of a pushing brassière salesman, who happened to be passing in a baby car. A man is more than a man, however, who does not rest occasionally from pick labour, and less than one, who does not give serious attention to a civil inquiry.

'Blimey, that's a new idea, that is,' remarked the person addressed. 'Dahn on yer luck?' said he to Willoughby. 'Can't yer get a clurk's job in an orfis?'

'I don't want one, anyway,' replied Willoughby. 'I might take one if I was starving. As it is, I'd very much rather do yours.'

'That's a good un,' cried the other in great amazement. 'What do you say, Bert, eh? Me for a nice jammy clurk's job in an orfis. I got a boy,' said he to Willoughby. ''E's started. Ten bob a week, collar and tie, in a lawyer's place, eh? "Don't you start a-looking down on yer old dad, though," says I to 'im. But *'e will.* Gor bless yer! *'E will.* Can't blame him, neither, when you come to look at it.'

Willoughby did not pursue this aspect of the subject, which he found depressing. 'The thing is,' he said, 'I've been ill, and I want some rough work to put me right.'

'Go on, matey,' cried another. 'You go orf for a fortnight to Margate.'

'Oh dear, no!' said Willoughby with a shudder. 'I want to do something like this.'

A small man, of an extremely pessimistic cast of countenance, had joined the group, and now addressed Willoughby from the corner of his mouth, but with great velocity. 'Gotcherticket?' said he.

'Ticket? What ticket?' asked Willoughby.

The small man ejected a positive dart of saliva from the same small aperture between his lips as he employed for conversation. 'Blackleglabour!' said he, very bitterly, and moved away.

'Gern, you *Comrade*!' cried the first man after him. 'Young bloke don't know what yer talking about – *ticket*! All the same, yet gotter '*ave* yer ticket,' said he to Willoughby. 'Well, you pays your bob, then you go and line up along o' plenty of others. Chaps with nippers, see? Well ...'

'I see,' said Willoughby. 'Profession overcrowded, eh?'

'That's it, mate. Don't want no amachoors abaht, these times,' replied the other. 'Besides, they wouldn't give the job to a bloke wot looks more'n 'arf a gennelman – *sorft* – see?'

'Oh, ah!' said Willoughby. 'Well, that's sad. I wonder if there's anything else. Would there be any chance of getting on a ship, do you think?'

A man, on whose considerable arms Willoughby now observed anchors to be tattooed, burst into a fit of gloomy laughter at this. 'Same again, I suppose?' inquired our hero.

'Only worse, mate,' answered the other. 'No, sonny. What you better do is to wait for a fall of snow, and get in on the sweepin': 'bout all there is to it.'

'Well, many thanks,' said Willoughby, preparing to resume his stroll.

''Ere,' called the other, after him. Willoughby turned. ''Ere. Straight,' said the other, in a terrific whisper. '*Dahn an aht? 'ad yer bit 'o tommy this mornin'?*'

Willoughby divined his intention: 'I'm all right that way,' he said. 'Many thanks, all the same.'

'Know what I mean?' added the other.

'Yes, yes,' said Willoughby. 'It's jolly good of you, too. But that's all right.'

'Sure?' said the navvy.

'Quite all right,' said Willoughby. 'Glad you asked me, though. Good-bye.'

He now hurried home, for he sighted, as one sights a fog-bank in the distance, the advancing grey cloud of his disorder. 'Ollebeare's the only thing,' said he. 'I must write and post the letter before that clock strikes one.'

He wrote an extremely brief letter to his uncle, and reached the pillar-box just as the clocks began to chime the hour, upon which his Cinderella good spirits deserted him, he relapsed into the most contemptible depression again, began to twitch, play with his fingers and so forth. 'The better I get, the more I shall think,' said he, 'and the more I think, the worse I shall get.' Altogether, he passed the next two or three days as darkly as if he had never seen daylight. Eventually, however, the following letter arrived.

My dear Nephew,

I am sorry to hear you are in a bad way. Things here, also, are not at all as they should be. I suppose we have never had a Worse Year. Three thunderstorms at Hatching time, each one with Hailstones like hazel nuts, or like Indian corn at least. I think they pelted down with greater Velocity than ever I saw Hailstones come down. My heart bled for the helpless Chicks. Add to that, the accursed Forked-worm took Heavy Toll. Bucknell blames our Fallows, which certainly I had meant to put under Plough, and Lime, this year, and will without fail this side of Christmas. But with so much land being laid down (foul land we've always had) it stands to reason Gapes Must Spread, *whatever one may do. As I told a certain* fool *back in the Summer, land laid*

down out of proportion is worse than any Fallow, six year old or one. Why? Moisture. What else spreads the Worm?

Bucknell, as you may imagine, is much put about to show a good Rise, even to our small way of thinking. What Birds there are, are weak. He is not likely to find you of any great assistance, Feeding being all but done. All the same, come if it will do you good. I will not have you in the house: this Season has made me Nervy and depressed, and not inclined for young company. Some cottager will lodge you. Bucknell will make all arrangements. Heaven knows the vegetable plots need roughing up; they have become stinking sour, for lack of lime in Autumn this many years. I wish I could Renardine the Western Bury, and make the Sun sit out, to get things done. On this place, I regret to say, there is enough even for an unskilled hand to do. Come when you please.

Your affct. uncle
OLLEBEARE

PS. – *Vermin I will not mention. Nothing like it since Egypt. But what you will be interested to hear is, we have had Motor-car Poachers. By great good fortune I came upon their Car.*

PPS. – *If you are ill, you may need money. Here at all events is £10 – Cartridges which will NOT be fired off this Season. I need say no more. – O.*

This letter had the same invigorating effect upon Willoughby as had the smell of kippers: it came at eight, and he caught the ten o'clock train. 'Four years!' said he to himself, as this settled into its stride. 'And nearly as long since Baiye prescribed a course at the university of idleness and meditation. Well, I now fear nothing on earth, and have a vastly greater appreciation of Shakespeare.' He had a volume with him. 'It is extraordinary,' he observed, 'that I could have thought I understood even a line before. Perhaps that is enough. It is true I am a wreck, but that is easily dealt with.'

'My God!' said his uncle, when he saw him. 'You look as if you had gape-worm yourself.'

'You say they are forked?' said Willoughby.

'That's when they couple,' replied Lord Ollebeare. 'Then,

d'ye see, they stick in the poor bird's throat, which, if it's strong enough, sicks the she-worm up on the ground. They stick so hard, though, it loses a lot of blood. Oh, the poor birds! It's miserable to see them.'

'That's it, then,' said Willoughby, with a laugh. 'Has Bucknell found me a place to stay?'

'I don't want you here,' said his uncle apologetically. 'You talk too much for me. You're at Stonor's. However, take a gun when you've a mind to: there's nothing in the world that won't put right.'

