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JAMES HILTON

author of LOST HORIZON & GOODBYE, MR. CHIPS

The Passionate Year

A memorable novel of two women, one man, and a love that broke all barriers

A MAN, TWO WOMEN AND ONE PASSIONATE YEAR

Ken was thirsting for something, he wasn't quite certain what. Clare came along and in some mysterious way appeased his thirst.

At first, he thought what she gave so abundantly was the milk of human kindness.

—And then, he discovered it was a far, far headier drink.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JAMES HILTON was born in England and educated at Cambridge, where he wrote his first novel, CATHERINE HERSELF. His first big success came with the publication of GOOD-BYE, MR. CHIPS, which was originally written for a Christmas supplement of the *British Weekly.*

LOST HORIZON, published also in 1933, was awarded the Hawthornden Prize (British equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize), was very well received in America, and became an outstanding motion picture, as did GOOD-BYE, MR. CHIPS. Mr. Hilton's other novels include ILL WIND, RANDOM HARVEST, SO WELL REMEMBERED, THE STORY OF DR. WASSELL, and TIME AND TIME AGAIN.

A resident of the United States since 1935, he died in Long Beach, California, in 1954.

The Passionate Year

James Hilton

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BOOK I

THE SUMMER TERM

THE PASSIONATE YEAR

CHAPTER ONE

I

"Ah, um yes, Mr. Speed, is it not? . . . Welcome, sir! Welcome to Millstead!" Kenneth Speed gripped the other's hand and smiled. He was a tall passably good-looking fellow in his early twenties, bright-eyed and brown-haired. At the moment he was feeling somewhat nervous, and always when he felt nervous he did things vigorously, as if to obscure his secret trepidation. Therefore when he took hold of the soft moist hand that was offered him he grasped it in such a way that its possessor winced and gave a perceptible gasp.

"Delighted to meet you, sir," said the young man, briskly, and his voice, like his action, was especially vigorous because of nervousness. It was not nervousness of interviewing a future employer, or of receiving social initiation into a new world; still less was it due to any consciousness of personal inferiority; it was an intellectual nervousness, based on an acute realisation of the exact moment when life turns a fresh corner which may or may not lead into a blind alley. And as Kenneth Speed felt the touch of this clammy elderly hand, he experienced a sudden eager desire to run away, out of the dark study and through the streets to the railway-station whence he had come. Absurd and ignoble desire, he told himself, shrugging his shoulders slightly as if to shake off an unpleasant sensation. He saw the past kaleidoscopically, the future as a mere vague following-up of the immediate present.

A month ago he had been a resident undergraduate at Cambridge. Now he was Kenneth Speed, B.A., Arts' Master at Millstead School. The transformation seemed to him for the time being all that was in life.

It was a dull glowering day towards the end of April, most appropriately melancholy for the beginning of term. It was one of those days when the sun had been bright very early, and by ten o'clock the sky dappled with white clouds; by noon the whiteness had dulled and spread to leaden patches of grey; now, at mid-afternoon, a cold wintry wind rolled them heavily across the sky and piled them on to the deep gloom of the horizon. The Headmaster's study, lit from three small windows through which the daylight, filtered by the thick spring foliage of lime trees, struggled meagrely, was darker even than usual, and Speed, peering around with hesitant inquisitive eyes, received no more than a confused impression of dreariness. He could see the clerical collar of the man opposite gleaming like a bar of ivory against an ebony background.

The voice, almost as soft and clammy as the hand, went on: "I hope you will be very comfortable here, Mr. Speed. We are—um yes—an old foundation, and we have our—um yes—our traditions—and—um—so forth. . . . You will take music and drawing, I understand?"

"That was the arrangement, I believe."

His eyes, by now accustomed to the gloom, saw over the top of the dazzling white collar a heavy duplicated chin and sharp clean-cut lips, lips in which whatever was slightly gentle was also slightly shrewd. Above them a huge promontory of a nose leaned back into deep-set eyes that had each a tiny spark in them that pierced the dusk like the gleaming tips of a pair of foils. And over all this a wide blue-veined forehead curved on to a bald crown on which the light shone mistily. There was fascination of a sort in the whole impression; one felt that the man might be almost physically a part of the dark study, indissolubly one with the leather-bound books and the massive mahogany pedestal-desk; a Pope, perhaps, in a Vatican born with him. And when he moved his finger to push a bell at his elbow Speed started as if the movement had been in some way sinister.

"Ah yes, that will be all right—um—music and drawing. Perhaps—um—commercial geography for the—um—lower forms, eh?"

"I'm afraid I don't know much about commercial geography."

"Oh, well—um yes—I suppose not. Still—easy to acquire, you know. Oh yes, quite easy . . . Come in. . . ."

This last remark, uttered in a peculiar treble wail, was in response to a soft tap at the door. It opened and a man stepped into the shadows and made his way to the desk with cat-like stealthiness.

"Light the gas, Potter . . . And by the way, Mr. Speed will be in to dinner." He turned to the young man and said, as if the enquiry were merely a matter of form: "You'll join us for dinner to-night, won't you?"

Speed replied: "I shall be delighted."

He wondered then what it was in the dark study that made him feel eerily sensitive and observant; so that, for instance, to watch Potter standing on a chair and lighting the incandescent globes was to feel vividly and uncannily the man's feline grace of movement. And what was it in the Headmaster's quivering blade-like eyes that awakened the wonder as to what these dark book-lined walls had seen in the past, what strange, furtive conversations they had heard, what scenes of pity and terror and fright and, might be, of blind suffering they had gazed upon?

The globes popped into yellow brilliance. The dark study took sudden shape and coherence; the shadows were no longer menacing. And the Headmaster, the Reverend Bruce Ervine, M.A., D.D., turned out to be no more than a plump apoplectic-looking man with a totally bald head.

Speed's eyes, blinking their relief, wandered vacantly over the bookshelves. He noticed Gibbon's "Decline and Fall" in twelve volumes, the Expositor's Bible in twenty volumes, the Encyclopædia Britannica in forty volumes, a long shelf of the Loeb classical series, and a huge group of lexicons surmounting like guardian angels a host of small school text-books.

"Dinner is at seven, then Mr. Speed. We—we do not dress—except for—um yes—for special occasions. . . . If you—um—have nothing to do this afternoon—you might find a stroll into the town interesting—there are some Roman—um—earthworks that are extremely—um yes—extremely fascinating. Oh yes, really. . . Harrington's the stationers will sell you a guide. . . . I don't think there are any—um—duties we need trouble you with until to-morrow . . . um yes . . . Seven o'clock then, Mr. Speed . . ."

"I shall be there, sir."

He bowed slightly and backed himself through the green-baize double doors into the stone corridor.

II

He climbed the stone flights of steps that led to the School House dormitories and made his way to the little room in which, some hours earlier, the school porter, squirming after tips, had deposited his trunks and suit-case. Over the door, in neat white letters upon a black background, he read: "Mr. K. Speed."—It seemed to him almost the name of somebody else. He looked at it, earnestly and contemplatively, until he saw that a small boy was staring at him from the dormitory doorway at the end of the passage. That would never do; it would be fatal to appear eccentric. He walked into the room and shut the door behind him. He was alone now and could think. He saw the bare distempered walls with patches of deeper colour where pictures had been hung; the table covered with a green-baize cloth; the shabby pedestal-desk surmounted by a dilapidated inkstand; the empty fire-grate into which somebody, as if in derision, had cast quantities of red tissue-paper. An inner door opened into a small bedroom, and here his critical eye roved over the plain deal chest of drawers, the perfunctory wash-hand stand (it was expected, no doubt, that masters would wash in the prefects' bathroom), and the narrow iron bed with the hollow still in it that last term's occupant had worn. He carried his luggage in through the separating door and began to unpack.

But he was quite happy. He had always had the ambition to be a master at a public-school. He had dreamed about it; he was dreaming about it now. He was bursting with new ideas and new enthusiasms, which he hoped would be infectious, and Millstead, which was certainly a good school, would doubtless give him his chance. Something in Ervine's dark study had momentarily damped his enthusiasm, but only momentarily; and in any case he was not afraid of an uncomfortable bed or of a poorly-furnished room. When he had been at Millstead a little while he would, he decided, import some furniture from home; it would not, however, be wise to do everything in a hurry. For the immediate present a few photographs on the mantelpiece, Medici prints on the walls, a few cushions, books of course, and his innumerable under-

graduate pipes and tobacco-jars, would wreak a sufficiently pleasant transformation.

He looked through the open lattice-windows and saw, three storeys below, the headmaster's garden, the running-track, and beyond that the smooth green of the cricket-pitch. Leaning out and turning his head sharply to the left he could see the huge red blocks of Milner's and Lavery's, the two other houses, together with the science buildings and the squat gymnasium. He felt already intimate with them; he anticipated in a sense the peculiar closeness of their relationship with his life. Their very bricks and mortar might, if he let them, become part of his inmost soul. He would walk amongst them secretly and knowingly, familiar with every step and curve of their corridors, growing each day more intimate with them until one day, might be, he should be a part of them as darkly and mysteriously as Ervine had become a part of his study. Would he? He shrank instinctively from such a final absorption of himself. And yet already he was conscious of fascination, of something that would permeate his life subtly and tremendously—that must do so, whether he willed it or not. And as he leaned his head out of the window he felt big cold drops of rain.

He shut the windows and resumed unpacking. Just as he had finished everything except the hanging up of some of the pictures, he heard the School clock chime the hour of four. He recollected that the porter had told him that tea could be obtained in the Masters' Common-Room at that hour. It was raining heavily now, so that a walk into the town, even with the lure of old Roman earthworks, was unattractive. Besides, he felt just pleasantly hungry. He washed his hands and descended the four long flights to the ground-floor corridors.

III

The Masters' Common-Room was empty save for a diminutive man reading the *Farmer and Stockbreeder*. As Speed entered the little man turned round in his chair and looked at him. Speed smiled and said, still with a trace of that almost boisterous nervousness: "I hope I'm not intruding."

The little man replied: "Oh, not at all. Come and sit down. Are you having tea?"

"Yes."

"Then perhaps we can have it together. You're Speed, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Thought so. I'm Pritchard. Science and maths."

He said that with the air of making a vivid epigram. He had small, rather feminine features, and a complexion clear as a woman's. Moreover he nipped out his words, as it were, with a delicacy that was almost wholly feminine, and that blended curiously with his far-reaching contralto voice.

He pressed a bell by the mantelpiece.

"That'll fetch Potter," he said. "Potter's the Head's man, but the Head is good enough to lend him to us for meals. I daresay we'll be alone. The rest won't come before they have to."

"Why do you, then?" enquired Speed, laughing a little.

"Me?—Oh, I'm the victim of the railway timetable. If I'd caught a later train I shouldn't have arrived here till to-morrow. I come from the Isle of Man. Where do you come from?"

"Little place in Essex."

"You're all right then. Perhaps you'll be able to manage a week-end home during the term. What's the Head put you on to?"

"Oh, drawing and music. And he mentioned commercial geography, but I'm not qualified for that."

"Bless you, you don't need to be. It's only exports and imports . . . Potter, tea for two, please. . . . And some toast . . . Public-school man yourself, I suppose."

"Yes."

"Here?"

"No."

"Where, then, if you don't object to my questions?"

"Harrow."

Pritchard whistled.

After Potter had reappeared with the tea, he went on: "You know, Speed, we've had a bit of gossip here about you. Before the vac. started. Something that the Head's wife let out one night when Ransome—he's the classics Master—went there to dinner. She rather gave Ransome the impression that you were a bit of a millionaire."

Speed coloured and said hastily: "Oh, not at all. She's quite mistaken, I assure you."

Pritchard paused, teacup in hand. "But your father is Sir Charles Speed, isn't he?"

"Yes."

The assent was grudging and a trifle irritated. Speed helped himself to toast with an energy that gave emphasis to the monosyllable. After munching in silence for some minutes he said: "Don't forget I'm far more curious about Millstead than you have any right to be about me. Tell me about the place."

"My dear fellow, I——" his voice sank to a melodramatic whisper—"I positively daren't tell you anything while *that* fellow's about." (He jerked his head in the direction of the pantry cupboard inside which Potter could be heard sibilantly cleaning the knives.) "He's got ears that would pierce a ten-inch wall. But if you want to make a friend of me come up to my room to-night—I'm over the way in Milner's—and we'll have a pipe and a chat before bedtime."

Speed said: "Sorry. But I'm afraid I can't to-night. Thanks all the same, though. I'm dining at the Head's."

Pritchard's eyes rounded, and once again he emitted a soft whistle. "Oh, you are, are you?" he said, curiously, and he seemed ever so slightly displeased. He was silent for a short time; then, toying facetiously with a slab of cake, he added: "Well, be sure and give Miss Ervine my love when you get there."

"Miss Ervine?"

"Herself."

Speed said after a pause: "What's she like?"

Again Pritchard jerked his head significantly towards the pantry cupboard. "Mustn't talk shop here, old man. Besides you'll find out quite soon enough what she's like."

He took up the *Farmer and Stockbreeder* and said, in rather a loud tone, as if for Potter's benefit to set a label of innocuousness upon the whole of their conversation: "Don't know if you're at all interested in farming, Speed?—I am. My brother's got a little farm down in Herefordshire . . ."

They chatted about farming for some time, while Potter wandered about preparing the long tables for dinner. Speed was not especially interested, and after a while excused himself by mentioning some letters that he must write. He came to the conclusion that he did not want to make a friend of Pritchard.