Willoughby repressed a morbid thought. However, he was delighted with his room in the Stonor cottage: the walls were well adorned with pictures of Shropshire lads, in tight red jackets, perishing in the wars. The place lay uphill from Ollebeare, the window gave on two diverging escarpments of the limestone, bear-skinned with profound woods, barrows eternal on the bare skyline, and a glimpse through to the Oxfordshire plain, woods, villages, pasture and plough-check, all visible at clear noonday, trains smoking along it, but at blue evening it was like a distant sea.

Stonor was a carter: carters are all very honest men. His wife was a plump body, whose red cheeks it would have done you good to see. Her cooking was good, as cottage cooking goes, *i.e.* who cleans his plate need not worry about his appetite. She kept her geraniums in the deep window space; the walls were of the thick grey stone; outside, the chrysanthemum flared red and ragged in the frost, and the brussels sprouts stood by.

Willoughby invested in army cords, and shirts of an amazing blue, and a pair of the World-famous Super Dreadnought Kip Boots, superlatively ironed. Some will blame him for this, and admittedly when he bought them it was to *feel the raw*, but then he had had a nervous breakdown. The work would have called for them in any case, when the weather turned at the end of the month.

Regard them, if you please, as his uniform for a battle we shall not attempt to describe. The forces, however, must be

enumerated. He had to deal with constant reinforcements of returning thoughts. He had, in the first agonising revulsion, so shut and clenched his mind, that he could not, even when he tried, do more than *name* the various monstrous thoughts that bided their time there. He could not *realise* them. You may imagine a villainous jig-saw, of which each piece is in itself a violent insult to every sensibility, but which has, in its furious haste to present its annihilating total, mercifully jumbled itself, but now lies waiting and compelling its very victim to re-arrange its Gorgon whole.

Fortunately our hero so numbly fumbled each eagerly protruded part, that at first the greater sections were less formidable than the least: they were unbelievable. What made him start and shiver was always some small and concrete incident, such as some utterly forgotten little pleasantry he had indulged in at the expense of the sentiment of honour. Or some trivial aspect of a larger thing might while away a night for him: he could not bear, for example, the thought of his debauched absence from Pimlico when the news of old Hendred's death arrived. As for Lucy, he flung himself a hundred times on that problem, but it was so extremely merciful as to reduce him to a condition of idiocy whenever he thought of it. He was unable to grasp it with his mind, in exactly the same way that one is unable to force one's hand to grasp a red-hot poker, or to feel lingeringly the shape of it if one does.

His allies form a more pleasing list. They were the forces of that world where beauty crows on every dunghill, gleams in every shower, steams from each new-turned sod, musics every jingle and clash and call, grips the hand in rough stuff, is the exultation in tiredness, the bite in frost, the scorch in sunlight: it springs up like a weed, shines fat as harvest, rises like the wood-smell out of yesterday, and blows out of to-morrow like the wet wind of spring.

Here is something which the eye alone can only skim the surface of. The element demands some more tangible conductor: steel and ash-wood are the best of all. Willoughby, when he had learned to manage his fork, experienced an

Antaeus contact every time he drove it in. The last milky-mauve foam of the Michaelmas daisies, which had bewitched his eye while yet he struggled to learn, faded. The last wet ash leaf drifted down the wind, to cleave upon the wet ash-wood in his hand. He was left alone with the sodden earth, a blackening sky, the smoke scarcely rising from his little pyramid of couchy clods. It was that day, when, for the first of a dozen times, the stranger has an illusion of nadir. It was that day, also, when the ache sits heaviest in the unaccustomed back, when novelty's straw flare sinks suddenly to a pitiful ash, when rhythm stutters in its first phrase: there is a devilish, grey, monotonous outlook to the job. One's thoughts, on the other hand, are as active and various as ever.

This was the moment at which Willoughby nearly put aside his fork, *in order to think unhindered.* There are occasions, however, when a very bad temper is worth all the riches of the Orient. It has been noted that our hero was inclined to turn savage, swear, etc., when he was crossed. Very well, then, he now attacked the uninviting trench with a steady vindictiveness. His heel ground the fork past the surrendering stones; a blister on his hand broke, affording him a vivid streak in the monotony of his task. You may not believe it, but as the black frost settled down with the dusk, the warmer earth released its withheld fragrance; the air under the black orchard boughs turned a singularly interesting blue, a prussian blue ; a treacly light shone from a distant window; his little couch fire caved in, and waved a flaming hand. 'I'll square along to the end before I knock off,' observed Willoughby.

He was now, without realising it, free of all the riches of winter, which are accessible only to those who do not shrink from the raw. The close-fisted season, which keeps its treasure in the earth, has more than prodigal summer. Our hero was astonished at the *glow* everything had, the profundity of colour in earth and bark and sky, the ochreous faces in the yellow light of the tap-room: he found the same quiet steady glow in the voices he heard there, and in the things he heard said. 'We English are a wintry race,' he reflected, 'when all's said and done.'

It may appear to invalidate his griefs, that they thus could heal without satisfaction, and, still more, his illness, that he could recover without injections or massage or a cruise to the West Indies, but merely by the inexpensive agency of a little landscape with figures. As to the first, it can only be repeated he was as obstinate as the devil; and as to the second, that he had been so long a confirmed idler, hanging about the picture galleries, looking at works of art, reading Shakespeare and other authors, instead of doing an honest job.

However it was, he healed. Only one thing remained as bitter as ever in his mind: that was the villainous idea that had been injected there concerning Lucy. In fact, as the other matters fell away from him, this was left obtruding. In the end it was the only thing that mattered in the least.

'If we were not parted for ever,' he said, 'I could go and ask her. The damned details worked out so well, but yet there may be a mistake somewhere.' Our hero had ceased to live in the world in which people, who happened to be crossed in love, abandoned themselves to uninhibited satisfaction. Indeed, he was returning to Lucy's world, to the upper air, in which, on the contrary, such things are quite unbelievable.

By the most extraordinary coincidence, with every daily step he took in this direction, he seemed to be advancing into the spring, into a landscape, that is, in which the native species of prunus and pyrus whiten the wood edge with their bloom. He was not there yet, it was in fact only February, but it was one of those days when a thaw, coming suddenly after a week's hard frost, gives one a foretaste of the sweet of the year. It is as if a transparency of spring was hung almost in range of the corner of one's eye. A blackbird tries it, buds glisten on the woodbine and the briar, an indescribable tenderness is in the air, one can believe in the cherry blossom, and almost reach out to the days when daffodils begin to peer.

' "Then heigh! the doxy over the dale," ' remarked Willoughby. 'Heigh! indeed! What guts those fellows had in those days!'

He did himself an injustice. Only certain circumstances, over

which he most assuredly had no control, prevented him from a similar ejaculation. Instead, he saw from the corner of his eye that transparency of spring of which we have spoken: the filmy illusion contained the most delightful little grove of prunus and pyrus, ghostlily in flower. 'If by any chance she is doing such things,' cried our hero, with a grimness altogether inappropriate to the pretty illusion, 'she must be stopped at any cost. I will pretend to know nothing, and act as if I loved her in just the same way as ever. As it is, it is only a different way.

'I will not deceive myself, however,' he added with great resolution. 'If I try to sweeten the situation because I am afraid, I shall mess it all up again. "It is a pity Mademoiselle Cunégonde should have grown so confoundedly ugly." Poor thing!