IV

At a quarter to seven he sank into the wicker armchair in his room and gazed pensively at the red tissue-paper in the fire-grate. He had just a few minutes with nothing particular to do in them before going downstairs to dinner at the Head's. He was ready dressed and groomed for the occasion, polished up to that pitch of healthy cleanliness and sartorial efficiency which the undergraduate of not many weeks before had been wont to present at University functions of the more fashionable sort. He looked extraordinarily young, almost boyish, in his smartly cut lounge suit and patent shoes; he thought so himself as he looked in the mirror—he speculated a little humorously whether the head-prefect would look older or younger than he did. He remembered Pritchard's half-jocular reference to Miss Ervine; he supposed from the way Pritchard had mentioned her that she was some awful spectacled blue-stocking of a girl—schoolmasters' daughters were quite often like that. On the whole he was looking forward to seven o'clock, partly because he was eager to pick up more of the threads of Millstead life, and partly because he enjoyed dining out.

Out in the corridor and in the dormitories and down the stone steps various sounds told him, even though he did not know Millstead, that the term had at last begun. He could hear the confused murmur of boyish voices ascending in sudden gusts from the rooms below; every now and then footsteps raced past his room and were muffled by the webbing on the dormitory floor; he heard shouts and cries of all kinds, from shrillest treble to deepest bass, rising and falling ceaselessly amid the vague jangle of miscellaneous sound. Sometimes a particular voice or group of voices would become separate from the rest, and then he could pick up scraps of conversation, eager salutations, boisterous chaff, exchanged remarks about vacation experiences, all intermittent and punctuated by the noisy unpacking of suit-cases and the clatter of water-jugs in their basins. He was so young that he could hardly believe that he was a Master now and not a schoolboy.

The school-clock commenced to chime the hour. He rose, took a last view of himself in the bedroom mirror, and went out into the corridor. A small boy carrying a large bag collided

with him outside the door and apologised profusely. He said, with a laugh: "Oh, don't mention it."

He knew that the boy would recount the incident to everybody in the dormitory. In fact, as he turned the corner to descend the steps he caught a momentary glimpse of the boy standing stock still in the corridor gazing after him. He smiled as he went down.

V

He went round to the front entrance of the Headmaster's house and rang the bell. It was a curious house, the result of repeated architectural patchings and additions; its ultimate incongruity had been softened and mellowed by ivy and creeper of various sorts, so that it bore the sad air of a muffled-up invalid. Potter opened the door and admitted him with stealthy precision. While he was standing in the hall and being relieved of his hat and gloves he had time to notice the Asiatic and African bric-a-brac which, scattered about the walls and tables, bore testimony to Doctor Ervine's years as a missionary in foreign fields. Then, with the same feline grace, Potter showed him into the drawing-room.

It was a moderate-sized apartment lit by heavy old-fashioned gas chandeliers, whose peculiar and continuous hissing sound emphasised the awkwardness of any gap in the conversation. A baby-grand piano, with its sound-board closed and littered with music and ornaments, and various cabinets of china and curios, were the only large articles of furniture; chairs and settees were sprinkled haphazard over the central area round the screened fireplace. As Speed entered, with Potter opening the door for him and intoning sepulchrally: "Mr. Speed," an answering creak of several of the chairs betrayed the fact that the room was occupied.

Then the Head rose out of his armchair, book of some sort in hand, and came forward with a large easy smile.

"Um, yes—Mr. Speed—so glad—um, yes—may I introduce you to my wife?—Lydia, this is Mr. Speed!"

At first glance Speed was struck with the magnificent appropriateness of the name Lydia. She was a pert little woman, obviously competent; the sort of woman who is always suspected of twisting her husband round her little finger. She was fifty if she was a day, yet she dressed with a dash of the young university blue-stocking; an imitation so insolent that

one assumed either that she was younger than she looked or that some enormous brain development justified the eccentricity. She had rather sharp blue eyes that were shrewd rather than far-seeing, and her hair, energetically dyed, left one in doubt as to what colour nature had ever accorded it. At present it was a dull brown that had streaks of black and grey.

She said, in a voice that though sharp was not unpretty: "I'm delighted to meet you, Mr. Speed. You must make yourself at home here, you know."

The Head murmured: "Um, yes, most certainly. At home —um, yes . . . Now let me introduce you to my daughter . . . Helen, this is—um—Mr. Speed."

A girl was staring at him, and he did not then notice much more than the extreme size and brightness of her blue eyes; that, and some astonishingly vague quality that cannot be more simply described than as a sense of continually restrained movement, so that, looking with his mind's eye at everybody else in the world, he saw them suddenly grown old and decrepit. Her bright golden hair hung down her back in a rebellious cascade; that, however, gave no clue to her age. The curious serene look in her eyes was a woman's (her mother's, no doubt), while the pretty half-mocking curve of her lips was still that of a young and fantastically mischievous child. In reality she was twenty, though she looked both older and younger.

She said, in a voice so deep and sombre that Speed recoiled suddenly as though faced with something uncanny: "How are you, Mr. Speed?"

He bowed to her and said, gallantly: "Delighted to be in Millstead, Miss Ervine."

The Head murmured semi-consciously: "Um, yes, delightful place—especially in summer weather—trees, you know —beautiful to sit out on the cricket ground—um, yes, very beautiful indeed . . ."

Potter opened the door to announce that dinner was served.

VI

As Mrs. Ervine and the girl preceded them out of the room Speed heard the latter say: "Clare's not come yet, mother." —Mrs. Ervine replied, a trifle acidly: "Well, my dear, we

can't wait for her. I suppose she knew it was at seven . . ."

The Head, taking Speed by the arm with an air of ponderous intimacy, was saying: "Don't know whether you've a good reading voice, Speed. If so, we must have you for the lessons in morning chapel."

Speed was mumbling something appropriate and the Head was piloting him into the dining-room when Potter appeared again, accompanied by a dark-haired girl, short in stature and rather pale-complexioned. She seemed quite unconcerned as she caught up the tail end of the procession into the dining-room and remarked casually: "How are you, Doctor Ervine? —So sorry I'm a trifle late. Friday, you know,—rather a busy day for the shop."

The Head looked momentarily nonplussed, then smiled and said: "Oh, not at all . . . not at all . . . I must introduce you to our new recruit—Mr. Speed. . . . This is Miss Harrington, a friend of my daughter's. She—um, yes, she manages—most successfully, I may say—the—er—the bookshop down in the town. Bookshop, you know."

He said that with the air of implying: Bookshops are not ordinary shops.

Speed bowed; the Head went on boomingly: "And she is, I think I may venture to say, my daughter's greatest friend. Eh?"

He addressed the monosyllable to the girl with a touch of shrewdness: she replied quietly: "I don't know." The three words were spoken in that rare tone in which they simply mean nothing but literally what they say.

In the dining-room they sat in the following formation: Dr. and Mrs. Ervine at the head and foot respectively; Helen and Clare together at one side, and Speed opposite them at the other. The dining-room was a cold forlorn-looking apartment in which the dim incandescent light seemed to accomplish little more than to cast a dull glitter of obscurity on the oil-paintings that hung, ever so slightly askew, on the walls. A peculiar incongruity in it struck Speed at once, though the same might never have occurred to anybody else: the minute salt and pepper-boxes on the table possessed a pretty feminine daintiness which harmonised ill with the huge mahogany sideboard. The latter reminded Speed of the board-room of a City banking-house. It was as if, he thought, the Doctor and his wife had impressed their personalities crudely and without compromise; and as if those personalities

were so diametrically different that no fusing of the two into one was ever possible. Throughout the meal he kept looking first to his left, at Mrs. Ervine, and then to his right at the Doctor, and wondering at what he felt instinctively to be a fundamental strangeness in their life together.

Potter, assisted by a speckle-faced maid, hovered assiduously around, and the Doctor assisted occasionally by his wife, hovered no less assiduously around the conversation, preventing it from lapsing into such awkward silences as would throw into prominence the continual hissing of the gas and his own sibilant ingurgitation of soup. The Doctor talked rather loudly and ponderously, and with such careful and scrupulous qualifications of everything he said that one had the impressive sensation that incalculable and mysterious issues hung upon his words; Mrs. Ervine's remarks were short and pithy, sometimes a little cynical.

The Doctor seemed to fear that he had given Speed a wrong impression of Miss Harrington. "I'm sure Mr. Speed will be surprised when I tell him that he can have the honour of purchasing his *Times* from you each morning, Clare," he said, lapping up the final spoonful of soup and bestowing a satisfied wipe with his napkin on his broad wet lips.

Clare said: "I should think Mr. Speed would prefer to have it delivered."

Mrs. Ervine said: "Perhaps Mr. Speed doesn't take the *Times*, either."

Speed looked across to Clare with a humorous twist of the corners of the mouth and said: "You can book me an order for the *Telegraph* if you like, Miss Harrington."

"With pleasure, Mr. Speed. Any Sunday paper?"

"The *Observer*, if you will be so kind."

"Right."

Again the Doctor seemed to fear that he had given Speed a wrong impression of Miss Harrington. "I'm sure Mr. Speed will be interested to know that your father is a great littérateur, Clare."

Clare gave the Doctor a curious look, with one corner of her upper lip tilted at an audacious upward angle.

The Doctor went on, leaning his elbows on the table as soon as Potter had removed his soup-plate: "Mr. Harrington is the author of books on ethics."

All this time Helen had not spoken a word. Speed had been

watching her, for she was already to him by far the most interesting member of the party. He noticed that her eyes were constantly shifting between Clare and anyone whom Clare was addressing; Clare seemed almost the centre of her world. When Clare smiled she smiled also, and when Clare was pensive there came into her eyes a look which held, besides pensiveness, a touch of sadness. She was an extremely beautiful girl and in the yellow light the coils of her hair shone like sheaves of golden corn on a summer's day. It was obvious that, conversationally at any rate, she was extremely shy.

Mrs. Ervine was saying: "You're going to take the music, Mr. Speed, are you not?"

Speed smiled and nodded.

She went on: "Then I suppose you're fond of music."

"Doesn't it follow?" Speed answered, with a laugh.

She replied pertly: "Not necessarily at all, Mr. Speed. Do you play an instrument?"

"The piano a little."

The Head interposed with: "Um, yes—a wonderful instrument. We must have some music after dinner, eh, Lydia? —Do you like Mendelssohn?" (He gave the word an exaggeratedly German pronunciation). "My daughter plays some of the—um—the *Lieder ohne Wörte*—um, yes—the Songs Without Words, you know."

"I like *some* of Mendelssohn," said Speed.

He looked across at the girl. She was blushing furiously, with her eyes still furtively on Clare.

VII

After dinner they all returned to the drawing-room, where inferior coffee was distributed round in absurdly diminutive cups, Potter attitudinising over it like a high-priest performing the rites of some sinister religious ceremony. Clare and Helen sat together on one of the settees, discoursing inaudibly and apparently in private; the Head commenced an anecdote that was suggested by Speed's glance at a photograph on the mantelpiece, a photograph of a coloured man attired in loose-fitting cotton draperies. "My servant when I was in India," the Head had informed Speed. "An excellent fellow—most—um, yes—faithful and reliable. One of the

earliest of my converts. I well remember the first morning after I had engaged him to look after me he woke me up with the words 'Chota Hazra, sahib'—"

Speed feigning interest, managed to keep his eyes intermittently on the two girls. He wondered if they were discussing him.

"I said—'I can't—um—see Mr. Chota Hazra this time in the morning.'"

Speed nodded with a show of intelligence, and then, to be on the safe side if the joke had been reached, gave a slight titter.

"Of course," said the Head, after a pause, "it was all my imperfect knowledge of Hindostanee. 'Chota hazra' means —um, yes—breakfast!"

Speed laughed loudly. He had the feeling after he had laughed that he had laughed too loudly, for everything seemed so achingly silent after the echoes had died away, silent except for the eternal hiss of the gas in the chandeliers. It was as if his laughter had startled something; he could hear, in his imagination, the faint fluttering of wings as if something had flown away. A curious buzzing came into his head; he thought perhaps it might be due to the mediocre Burgundy that he had drunk with his dinner. Then for one strange unforgettable second he saw Helen's sky-blue eyes focussed full upon him and it was in them that he read a look of half-frightened wonderment that sent the blood tingling in his veins.

He said, with a supreme inward feeling of recklessness: "I would love to hear Miss Ervine play Mendelssohn."

He half expected a dreadful silence to supervene and everybody to stare at him as the author of some frightful conversational *faux pas;* he had the feeling of having done something deliberately and provocatively unconventional. He saw the girl's eyes glance away from him and the blush rekindle her cheeks in an instant. It seemed to him also that she clung closer to Clare and that Clare smiled a little, as a mother to a shy child.

Of course it was all a part of his acute sensitiveness; his remark was taken to be more than a touch of polite gallantry. Mrs. Ervine said: "Helen's very nervous," and the Head, rolling his head from side to side in an ecstasy of anticipation, said: "Ah yes, most certainly. Delightful that will be—um,

yes—most delightful. Helen, you must not disappoint Mr. Speed on his first night at Millstead."

She looked up, shook her head so that for an instant all her face seemed to be wrapped in yellow flame, and said, somberly: "I can't play—please don't ask me to."

Then she turned to Clare and said, suddenly: "I can't really, can I, Clare?"

"You can," said Clare, "but you get nervous."

She said that calmly and deliberatively, with the air of issuing a final judgment of the matter.

"Come now, Helen," boomed the Head, ponderously. "Mr. Speed—um—is very anxious to hear you. It is very—um, yes—silly to be nervous. Come along now."