'If only I could believe it was untrue!' he said. 'I shall never dare to inquire. In fact, I ought not to try to. Still ...'

He acquainted his uncle with his intention: pretty soon he was ready to depart. The car came to pick him up; Lord Ollebeare stood in the porch bidding him farewell, for he had opened the front door on succeeding to the title. The greatest liking now prevailed between these two, they had spent a good many evenings together, Lord Ollebeare had discovered that Willoughby no longer talked too much. Besides, the kitchen garden looked a different place, and Willoughby had not chosen to mention that he was haring away after a girl.

'I fear he'll have no girl at Ollebeare,' thought our hero, as the cab jolted away down the avenue. 'Still, we can fix up t'other side of the county.'

'*He's* all right,' thought Ollebeare on the steps, 'as long as no damned woman gets her hooks into him. He's been pricked, thank goodness! That I can tell. It may be the saving of him.'

Lord Ollebeare, though he had opened the front door, had neglected to repair the great porch. The frost had been a very sudden one, coming after a good deal of rain. The ice was now melting in the crevices of the stone; there was a grinding sound, and half the great key-stone fell on the old man's

shoulder, breaking the collar-bone, shoulder-blade, and goodness knows what else: he was picked up a few minutes later with blood running out of his mouth.

Meanwhile, our hero rode, at the rate of fifteen miles an hour, up hill, down dale, along ridges, through snug corners, over trout streams, past bleak granges, copper-floored woodlands, duck-ponds, orchards, villages, until at last the tall and rickety black cab crawled like a beetle along the last scarp of all. The great plain smoked away to the horizon; beyond it lay London, and the tossing sea, and the wind sang in the telegraph wires.

CHAPTER XXVII

A knock at the door – Why have you come?
Alteration in a glance – Except once –
Conversation overheard in a café –
Lucy's concession – A letter –

HITHERTO, Willoughby had only been as far as Paris, and that in bad company. He now experienced the delightful sensation of hurtling through an entirely strange country, in a new-smelling train, separate, cased in by his ignorance of languages, a compact thing, his own projectile, which should burst upon Lucy in her inconsiderable foreign surroundings, and wrap her in a positive Union Jack of Kew and Ollebeare and love.

He had a variety of misgivings, but his eagerness roared ahead like the unslackening engine, and all his thoughts, good and ill, streamed behind it like the smoke. His eye was plunged always into the farthest horizon, he thrust the train forward, cursed it when it was slow, exulted when a sudden burst of its own speed slackened momentarily the pressure of his will on the partition before him, and the effect of all this was, that he arrived at Leipzig at 14.52 on the showery afternoon of Tuesday, February the 27th.

He had Lucy's address written on a piece of paper. This he showed to a cabby, they sped through streets which seemed oddly unconscious of the invader, and pulled up at the arched porch of an old house which had been divided into flats.

Willoughby went up the stone stairs, and found Lucy's name on a door on the second landing. He hesitated a long half-minute before raising the knocker. His mouth was astonishingly dry. 'What exactly do I think about it all?' said he in a panic. 'And what will she think?'

What unnerved him was finding this building, and the whole town, so disturbingly substantial. It appeared as if it had been going on for a long time, and meant still to go on. England, on the other hand, seemed very far; Kew, Ollebeare, and all the rest were only names in a foreign language.

'Inside,' thought Willoughby, 'there's a life going on. Something done this morning, a telephone, arrangements for the rest of the day, the rest of the week, for ever. I wish I knew.'

However, he proposed to enter upon this life. He knocked at the door. On knocking on a front door, as on other surfaces of wood, one can at once tell whether there is life or dead hollowness behind it, whether it is full or empty. Willoughby's heart was beating so fast that the first moment after knocking seemed an age: everything was dead silent, the place was dead.

He was already in despair when he heard a step within, but it was a slow step, a hobbling one, not Lucy's. The door being slowly opened, he was greeted by an old woman, who wore a scrubbing-apron.

'Miss Langton?' inquired our hero.

The old woman said something. He repeated the name, which appeared to convey nothing to her. At last he pointed it out on the door. The old woman was delighted.

'Fräulein Lungtaun,' she said. 'Ja, Ja, Fräulein Lungtaun.'

Willoughby nodded like a madman. The old woman told him something which was probably of the greatest importance.

'Oh hell!' thought our hero. He repeated Lucy's name, pointing to the recesses of the flat, but, by an automatic collateral association, also opening his mouth, as one who points to his stomach does, when he wishes to convey that he's hungry. This producing no more than a look of confusion, and possibly fear, the tantalised wretch entirely lost his head.

'Mees Langton,' he demanded, with great animation. 'She lif here, yes? Ees she een?' His expression as he enunciated this last phrase caused the old woman to close the door very precipitately.

Willoughby remained outside: he had an obscure feeling that the flat might vanish if he turned his back on it. After a few minutes, however, he thought of going in search of a Cook's place, where he might obtain the services of an interpreter. He rushed downstairs, looked right and left from the porch, and thought no more of Messrs Thos. Cook & Son, for there was Lucy coming along the street, in clothes that were unfamiliar to him, and carrying a bunch of tulips such as one buys from a stall.

She put her hand to her mouth, and stopped dead.

'You?' she said. 'Why? Why have you come?' She turned extremely pale: he thought she looked rather foreign. 'Anyway,' she said, 'come in.'

This was not quite such a good meeting as the previous one. Willoughby was now the visitor: he was not, however, immediately overwhelmed with kisses. There is at least that difference between the sexes.

The old woman was clattering pots in a little kitchen at the end of the passage. Lucy closed the sitting-room door. 'Why have you come?' she asked again.

Willoughby was quite unable to put his reasons into words. Lucy had, as a matter of fact, an extremely sophisticated hat on. Moreover, she had taken to using her lipstick in a continental way, with rather a geometrical effect. Such little details, the most natural things in the world in Leipzig, have a disproportionate significance to one fresh from the provincialities of Gloucestershire, and from memories of Kew. 'She is alto-

gether different,' thought Willoughby in great dismay. 'Anything might be true. Still ...!'

All this took no time at all. He extended his arms. Lucy did not, however, make that tiny movement of acquiescence, which permits a man to take such creatures willy nilly, etc. In fact, she continued to look inquiringly at our hero.

'Look here,' he said, 'I see now what a fool I was, to write as I did last autumn. I'm sorry. It was wrong to be so upset about trifles ... comparative trifles. I don't want to know anything. I ... I simply don't care. That's what I've come for.'

'It's taken you six months,' said Lucy.

'I suppose it has,' said he.

'And you feel you can come,' said she, 'and raise your finger ...'

'I thought nothing about it, that way,' said he. 'As soon as I saw things properly, I came. Much as you did to me, I suppose. I've been ill, badly ill. Then I was at Ollebeare.'

'Ill?' she said. 'Why, Willoughby, what's been wrong with you? You're all right now? Yes, you look all right.'

'My bloody nerves were bad,' said he with a scowl.

Lucy said nothing. Her eyes, however, which had but now rested steadily on Willoughby's, became, without altering one measurable jot in shape or colour, utterly different in appearance. Our hero noting this with great attention, a not dissimilar change took place in his wincing heart, and in turn was reflected in his countenance. In short, there was a general melting and softening, an awakening of something that had seemed dead and cold, a hurried abandonment of defences, and various demonstrations of all this, such as not infrequently take place between lovers who have been separated and estranged.

The defences, however, had existed: one must not overlook small points of that sort.

Nevertheless, our young people, having rinsed off, in the shining Lethe of one another's eyes, as much of half a year's misery as may be rinsed off in half an hour, having been shy, tender, rather timidly passionate, then as passionate as may be with an old woman clattering pots a few feet away: having

gone through these phases, they became restless from sheer happiness, which, as it glitters most, also dances most, nearest the rocks; and, being indoors, they wished to go out, so they went out.

'What do you think of my hat?' asked Lucy at the mirror, looking at him from the corner of her eye.

'It looks a very *smart* hat,' said he.

'It *is* smart,' said she.

'Oh, ah!' said he.

It was the most trivial conversation in the world; a mere straw, hardly worth recording.

Very well, they went out. She showed him the shop where she bought her music, a greengrocer who made jokes, and so forth. 'This is not at all a bad town,' said Willoughby, looking at all these innocent things with much approval.

'You might put up here,' said she, stopping at the doorway of an hotel. 'I've heard it's very good, and cheap. They'll send to the station for your bag.'

They looked at a room, a wooden room. 'It'll do,' said Willoughby.

'Wait, darling,' she said, and hurried down the stairs, to return very shortly with a bunch of the same mauve tulips as she had been carrying in the street.

'I got these at the shop next door,' she said. 'One mark, fifty. And in the market they're only seventy-five, and quite as good.'

Willoughby was delighted by the wifeliness of this allusion to prices. It was a trick Lucy had caught from her fellow-students, and caught it the more easily because it seemed so different. The tulips were put in a bowl.

'It makes it look rather better,' said Lucy. 'I wish I could put you up. Still, we'll be together every day, as soon as I've finished my classes. I'll tell you the hours.'

'Oh, hell!' cried our hero. 'Can't you give them up?'

'Yes,' said she, 'I will, all this week, except Thursday. That's something I *must* go to. I'm at rather an important stage.'

'When,' said Willoughby, 'shall we go back?'

'I don't want to leave,' said she, 'till the end of the term. Look, darling. Why not stay here all the year?'

'I want to do something in England,' said Willoughby. 'I've got a liking for it.'

'We must talk about it,' she said. 'We'll fix it fairly, somehow.'

They talked about it, as a matter of fact, all the evening.

'You see, this counts to me,' said Lucy, 'just as much as your idea counts to you.'

'But surely,' said Willoughby, several times, 'it's the man's way of life that decides it?'

'It always *has* been,' was Lucy's reply to this.

In the end she proposed this compromise: that Willoughby should stay in Leipzig till the end of the year, when her course finished. 'Then,' she said, 'we'll live as you wish, in the country (you know I love it too), only somewhere not absolutely out of reach of London, so that I can go up for concerts and things. Bucks, perhaps. In exchange for that, I'll make no bones about coming to live at Ollebeare when your uncle dies, if you still feel it's utterly impossible to consider letting it.'

'That sounds absolutely reasonable and fair,' said Willoughby. 'But please note that the Tory attitude is neither reasonable nor fair to women. So in consenting to this levelling proposal, I sacrifice the very best, and you're a Delilah. Besides,' he added, unconsciously letting go his smile, 'I know I shall hate Leipzig.'

Lucy observed his smile fade suddenly, and guessed the reason, or part of it. She felt a pain, but to keep her end up, she said in a light tone: 'What'll make you hate it more, is that your *bête noire* (at least, I think she's your *bête noire*), Mary Kenstall, is here again.'

'Oh, *her*,' said he. 'I don't know her. I've seen her once, but never met her. She's not really my *bête noire*. Only I thought it rum you should be staying with her, that's all.'

'Oh, one looks at things differently here,' said Lucy.

Willoughby found several different ways of looking at things during the next few days. It must be admitted he suf-

fered a very abominable reaction when he was alone. The more he saw of Lucy, the less he thought the story he had heard was possible. On the other hand, he was a positive Othello, and one grain of possibility goes a long way with such. He had his own little experience to go by. 'The nicer people are, the more recklessly they'll smash themselves to pieces,' he thought. 'She is infinitely nicer than I am ... Oh Lord! I don't know.'

It was only by means of a ceaseless and agonising vigilance he prevented himself asking a fatal question. 'Once it is on the *tapis*,' he thought, 'it'll be there between us, each knowing the other knows.'

He suffered a great deal over this. On the other hand, the first day or two of March were days of singular beauty. The showery air was so sweet you would almost have thought the lilac was in bloom.

Lucy and Willoughby had arranged to be married at the Consulate. This would take a few days; they were very much in love, they experienced a delightful impatience : all the same, Willoughby, wishing to make one of those absurd distinctions that jealous lovers do, hinted they might be very conventional till that day. Lucy, of course, agreed, and they kept this resolution very steadfastly and completely, except once.

When Lucy was engaged at the Conservatoire, Willoughby took a beer and cold sausage luncheon at Der Tannenbaum, a café much frequented by the student kind in Leipzig. Sitting there on one of these lovely days, he heard some people talking English pretty loudly, as was not uncommon: these people were sitting back to back with him, and before very long his attention was caught by a mention of Frances.

Our hero flicked a glance over his shoulder, and recognised Miss Kenstall as the speaker.

'It was very strange,' Miss Kenstall was saying. 'She kept pumping me about Lucy, and said she knew her quite well. When I got out here, I found that Lucy had never heard of her. In my opinion,' said the young lady of Tavistock Square, 'she was just a social climber, trying to edge her way in by pretending we had acquaintances in common.'

The conversation contained nothing more of any interest: however, this was enough for Willoughby. As soon as the party had moved away, he issued forth into the street, turned a bland face to the sun, walked up and down, bumping into people, still putting two and two together, no longer for any necessity, but for the sheer pleasure of it.

'What a wretch I've been!' he cried. 'I don't care! Will she ever forgive me? I don't care!'

He went to his hotel, sat in his room: one can't sit in an hotel bedroom. He went out again, saw a couple of letters in the rack as he went out, stuffed them into his pocket, and walked up and down the streets again. At last, half-past three overtook him unawares; he made an extensive purchase at a florist's, and hurried round to Lucy's flat.

'Darling, what is it?' cried Lucy.

It must be baldly stated that Willoughby was kissing all over her face, as the saying is.

'You will,' said he, 'be furious with me. However, I don't care.' With that he told her exactly what he had believed. He nerved himself to touch on certain extenuating circumstances, but perhaps did not realise how cryptic was the allusion he made.