There was a note in those last three words of sudden harshness, a faint note, it is true, but one that Speed, acutely perceptive of such subtleties, was quick to hear and notice. He looked at the Head and once again, it seemed to him, the Head was as he had seen him that afternoon in the dark study, a flash of malevolent sharpness in his eyes, a menacing slope in his huge low-hanging nose. The room seemed to grow darker and the atmosphere more tense; he saw the girl leave the settee and walk to the piano. She sat on the stool for a moment with her hands poised hesitatingly over the keyboard; then, suddenly, and at a furious rate, she plunged into the opening bars of the Spring Song. Speed had never heard it played at such an alarming rate. Five or six bars from the beginning she stopped all at once, lingered a moment with her hands over the keys, and then left the stool and almost ran the intervening yards to the settee. She said, with deep passion: "I can't—I don't remember it."

Clare said protectingly: "Never mind, Helen. It doesn't matter."

Speed said: "No, of course not. It's awfully hard to remember music—at least, I always find it so."

And the Head, all his harshness gone and placidity restored in its place, murmured. "Hard—um yes—very hard. I don't know how people manage it at all. Oh, *very* difficult, don't you think so, Lydia?"

"Difficult if you're nervous," replied Mrs. Ervine, with her own peculiar note of acidity.

VIII

Conversation ambled on, drearily and with infinite labour, until half-past nine, when Clare arose and said she must go. Helen then rose also and said she would go with Clare a part of the way into the town, but Mrs. Ervine objected because Helen had a cold. Clare said: "Oh, don't trouble, Helen, I can easily go alone—I'm used to it, you know, and there's a bright moon."

Speed, feeling that a show of gallantry would bring to an end an evening that had just begun to get on his nerves a little, said: "Suppose I see you home, Miss Harrington. I've got to go down to the general post-office to post a letter, and I can quite easily accompany you as far as the High Street."

"There's no need to," said Clare. "And I hope you're not inventing that letter you have to post."

"I assure you I'm not," Speed answered, and he pulled out of his pocket a letter home that he had written up in his room that afternoon.

Clare laughed.

In the dimly-lit hall, after he had bidden good night to Doctor and Mrs. Ervine, he found an opportunity of speaking a few words to Helen alone. She was waiting at the door to have a few final words with Clare, and before Clare appeared Speed came up to her and began speaking.

He said: "Miss Ervine, please forgive me for having been the means of making you feel uncomfortable this evening. I had no idea you were nervous, or I shouldn't have dreamed of asking you to play. I know what nervousness is, because I'm nervous myself."

She gave him a half-frightened look and replied: "Oh, it's all right, Mr. Speed. It wasn't your fault. And anyhow it didn't matter."

She seemed only half interested. It was Clare she was waiting for, and when Clare appeared she left Speed by the door and the two girls conversed a moment in whispers. They kissed and said good night.

As Potter appeared mysteriously from nowhere and, after handing Speed his hat and gloves, opened the front-door with massive dignity, Helen threw her hands up as if to embrace the chill night air and exclaimed: "Oh, what a lovely moon! I wish I was coming with you, Clare!"

There was a strange bewildering pathos in her voice.

Over the heavy trees and the long black pillars of shadow the windows of the dormitories shone like yellow gems, piercing the night with radiance and making a pattern of intricate beauty on the path that led to the Headmaster's gate. Sounds, mysteriously clear, fell from everywhere upon the two of them as they crossed the soft lawn and came in view of the huge block of Milner's, all its windows lit and all its rooms alive with commotion. They could hear the clatter of jugs in their basins, the sudden chorus of boyish derision, the strident cry that pierced the night like a rocket, the dull incessant murmur of miscellaneous sounds, the clap of hands, the faint jabber of a muffled gramophone. Millstead was most impressive at this hour, for it was the hour when she seemed most of all immense and vital, a body palpitating with warmth and energy, a mighty organism which would swallow the small and would sway even the greatest of men. Tears, bred of a curious undercurrent of emotion, came into Speed's eyes as he realised that he was now part of the marvellously contrived machine.

Out in the lane the moon was white along one side of the road-way, and here the lights of Millstead pierced through the foliage like so many bright stars. Speed walked with Clare in silence for some way. He had nothing particular to say; he had suggested accompanying her home partly from mere perfunctory politeness, but chiefly because he longed for a walk in the cool night air away from the stuffiness of the Head's drawing-room.

When they had been walking some moments Clare said: "I wish you hadn't come with me, Mr. Speed."

He answered, a trifle vacantly: "Why do you?"

"Because it will make Helen jealous."

He became as if suddenly galvanised into attention. "What! Jealous! Jealous!—Of whom?—Of what?—Of you having me to take you home?"

Clare shook her head. "Oh, no. Of you having me to take home."

He thought a moment and then said: "What, really?—Do you mean to tell me that——"

"Yes," she interrupted. "And of course you don't understand it, do you?—Men never understand Helen."

"And why don't they?"

"Because Helen doesn't like men, and men can never understand that."

He rejoined, heavily despondent: "Then I expect she dislikes me venomously enough. For it was I who asked her to play the piano, wasn't it?"

"She wouldn't dislike you any more for that," replied Clare. "But let's not discuss her. I hate gossiping about my friends."

They chattered intermittently and inconsequently about books after that, and at the corner of High Street she insisted on his leaving her and proceeding to the general post-office by the shortest route.

CHAPTER TWO

I

In the morning he was awakened by Hartopp the School House porter ringing his noisy hand-bell through the dormitories. He looked at his watch; it was half-past six. There was no need for him to think of getting up yet; he had no early morning form, and so could laze for another hour if he so desired. But it was quite impossible to go to sleep again because his mind, once he became awake, began turning over the incidents of the day before and anticipating those of the day to come. He lay in bed thinking and excogitating, listening to the slow beginnings of commotion in the dormitories, and watching bars of yellow sunshine creeping up the bed towards his face. At half-past seven Hartopp tapped at the door and brought in his correspondence. There was a letter from home and a note, signed by the Head, giving him his work time-table. He consulted it immediately and discovered that he was put down for two forms that morning; four *alpha* in drawing and five *gamma* in general supervision.

His letter from home, headed "Beachings Over, near Framlingay, Essex. Tel. Framlingay 32. Stations: Framlingay 2½ miles; Pumphrey Bassett 3 miles," ran as follows:

"My dear Ken,—This will reach you on the first morning of term, won't it, and your father and I both want you to understand that we wish you every success. It seems a funny thing to do, teaching in a boarding-school, but I suppose it's all right if you like it, only of course we should have liked you to go into the business. I hope you can keep order with the boys, anyhow, they do say that poor Mr. Rideaway in the village has an awful time, the boys pour ink in his pockets when he isn't looking. Father is going on business to Australia very soon and wants me to go with him, perhaps I may, but it sounds an outlandish sort of place to go to, doesn't it. Since you left us we've had to get rid of Jukes—we found him stealing a piece of tarpaulin—so ungrateful, isn't it, but

we've got another under-gardener now, he used to be at Peverly Court but left because the old duke was so *mean*. Dick goes back to Marlborough to-day—they begin the same day as yours. By the way, why did you choose Millstead? I'd never heard of it till we looked it up, it isn't well-known like Harrow and Rugby, is it. We had old Bennett and Sir Guy Blatherwick with us the last week-end, Sir Guy told us all about his travels in China, or Japan, I forget which. Well, write to us, won't you, and drop in if you get a day off any time—your affectionate mother, FANNY."