Lucy was properly affronted, and abused him roundly. 'You worm!' she said. 'And ... and you were going to keep it dark, and marry me to save me from a life of shame?' And with that she bit her lip, and began to cry.

'I'm sorry,' said Willoughby, 'that you should cry. The fact is ...' At this point, however, Lucy began to return him the same indiscriminate kisses that he had given her, except that there were her tears mixed up with them, a relish very highly rated by the connoisseur.

Willoughby would not have described himself as a connoisseur: however, a plain man may live well sometimes. He was moved as deep as he could be. 'Is that damned old woman gone from this place yet?' said he.

The old woman had gone at half-past three.

Lucy was one of those extremely nice girls, who, having raised a man to such happiness that he wishes he had the world

to give them, are themselves carried away to give everything they have, which often proves to be a more practicable proposition.

'Darling,' said Lucy, a little later. 'I'll come back with you at once. I can manage something in London. I see how much you must hate this place.'

'I love it,' cried Willoughby.

'No,' said she. 'I'll come back with you now. I want you to live your life, because I'm ...' It is here, in these days, that delicacy draws the curtain.

Willoughby insisted that she should at least remain till the end of the term. 'You are at an important stage,' he said. 'If I came into Ollebeare to-morrow, I would not budge till the end of the term. And that reminds me,' he added, 'I've got some letters, on one of which, now I come to think of it, I noticed my old uncle's fist. What can he have to say? You needn't fear being dragged off to live at Ollebeare while he's there. No wenches! He hates the very sight of 'em.'

So saying, he reached for his coat, took out his letter. Lucy put her chin on his shoulder, to show him how intimate they were. The letter ran:

My dear Nephew,

This is bad news. The big stone fell from the porch and brought me down. With the Shoulder-blade and God knows what broken inside, I am struck in the lungs, and do not cease to bleed. However, I have Rocketted yet, as birds do sometimes when so struck. The parson called (first time in three years) doubtless to tell me my soul would. I'd have had him in, to let him know I've no wish to sport Feather, but they will not let me speak. I can imagine a fine picture of Old Nick having magnificent sport (three Guns), blazing away at Rocketting souls, and Beelzebub his black dog bringing in the Runners. Or would you make a proper Big Day of it – all the principal fiends lined up, others beating out the Gravestones, flushing the Game up from among the Churchyard yews? No man fit to do the job, though. And no time left now, to have this fancy carried out. A pity – I could do with as many years again, at my age a man is at his best.

Well, boy, I run on. This is to let you know I've fixed you up in my will, believing you will keep to what you said. If it should run to an under, Bucknell's son would be glad to come in. I half-promised him, and wanted only that he should age a little. When B. wears out, see him righted. See to the dogs. Prince might yet sire you a better Pup than else you'll get – an old dog, a young bitch.

Most important: the Picture in the study – not to be Sold or moved on any Account. I rely on you there. In case of doubt, it has Clara written plain enough at the back. Not to be sold or moved on any account.

I must stop, boy. They said three lines.

A telegram shall head this back if by chance the Bleeding stops. Otherwise no need to hasten, for I shall be gone on.

Your affct. uncle,
OLLEBEARE.

Willoughby stared at this letter with very mixed feelings. 'It is all very well,' he said. 'But the place will not be the same.'

'Oh, Willoughby! I'm so sorry,' said Lucy. 'You must go back at once. We both will.'

'It's true,' said he. 'I said just now I'd wait, even if I came into the place. I forgot the other side of it. He was a fine fellow. Look, my dear, you'd better stay here for a week or two. I shall have to be on the spot: he knew nothing about you, hated womenfolk near the place – you see the point? Let the house *cool* of him, and it'll be different. Besides, the people would think it strange.'

'Oh, hang the *people*!' said Lucy. 'But certainly I couldn't go there so very soon after his death. But I want to be with you. Let me know when I may come, and I'll come at once.'

'I'll wire to Bucknell, I think,' said Willoughby. 'He can reply to Cook's man at the harbour.'

CHAPTER XXVIII

Upkeep and outgoings – A perfect year –
Liberal and Tory – Little discussions –
How I like you – Ah, sweetheart –
Put them on the floor

WILLOUGHBY was sorrier than most people would be, at the loss of an uncle, when he got his telegram at the Hook. He actually would not have chosen that the old man should die, even for the sake of the acres. On the other hand, he had not seen a great deal of him. And, apart from the reconciliations of lovers, there are very few joys comparable to that of inheriting a moderate-sized agricultural and sporting estate, consisting of 752 acres in all, about equally divided into arable, down, pasture and woodland, all in hand, and the latter consisting of Pinniger's Great Wood and Hanger (180 a.), and several handy pieces of warm well-grown covert, favourably situated for showing high birds: cottages, small farmhouse, extensive buildings, and the old world residence of Cotswold stone, containing Great Hall, five recep., fourteen principal bed., one bath, servants' wing, and all usual offices, overlooking picturesque walled gardens of convenient size: the property conveying the lordship of the manor of Kildep: and altogether needing only reasonable outlay to restore and modernise residence, get land in good heart, and generally fit up for occupation as a singularly attractive gentleman's seat of compact dimensions.

A critic might have found another side to the picture, but Willoughby was still an enthusiast, and appraised his inheritance as if he would have sold it. He wondered if his uncle had left him enough to keep the place up with, and was overjoyed to hear that he was sole legatee, and, when all was paid, would have between seven and eight hundred a year. Our hero was no longer an absolute fool: all the same, he was unable to resist making certain little plans. He was just wise enough,

most of the day, to say to himself: 'Go slow,' and in the evenings Bucknell said it for him.

It must be admitted he rushed about the place like a madman. Fortunately there was so much to be done that he could not but hesitate, which, in farming, is to stand the small best chance of being saved. Fortunately, also, his capital was pretty nearly as good as tied up: he knew at least the major outgoings: he had very little to play with, except the two hundred his uncle had paid away in rent. On the strength of this, he certainly made some astonishing proposals.

It is the beauty of places of this age and size, that there are always little discoveries to be made, even by one who has been there a winter or two. What Willoughby had thought to be no more than a thicket of elders, turned out to be a range of the most magnificent pig-sties, which only needed clearing, building up, roofing, and stocking, to make of him a happy back-scratcher of prize boars and teeming sows.

'At least,' he said to Bucknell, 'pigs can go no lower. It's the moment to get in. And a book I've just read, which describes the latest methods ...'

On such occasions, Bucknell addressed him as Master Willoughby. 'Two hundred pound,' he said, 'for building up that row ...'

'What?' cried Willoughby. 'If we quarry our own stone?'

'If you talk prize stock,' said Bucknell, utterly ignoring this inquiry, 'what do you reckon that to be? No, Master Willoughby, say ordinary creditable swine? Two boars, ten breeding sows; that's what they pig-sties were made for. What do you reckon they be, in market even to-day?'

'But,' said Willoughby, 'my notion was to get young 'uns. Six-weeks pigs of good breed, d'ye see? That go for under a pound apiece in these days. Breed and sell, I thought, and keep back the likeliest; till in the end we'd have some first-class stock.'