After he had read it he washed and dressed in a leisurely fashion and descended in time for School breakfast at eight. Hartopp showed him his place, at the head of number four table, and he was interested to see by his plate a neatly folded *Daily Telegraph*. Businesslike, he commented mentally, and he was glad to see it because a newspaper is an excellent cloak for nervousness and embarrassment. His mother's hint about his being possibly a bad disciplinarian put him on his guard; he was determined to succeed in this immensely important respect right from the start. Of course he possessed the enormous advantage of knowing from recent experience the habits and psychology of the average public-schoolboy.

But breakfast was not a very terrible ordeal. The boys nearest him introduced themselves and bade him a cheerful good morning, for there is a sense of fairness in schoolboys which makes them generous to newcomers, except where tradition decrees the setting-up of some definite ordeal. Towards the end of the meal Pritchard walked over from one of the other tables and enquired, in a voice loud enough for at any rate two or three of the boys to hear: "Well, Speed, old man, did you have a merry carousal at the Head's last night?"

Speed replied, a little coldly: "I had a pleasant time."

"I suppose now," went on Pritchard, dropping his voice a little, but still not sufficiently to prevent the nearest boys from hearing, "you realise what I meant yesterday."

"What was that?"

"When I said that you'd find out soon enough what she was like."

Speed said crisply: "You warned me yesterday against talking shop. I might warn you now."

"But that isn't shop."

"Well, whether it is or not I don't propose to discuss it—*now*—and *here*."

Almost without his being aware of it his voice had risen somewhat, so that at this final pronouncement the boys nearest him looked up with curiosity tinged with poorly-concealed amusement. It was rather obvious that Pritchard was unpopular.

Speed was sorry that he had not exercised greater control over his voice, especially when Pritchard, reddening, merely shrugged his shoulders and went away.

The boy nearest to Speed grinned and said audaciously: "That'll take Mr. Pritchard down a peg, sir!"

Speed barked out (to the boy's bewilderment): "Don't be impertinent!"

For the rest of the meal he held up the *Telegraph* as a rampart between himself and the world.

II

He knew, at the end of the first school day, that he had been a success, and that if he took reasonable care he would be able to go on being a success. It had been a day of subtle trials and ordeals, yet he had, helped rather than hindered by his peculiar type of nervousness, got safely through them all.

Numerous were the pitfalls which he had carefully avoided. At school meals he had courteously declined to share jam and delicacies which the nearest to him offered. If he had he would have been inundated immediately with pots of jam and boxes of fancy cakes from all quarters of the table. Many a new Master at Millstead had finished his first meal with his part of the table looking like the counter of an untidy grocer's shop. Instinct rather than prevision had saved Speed from such a fate. Instinct, in fact, had been his guardian angel throughout the day; instinct which, although to some extent born of his recent public-school experience, was perhaps equally due to that curious barometric sensitiveness that made his feelings so much more acute and clairvoyant than those of other people.

At dinner in the Masters' Common-Room he had met the majority of the staff. There was Garforth, the bursar, a pleasant little man with a loving-kindness overclouded somewhat by pedantry; Hayes-Smith, housemaster of Milner's, a brisk,

bustling, unimaginative fellow whose laugh was more eloquent than his words; Ransome, a wizened Voltairish classical master, morbidly ashamed of being caught in possession of any emotion of any kind; Lavery, housemaster of North House (commonly called Lavery's), whose extraordinary talent for delegating authority enabled him to combine laziness and efficiency in a way both marvellous and enviable; and Poulet, the French and German Master, who spoke far better English than anybody in the Common-Room, except, perhaps, Garforth or Ransome. Then, of course, there was Clanwell, whom Speed had already met; Clanwell, better known "Fishcake," a sporting man of great vigour who would, from time to time, astonish the world by donning a black suit and preaching from the Millstead pulpit a sermon of babbling meekness. Speed liked him; liked all of them, in fact, better than he did Pritchard.

At dinner, Pritchard sat next to him on one side and Clanwell on the other. Pritchard showed no malice for the incident of that morning's breakfast-time, and Speed, a little contrite, was affable enough. But for all that he did not like Pritchard.

Pritchard asked him if he had got on all right that day, and Speed replied that he had. Then Pritchard said: "Oh, well of course, the first day's always easy. It's after a week or so that you'll find things a bit trying. The first night you take prep, for instance. It's a sort of school tradition that they always try and rag you that night."

Clanwell, overhearing, remarked fiercely: "Anyway, Speed, take my tip and don't imagine it's a school tradition that any Master lets himself be ragged."

Speed laughed. "I'll remember that," he said.

He remembered it on the following Wednesday night when he was down to take evening preparation from seven until half-past eight. Preparation for the whole school, except prefects, was held in Millstead Big Hall, a huge vault-like chamber in which desks were ranged in long rows and where the Master in charge sat on high at a desk on a raised dais. No more subtle and searching test of disciplinary powers could have been contrived than this supervision of evening preparation, for the room was so big that it was impossible to see clearly from the Master's desk to the far end, and besides that, the acoustics were so peculiar that conversations in some parts of the room were practically inaudible except from very

close quarters. A new master suffered additional handicap in being ignorant of the names of the vast majority of the boys.

At dinner, before the ordeal, the Masters in the Common-Room had given Speed jocular advice. "Whatever you do, watch that they don't get near the electric-light switches," said Clanwell. Pritchard said: "When old Blenkinsop took his first prep they switched off the lights and then took his trousers off and poured ink over his legs." Garforth said: "Whatever you do, don't lose your temper and hit anybody. It doesn't pay." "Best to walk up and down the rows if you want them to stop talking," said Ransome. Pritchard said: "If you do that they'll beat time to your steps with their feet." Poulet remarked reminiscently: "When I took my first prep they started a gramophone somewhere, and I guessed they'd hidden it well, so I said: 'Gentlemen, anyone who interrupts the music will have a hundred lines!' They laughed and were quite peaceable afterwards."

Speed said, at the conclusion of the meal: "I'm much obliged to everybody for the advice. I'll try to remember all of it, but I guess when I'm in there I shall just do whatever occurs to me at the moment." To which Clanwell replied, putting a hand on Speed's shoulder: "You couldn't do better, my lad."

Speed was very nervous as he took his seat on the dais at five to seven and watched the school straggling to their places. They came in quietly enough, but there was an atmosphere of subdued expectancy of which Speed was keenly conscious; the boys stared about them, grinned at each other, seemed as if they were waiting for something to happen. Nevertheless, at five past seven all was perfectly quiet and orderly, although it was obvious that little work was being done. Speed felt rather as if he were sitting on a powder-magazine, and there was a sense in which he was eager for the storm to break.