'Oh, ah!' said Bucknell. 'What with their victuals and near half a man's time to look to 'em, by the time they pigs had bred 'twould ha' been cheaper far to ha' bought 'em grown. Grain foods going up ...'

'We could grow our own,' said Willoughby with enthusiasm.

''Twon't *do*, Master Willoughby,' cried the old keeper. 'And bacon hogs going downer and downer ...! Buy nothing and sell nothing, in years the like of these. So his late Lordship said, and so says every man what knows. Taking the liberty, sir, that there rent money as you talks on, that's plenty little enough to make up for what his late Lordship knew, and, taking the liberty, sir, – *you don't*.'

'One must learn, however,' said Willoughby.

'Get your larning, sir, in carrying on as 'tis. Mebbe when times are better, and you been at it six or seven year, mebbe you might larnch out a bit. You'll be wantin' to clean the house up, too; a-fitten on it for that young leddy you talks o' bringen here. 'Twon't never do for her, sir, to eat her dinner out here in the back place, long o' you and me.'

They had a score of conversations of this sort. In the end Willoughby was content with a little cleaning of the land, and some plastering within. The kitchen garden seemed to him to be in very passable shape; the flower garden needed only to be made a blank sheet for his Lucy's choice to colour; two jobbing men did wonders in that direction before the month was out.

She returned at Easter, a very good time of year for the purpose. He met her in London, they were married as quickly as people can be, and as joyfully. There are certain moments when the memory of sorrow (which, like an old husk, may still have a seed or two clinging to it) adds a brightness of its own to pleasure, as, when the sun is hot enough, the particles of soot burn like flakes of gold in the burning London sky.

If ever a pair seemed made to be happy, then it was these two. I must remind you that Lucy's hair was of a dark yellow, her top lip a little lifted, her legs were long and round, and her eyes, which had always been kind and candid, had now an intelligent and a resolute look as well. As for Willoughby, he had lost the worst of his rough look, and retained the best of it. There was something very engaging in the way enthusiasm

broke through, in features which might otherwise have been a little dark and lonely. They were so extremely fortunate as to have the keenest possible appreciation of these advantages in one another; in fact, they were a pretty pair, and now reaped the reward of those who have fasted long: they kissed, hugged, etc., day and night.

Add to this, 752 acres, nearly as many pounds a year, a house too large for them, the manifest adoration of Bucknell senior (half retired) for Lucy, the satisfactory shaping of Bucknell junior, the very conciliatory attitude of Lucy's father, and one or two visits from that excellent old nurse, who threw up her hands, kissed Willoughby, and did all that an old nurse should do.

In a word, our young couple lived happily ever after, for what is *ever* but eternity, and the year that followed was an eternal year, in the best and most modern sense of that profound term: it curved, nay, circled, from spring to spring. It was a complete thing, perfect and unique, never to be forgotten, and, owing to the finite character of completion, and the essential limitation of uniqueness, never to be repeated.

The only slight pain our hero experienced in all this time (and that was no more than a man needs, to keep consciousness sober, lest the riot be lost in riot), he experienced during the few brief absences of his bride, which was as it should be. When his blood slowed a little, for lack of her ceaselessly surprising prettiness to keep it racing, when these little lonelinesses reminded him of the desert out of which he had come, he thought of another little matter, which the vile Schölte myth had dwarfed into nothingness, and which, also, when Lucy was there, was burned up in the burning joy she kindled in him. It must be remembered that jealousy was this dark-faced young man's great weakness, a weakness wholly contemptible from the modern point of view, but one which receives a certain regrettable endorsement from the more extreme forms of Toryism. Our hero must be given credit for a very great improvement: at one time this discreditable emotion had so evenly weighed the balance against love, that a mere meaning-

less name, uttered over the telephone, had been enough to tip his world into destruction.

Now it was very different: 'We all have our little troubles,' said Willoughby, and went out under the sultry moon to where the insomniac corncrake rattled among the black poppies in the shadowy corn. The woods stood all about, quiet, but not caring to sleep on so very short a night. You could see to read a newspaper. A certain sentence escaped our hero's lips: 'Nothing matters beside this.'

Lucy was never away more than two or three days. 'Oh, how lovely to be back!' she'd say. Willoughby, feeling as if he had been whining on the chain, would look at her for one incredulous, heart-stopped moment, and fluster her with caresses as if he were some half-maddened dog, and, as happens with those unfortunate animals, had never really believed she would return.

It was necessary to look at everything, the gardens, the orchard, which after all was the best place to sit in, the two grunters that had a wooden sty among the nettles at the end of it, the fish pond, the pet wethers that Willoughby had 'laid down' to make old mutton, the view from the top of the house, the house itself. In this, they had arranged themselves very well. The great hall in front was furnished very roughly: a rug or two here and there on its stone floor, rush seats, oak settles, the dogs lay there; one could come in without wiping one's boots. For cooler weather there was a little western parlour, for which Lucy had found a paper of that richest eighteenth-century yellow: in this room Willoughby made less mess than was natural to him. The library was theoretically in use again; more often, but not very often, Willoughby used his uncle's little study. Out at the back, as we call the north-eastern wing, Bucknell sat with his son and the two giggling girls who swept and cooked. The same old woman, whom Willoughby had seen first at this place, now passed, a slow but regular pulse, through the rooms which would otherwise lie dead. Oh! it was a pretty year.

No one noticed when it came to an end. Maybe it was in

April, maybe it was in May. The happy pair would have sworn it went on for a year and another year. However, we know better than that, and it is our duty to say so.

There is a phase, from which not the reddest mouth nor the hungriest is immune, when a certain number of kisses have been exchanged. It has been very neatly expressed – 'When passion passes into the deeper joy of true companionship.' Be that as it may, there is no doubt that the beloved, in one important and blood-quickening aspect, is absent, not for two or three days, but for periods which increase until they become very much the rule. Then the young couple employ those same mouths for conversation: sometimes very interesting little discussions take place.

'I wish,' observed Willoughby, 'that next time the Fischers are in England, you would, *if by any chance* they should come to see us, ask them not to burst into song in Kildep street. It was conveyed to me, in the politest manner, that they did so.'

'Good heavens, Willoughby!' remarked Lucy. 'The Fischers! People who are begged and prayed to sing in every capital of Europe! There is no one like them, in their style. Personally I like to hear anybody sing anywhere, I think it makes life beautiful, but to have the Fischers sing one of their things in a place like Kildep – why, it's a *privilege*.'

'My dear,' replied Willoughby, 'you are perfectly right, and if the world was perfect no doubt people of all nationalities would burst into song everywhere. As it is, it is different, and in this place anything different is disliked.'

'That's not true, Willoughby,' cried Lucy. 'I know who told you: it was the old women at the post office. They told me too, and said it was a real treat, and put them in mind of Heaven.'

'The devil frequently appears as an angel,' said Willoughby, 'and I see he sings like one. If it is not disliked, so much the worse, for then I should only be laughed at, but ...'