At about a quarter-past seven a banging of desk-lids began at the far end of the hall.

He stood up and said, quietly, but in a voice that carried well: "I don't want to be hard on anybody, so I'd better warn you that I shall punish any disorderliness very severely."

There was some tittering, and for a moment or so he wondered if he had made a fool of himself.

Then he saw a bright, rather pleasant-faced boy in one of the back rows deliberately raise a desk-lid and drop it with

a bang. Speed consulted the map of the desks that was in front of him and by counting down the rows discovered the boy's name to be Worsley. He wondered how the name should be pronounced—whether the first syllable should rhyme with "purse" or with "horse." Instinct in him, that uncanny feeling for atmosphere, embarked him on an outrageously bold adventure, nothing less than a piece of facetiousness, the most dangerous weapon in a new Master's armoury, and the one most of all likely to recoil on himself. He stood up again and said: "Wawsley or Wurssley—however you call yourself—you have a hundred lines!"

The whole assembly roared with laughter. That frightened him a little. Supposing they did not stop laughing! He remembered an occasion at his own school when a class had ragged a certain Master very neatly and subtly by pretending to go off into hysterics of laughter at some trifling witticism of his.

When the laughter subsided, a lean, rather clever-looking boy rose up in the front row but one and said, impudently: "Please sir, I'm Worsley. I didn't do anything."

Speed replied promptly: "Oh, didn't you? Well, you've got a hundred lines, anyway."

"What for, sir"—in hot indignation.

"For sitting in your wrong desk."

Again the assembly laughed, but there was no mistaking the respectfulness that underlay the merriment. And, as a matter of fact, the rest of the evening passed entirely without incident. After the others had gone, and when the school-bell had rung for evening chapel, Worsley came up to the dais accompanied by the pleasant-faced boy who dropped the desk-lid. Worsley pleaded for the remission of his hundred lines, and the other boy supported him, urging that it was he and not Worsley who had dropped the lid.

"And what is your name?" asked Speed.

"Naylor, sir."

"Very well, Naylor, you and Worsley can share the hundred lines between you." He added smiling: "I've no doubt you're neither of you worse than anybody else but you must pay the penalty of being pioneers."

They went away laughing.

That night Speed went into Clanwell's room for a chat before bedtime, and Clanwell congratulated him fulsomely on his successful passage of the ordeal. "As a matter of fact," Clanwell said, "I happen to know that they'd prepared a star

benefit performance for you but that you put them off, somehow, from the beginning. The prefects get to hear of these things and they tell me. Of course, I don't take any official note of them. It doesn't matter to me what plans people make —it's when any are put into execution that I wake up. Anyhow, you may be interested to know that the members of School House subscribed over fifteen shillings to purchase fireworks which they were going to let off after the switches had been turned off! Alas for fond hopes ruined!"

Clanwell and Speed leaned back in their armchairs and roared with laughter.

III

At the end of the first week of life at Millstead, Speed was perfectly happy. He seemed to have surmounted easily all the difficulties that had confronted or that could confront him, and now there stretched away into the future an endless succession of glorious days spent tirelessly in the work that he loved. For he loved teaching. He loved boys. When he got over his preliminary, and in some ways rather helpful nervousness he was thoroughly at home with all of them. He invited those in his house to tea, two or three at a time, almost every afternoon. He took a deep and individual interest in all who showed distinct artistic or musical abilities. He plunged adventurously into the revolutionising of the School's arts curriculum; he dreamed of organising an exhibition of art work in time for Speech Day, of reviving the moribund School musical society, of getting up concerts of chamber music, of entering the School choir for musical festivals. All the hot enthusiasm of youth he poured ungrudgingly into the service of Millstead, and Millstead rewarded him by liking him tremendously. The boys liked him because he was young and agreeable, yet not condescendingly so; besides, he could play a game of cricket that was so good-naturedly mediocre that nobody, after witnessing it, could doubt that he was a fellow of like capabilities with the rest. The Masters liked him because he was energetic and efficient and did not ally himself with any particular set or clique among them.

Clanwell said to him one evening: "I hope you won't leave at the end of the term, Speed."

Speed said: "Why on earth should I?"

"We sometimes find that people who're either very good or very bad do so. And you're very good."

"I'm so glad you think so." His face grew suddenly boyish with blushes.

"We all think so, Speed. And the Head likes you. We hope you'll stay."

"I'll stay all right. I'm too happy to want to go away."

Clanwell said meditatively: "It's a fine life if you're cut out for it, isn't it? I sometimes think there isn't a finer life in the whole world."

"I've always thought that."

"I hope you always will think it."

"And I hope so too."

Summer weather came like a strong flood about ten days after the opening of term, and then Millstead showed herself to him in all her serene and matchless beauty. He learned to know and expect the warm sunshine waking him in the mornings and creeping up the bed till it dazzled his eyes; he learned to know and to love the *plick-plock* of the cricket that was his music as he sat by the open window many an afternoon at work. And at night time, when the flaring gas jets winked in all the tiny windows and when there came upwards the cheerful smell of coffee-making in the studies, it was all as if some subtle alchemy were at work, transforming his soul into the mould and form of Millstead. Something fine and mighty was in the place, and his soul, passionately eager to yield itself, craved for that full possession which Millstead brought to it. The spell was swift and glorious. Sometimes he thought of Millstead almost as a lover; he would stroll round at night and drink deep of the witchery that love put into all that he saw and heard; the sounds of feet scampering along the passage outside his door, the cold lawns with the moon white upon them, the soft delicious flower-scents that rose up to his bedroom window at night. The chapel seemed to him, to put it epigrammatically, far more important because it belonged to Millstead than because it belonged to Christ. Millstead, stiff-collared and black-coated on a Sunday morning, and wondering what on earth it should do with itself on Sunday afternoon, touched him far more deeply than did the chatter of some smooth-voiced imported divine who knew Millstead only from spending a bored week-end at the Head's house. To Speed, sitting in the Master's pew, and giving vent to his ever-ready imagination, Millstead seemed a personifica-

tion of all that was youthful and clear-spirited and unwilling to pay any more than merely respectful attention to the exhortations of elders.

He did not sentimentalise over it. He was not old enough to think regretfully of his own school-days. It was the present, the present leaning longingly in the arms of the future, that wove its subtle and gracious spell. He did not kindle to the trite rhapsodies of middle-aged "old boys." The "Thoughts of an Old Millsteadian on Revisiting the School Chapel," published in the school magazine, stirred him not at all. But to wander about on a dark night and to find his feet beautifully at ease upon curious steps and corridors gave him pangs of exquisite lover-like intimacy; he was a "new boy," eager for the future, not an "old boy" sighing for the past.

And all this was accomplished so swiftly and effortlessly, within a few weeks of his beginning at the school it was as if Millstead had filled a void in his soul that had been gaping for it.