'Oh come! Are you afraid of being laughed at?' asked Lucy. 'I thought you regarded it as the mission of your sort of people, to be martyrs to their eccentricities, in the cause of culture. And now you're afraid of being laughed at!'

'You wretch!' said Willoughby. 'You're deliberately twisting the matter. There is such a thing as being eccentric in the right way, and (he added with a smile) being laughed at respectfully. If I hunted a pack of pigs, for example ...'

'But not if you have two great singers here,' said Lucy, with a laugh that was not entirely respectful.

'My point is,' said Willoughby, 'that we have a way of doing things here, which could be bettered no doubt, but not except at risk of letting in the ocean. So if a new thing is liked, it's worse than if it's just thought ridiculous. It would lead to a decay of morals, anarchy, revolution, wire, wireless, God knows what, if the villagers too much admired Lili Fischer's very wander-vogelish outfit.'

'The truth is,' cried Lucy, with what might have seemed a disproportionate straightness of glance: 'The truth is, you don't like the Fischers, which is why you said "if by any *chance*" I ask them again. Which of course I shall, because they are fine people, and your reason is a mean one, as with all your attitude to people I knew in Germany. I need not say what it is.'

'No, no, I think you need not,' said Willoughby, looking rather dark. 'Well, I'm going to stretch my legs.'

With that he rose, to go and seek refreshment in contact with the earth, which had once cured a grief of major proportions, and now never failed him. It has a peculiar effect upon love, taking all the *essential desperate necessity* out of it, to have some other thing, which has once cured a great grief on that plane, and now never fails one.

Lucy's consolation, on the other hand, was far away, but not less attractive for that.

'I *shall* go to Salzburg,' she said, either crying it after Willoughby on this occasion, or on one of the others, maybe when they were discussing the rival merits of certain of Lucy's friends, as opposed to those of a Mr Otway of Lower Little-Ryde.

'What the dickens can it matter,' said she, 'what a hateful creature of that sort thinks? Don't try to defend him, Wil-

loughby. You were as disgusted as I was, when he said that about the hare. I saw your face. "I knocked a good lump of meat out of her, but she went on." Why, it makes you sick now, even. I can see it.'

'I am sick with a reservation,' said Willoughby.

'And that's bad,' cried Lucy. 'I hate it in you. I hate the way you're mad on killing things, and maiming them too.'

'Maiming them be damned!' said Willoughby. 'I think I kill as clean as most people. I believe if I miss, I miss forward, which is a damned sight more than anybody else I know of. Hi! Bucknell! Bucknell!' he cried, and, that worthy appearing at the back of the hall, 'Bucknell,' said he, 'Yes or no. Do I have many runners?'

'Precious few runners, sir,' replied that worthy. 'But a proper lot of fliers-on. Still, you'll come of that.'

'But say, now,' said Willoughby. 'Are they pricked birds that fly on?'

'Not so much that, sir,' replied Bucknell. 'You swing altogether too forrard for that, as I'm always a-tellin on yer. But you'll come of it, never fear. There's a difference already.'

'There was no reason to shout like that to Bucknell,' observed Lucy, when the old chap had withdrawn. 'It's a method of argument I don't like.'

'No, because it puts you down,' said Willoughby.

'No, it doesn't,' said Lucy. 'It doesn't affect the main point at all. Old Otway is several sorts of a beast, as you know quite well: cruel, stupid, nasty – you'll get like him yourself if you're not careful. If you've got to hob-nob with the country people, why don't you be more pleasant to the Fergusons or the Stillyards? They at least have some culture ...'

'You are mistaken,' said Willoughby. 'They read the literary magazines. Culture is what you *do*. What do they do? The smart thing. The Stillyards sold off half their land in order to go on rubbing shoulders with all the gigolos and touts at Monte Carlo. The Fergusons are just tradespeople, for all their bloody money. Neither of 'em care two hoots for the place. One's the sort that have sold England, and the others have

bought it for a background. No, damn 'em! Old Otway's worth the lot. Now he *has* got a culture. You say he's stupid. Why, there's no gamekeeper, nor farmer, nor anyone in these parts knows what he does. *And* about things that count, mark you. Don't interrupt me. These things do count, because they can be lived. The others are all right, once you know what the farm-hand knows. Otherwise it's all in the air, and that's why some of your bloody friends bore me so much.'

'They bore you,' replied Lucy indignantly, 'because you've got this mad idea of turning your back on everything, even on things you know are good. I am not going to see you degenerate into a narrow provincial ...'

'What I like,' struck in Willoughby, 'is as provincial as Stratford-on-Avon. Or as it was.'

'Everything is "as it was" with you,' cried Lucy bitterly. 'Don't you see it's hopeless?'

'Yes,' said Willoughby, 'I see perfectly well it's hopeless. Better than you do, perhaps, since I know it better and like it more. You would be tolerant of improvements. You wanted me to let Buttons Bottom meadow to those excellent protégés of yours.'

'People who were absolutely broke,' said Lucy. 'And a piece of land right away, that you've cursed often enough for being more trouble than it's worth.'

'No,' said Willoughby. 'Bald apes, no better than myself. And a meadow that's never been cluttered up with a nasty small-holding yet. I'd see a hundred would-be poultry farmers starve before my eyes ...'

'Don't overstate it, Willoughby,' said Lucy with a dangerous look. 'I might believe you.'

'I mean it,' said he. 'All the same, they'll get it one day. I know it's hopeless, as you say. However, it's worth spending one's life on.'

'That's very heroic of you,' said she, 'considering you're crazy about it. You seem to want to spend *my* life on it as well, though. You shut out everything. Well, I'm not going to stand for it.'

The conversation continued for some time. Lucy reminded our hero of a trip abroad which had been abandoned on the score of expense, he returned with a rather vague reference to the traditions of still-room and curing-tub, she countered with a more pointed one on the same subject, going on to speak of her own life; in his reply Willoughby had the bad taste, and worse indiscretion, to employ the term 'master.'

The simple truth is, Lucy during her stay abroad had become transformed from a very charming English girl of the cultivated sort into a young woman of intelligence and real culture. Willoughby, during the same period, had suffered such an appalling reversion, that though he had long lost his enthusiasm for the Irish school of poetry, he experienced, at his first reunion with Lucy, a faint tremor on learning that she shared his preference for certain works, that people he despised said no young girl should read. From this tremor, an emotional seismograph might have foretold the earthquake.

Taking two people, of equal generosity of spirit, each of a courageous and sincere intelligence, each of that order which ardently desires to live, and is scornful of living without a faith, it is more likely than not that the woman will be a Liberal, and it is quite certain that she will be all the more so, if the man happens to be a Tory. He on his part will view all progressive notions with increasing distrust, as his reactionary programme forces his wife to raise them as the standard of her independence.

It must be confessed that Willoughby was a little the more inclined to be extreme, in repentance for the revolutionary notions of his youth, and in a sharper repentance that he had ever inoculated Lucy with them. He would have hated modernism very thoroughly without them: as it was, he hated it all the more, and all the jealousy he routed in its own form, came back at him in the disguise of projects and theories to which otherwise he might have offered a more easy-going resistance.

What's more, he came of a certain strain, to revert to which scarcely needed so much encouragement. The Burfoot note,

which had always lain in the background of his voice, now dominated it; he kept his muddy boots on in the evening; would sit without saying a word – altogether Lucy began to wonder what her life was to be. She was a brave girl, passionately fond of music, more than fond, and she loved the conversation of intelligent people.

Whether it was the colour of her hair, or the more balanced nature of her education, she was not as desperately, rabidly crazy on these things as Willoughby was on the land. On the other hand, he had what he wanted, and poor Lucy had the vision of her only lifetime being passed far from all the things she held finest, and in the company of one who was inimical to them, and by no means passively. As for what he held to, with so brooding an exultation, she had thought it romantic, she still thought it beautiful, where it was not surprisingly narrow, coarse, and cruel, but (what daunted her more than anything) it was no world for a woman, and Willoughby didn't mind.

'Maybe,' said he, when she broached this aspect of the matter. 'Maybe life can't be good for both. However, one doesn't share a life like a ration. The life counts more than the people.' Lucy thought this view abhorrent in the extreme.

'I remember how you talked so fiercely against injustice and oppression and all that,' she said. 'I remember the first time I saw you. I was a fool, but it seemed like a revelation. I thought you the bravest and most generous creature ...'

'I didn't know what I was talking about in those days,' said Willoughby.

'You've absolutely changed,' said she. 'That's what it is.'

'No, I've not changed,' said he. 'I still hate the same things, and hate 'em harder, if not so frothily. But I've given 'em a new name.'

'What's that?' said she.

'*Man*,' said he, '*Man*. Who's ruined Long Down and messed up Kildep with his beastly wires and pylons, so he can make his twopence out of the spoiling of all he drew his virtue from. Woman too, if you like. Who ...' And shortly afterwards

the conversation was at cross-purposes, very cross-purposes indeed. This, however, was nothing new.

All this was very sad. However, they had had their year, and they thought it had extended to two or three. The fourth was altogether more doubtful. In fact, it was only half a year.

'Look, my dear,' said Lucy one day. 'It's nothing to do with loving or not loving. I wish to God you'd been bitten by any other fly than this. I shouldn't have minded. But no other would have stung so deep, I suppose, in one of your nature. I must work things out. I can't do it here. If I do, I know what decision I shall come to. I don't want to be made to come to that decision merely because a place makes one want to scream. I must go away for a long time.'

This was at the end of a long discussion. 'I'm sorry,' said Willoughby. 'The house'll go back without you, and I shall miss you like hell.'

'I can't stand it,' she said. 'I feel I'm losing what little wits I had. I can't go on reading the same dozen books, like you. Perhaps I'm exaggerating the Leipzig sort of life, because I miss it so. God knows I was miserable there. But in a way I'd rather be miserable, and feel my mind was alive.'

'You won't be so miserable again,' said Willoughby. 'Because, d'ye see, you can always come back.'

'But only to live your life,' she said.

'Oh, ah!' said Willoughby. 'I can't see other than that.'

'I'm afraid I shall want to come back,' she said. 'I hope I shall want to come back. But I don't think I shall.'

'We've had two or three damned fine years,' said Willoughby. 'Maybe that's more than most people have, if the truth was known.'

'How I like you, my dear!' cried Lucy. 'In spite of all your beastly ways.'

She felt an incredible sense of relief, and with it a tenderness she had missed for a long time. It was a long time since they had lived in such harmony as in the week before Lucy went away.

When she had gone, Willoughby missed her, as he'd said he

would, like hell. However, he knew the cure for that. He had his harvest to get in, and money was now going to be more important than ever. He worked all hours himself, got rid of one of the girls, and old Mrs Finch cooked the pudding again.

That season he had decided to cut down heavily on beaters. He walked out, when he had time to spare, on the October afternoons, taking what came his way. He found a place at a coppice edge, over which the pigeons were trading between the stubbles and the wood.

The nibbled turf stretched away before him, running liquid with long shadow to where the pale stubble lay in the hollow, and turf ran up again on the other side to lap the sweet curve of the opposing copse. All the shallow valley was utterly still, eternal in the mild sunset gold. Beside him stood a young and noble oak, antlered like a stag, a classic tree, in whose burnished green, so darkly glowing, some presage of autumn was wakened by the level rays.

The tree was older than he was, and yet young. 'I shall see it spread a bit yet,' thought Willoughby. Standing in one autumn, he looked at another, and another, and another, stretching down fifty years, for though his heart was a little heavy in the evenings, this young man had every intention of living to a great age.

To stand in one autumn, and look down the golden vistas of others, is to stand between the past and the future as if they were two glasses.

'I shall never see her again,' said Willoughby. 'She will pay me a visit or two ... However ...'

A pigeon, enormous and grey, swung in over the hazel screen in which he stood.

'Ah, sweetheart!' murmured Willoughby, swinging his gun. The pearly bird fell crash on the velvet-coloured turf a few feet out. Its beak opened, disgorging a few elderberries, in a bubbly clot of its bright blood. Willoughby saw the grey half-moon close up over its eye. 'Go on, Prince,' he said. The dog, not very keen on pigeons, went slowly out, and brought

to hand. Willoughby dropped it on a patch of yet more velvet-coloured moss. It glimmered there in the half light, finished.

'There is something in me,' he thought, 'that loves a thing most – loves it quietest and best, then – when first I see it broken and dead. It wasn't always so. The place is, and the life is: that's why everything else must be.'

These were very vague thoughts: soon he found himself glancing back and forth, along those vistas of autumns we have alluded to.

'Ah, sweetheart!' he said, swinging his gun again. He was thinking of Frances, with no sort of aversion. All the same, he saw the bird fall with a feeling of considerable content. 'Ah, sweetheart!' They were homing now, and coming faster. That was an occasion when he had made a fool of himself in some silly talk in his enthusiastic days. 'Perhaps,' he said, 'I shall never wake up again, blushing for that.'

Another bird beat its wings black and ragged in the sinking sun. Willoughby uttered his little phrase again, and again without any aversion. The vistas, however, stretched both ways, and it must be confessed he had passed a bold-eyed animal in the avenue that afternoon, a handsome stupid creature, an enterprising vendress of cakes. Down she came!

He looked at his little valley. It was held for a moment in the last rays, a moment of golden pause, time enough to feel centuries in.

'I will hold it,' he said. 'I will know it, and hold it. I will hold it in my mind. And that will be the last. However, I must not be interrupted.'

With that, and with the utmost cheerfulness, he picked up his birds, and went back through the gathering dusk.

Young Bucknell was standing at the gate of the yard.

'I got them apples all gathered, sir,' said he. 'Only the roof of the loft's in a bad way again. I thought mebbe they might get frosted, like last year. Where else might I put 'em?'

'Spread out some newspapers,' said Willoughby, 'and put 'em on the library floor.'

THE END

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Joyce Cary

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Evelyn Waugh

455

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Caryl Brahms and S. J. Simon

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JOHN COLLIER

DEFY THE FOUL FIEND

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