Only one spot in the whole place gave him a feeling of discomfort, and that was the Headmaster's study. The feeling of apprehension, of sinister attraction, that had come upon him when first he had entered it, lessened as time and custom wore it away; yet still, secretly and in shadow, it was there. All the sadness and pathos of a world seemed to be congregated in the dark study, and to come out of it into the sunlit corridors of the school was like the swift passing from the minor into the major key.

IV

On Fridays he had an early morning form before breakfast and then was completely free until four o'clock in the afternoon, so that if the weather were sufficiently enticing he could fill the basket on his bicycle with books and go cycling along the sweet-smelling sunlit lanes. Millstead was just on the edge of the fen district; in one direction the flat lands stretched illimitably to a horizon unbroken as the sea's edge; a stern and lonely country, with nothing to catch the eye save here and there the glint of dyke-water amongst tall reeds and afar off some desert church-tower stiff and stark as the mast of a ship on an empty sea. Speed did not agree with the general Common-Room consensus of opinion that the scenery round Millstead was tame and unattractive; se-

cretly to him the whole district was rich with wild and passionate beauty, and sometimes on these delectable Fridays he would cycle for miles along the flat fen roads with the wind behind him, and return in the afternoon by crawling romantic-looking branch-line trains which always managed to remind him of wild animals, so completely had the civilised thing been submerged in the atmosphere of what it had sought to civilise.

But that was only on one side of Millstead. On the other side, and beyond the rook-infested trees that were as ramparts to the south-west wind, the lanes curved into the folds of tiny hills and lifted themselves for a space on to the ridge of glossy heaths and took sudden twists into the secrecies of red-roofed tree-hidden hamlets. And amidst this country, winding its delicate way beneath arches of overhanging greenery, ran the river Wade.

One Friday morning Speed cycled out to Parminters, a village about three miles out of Millstead. Here there was a low hill (not more than a couple of hundred feet), carpeted with springy turf and overlooking innumerable coils of the glistening stream. At midday on a May morning there was something indescribably restful, drowsy almost, in the scene; the hill dropped by a sudden series of grassy terraces into the meadows, and there was quite a quarter of a mile of lush grass land between the foot of the slope and the river bank. It was an entrancing spectacle, one to watch rather than to see; the silken droop of the meadows, the waves of alternate shadow and sunlight passing over the long grasses, the dark patches of the landscape which drifted eastwards with the clouds. The sun, when it pierced their white edges and came sailing into the blue, was full of warmth and beauty, warmth that awakened myriads of insects to a drowsy buzzing contentment and beauty that lay like a soft veil spread across the world. Speed, with a bundle of four *alpha* geography essays in his pocket (he had, after all, decided that he was competent to teach commercial geography to the lower forms), lay down amongst the deep grass and lit a pipe.

He marked a few of the essays and then, smoking comfortably, settled to a contented gaze across the valley. It was then, not until he had been there some while, though, that he saw amidst the tall grasses of the meadows a splash of blue in the midst of the deep green. It is strange that at first he did not recognise her. He saw only a girl in a pale blue dress

stooping to pick grasses. She was hatless and golden-haired, and in one hand she bore a bunch of something purple, some kind of long grass whose name he did not know. He watched her at first exactly as he might have watched some perfect theatrical spectacle, with just that kind of detached admiration and rich impersonal enchantment. The pose of her as she stooped, the flaunt of the grasses in her hand, the movement of her head as she tossed back her laughing hair, the winding yellow path she trampled across the meadows: all these things he watched and strangely admired.

He lay watching for a long while, still without guessing who she was, till the sun went in behind a cloud and he felt drowsy. He closed his eyes and leaned back cushioned amongst the turf.

V

He woke with a sensation of intense chilliness; the sun had gone in and even its approximate position in the sky could not be determined because of the heaviness of the clouds. He looked at his watch; it was ten minutes past one; he must have slept for over an hour.

The sky was almost the most sinister thing he ever saw. In the east a faint deathly pallor hung over the horizon, but the piling clouds from the west were pushing it over the edge of the world. That faint pallor dissolved across the sky into the greyness deepening into a western horizon of pitch black. Here and there this was shot through with streaks of dull and sombre flame as if each of the hills in that dark land was a sulky volcano. It was cold, and yet the wind that blew in from the gloom was strangely oppressive; the grasses bent low as if weighed down by its passing. Deep in the cleft by Parminters the river gleamed like a writhing venomous snake, the sky giving it the dull shimmer of pewter. To descend across those dark meadows to the coils of the stream seemed somehow an adventure of curious and inscrutable horror. Speed stood up and looked far into the valley. The whole scene seemed to him unnatural; the darkness was weird and baffling; the clouds were the grim harbingers of a thunderstorm. And to him there seemed momentarily a strangeness in the aspect of everything; something deep and fearsome, imminent, perhaps, with tragedy. He felt within him a sombre presaging excitement.

It began to rain, quietly at first, then faster, faster, and at last overwhelmingly. He had brought no mackintosh. He stuffed the essays into his coat pocket, swung his bicycle off the turf where he had laid it, and began to run down the hill with it. His aim was to get to the village and shelter somewhere till the storm was over. Halfway down he paused to put up his coat-collar, and there, looking across the meadows, he saw again that girl in the pale-blue dress. He was nearer to her now and recognised her immediately. She was dressed in a loose-fitting and rather dilapidated frock which the downpour of rain had already made to cling to the soft curves of her body; round her throat, tightly twined, was a striped scarf which Speed, quick to like or to dislike what he saw, decided was absolutely and garishly ugly. And yet immediately he felt a swift tightening of his affection for her, for Millstead was like that, full of stark uglinesses that were beautiful by their intimacy. . . . She saw him and stopped. Details of her at that moment encumbered his memory ever afterwards. She was about twenty yards from him and he could see a most tremendous wrist-watch that she wore—an ordinary pocket watch clamped on to a strap. And from the outside pocket of her dress there protruded the chromatic cover of a threepenny novelette. (Had she read it? Was she going to read it? Did she like it? he wondered swiftly.) She still carried that bunch of grasses, now rather soiled and bedraggled, tightly in her hand. He imagined, in the curiously vivid way that was so easy to him, the damp feel of her palm; the heat and perspiration of it: somehow this again, a symbol of secret and bodily intimacy, renewed in him that sudden kindling affection for her.

He called out to her: "Miss Ervine!"

She answered, a little shyly: "Oh, how are you, Mr. Speed?"

"Rather wet just at present," he replied, striding over the tufts of thick grass towards her. "And you appear to be even wetter than I am. I'm afraid we're in for a severe thunderstorm."

"Oh well, I don't mind thunderstorms."

"You ought to mind getting wet." He paused, uncertain what to say next. Then instinct made him suddenly begin to talk to her as he might have done to a small child. "My dear young lady, you don't suppose I'm going to leave you here to get drenched to the skin, do you?"

She shrugged her shoulders and said: "I don't know what you're going to do."

"Have you had anything to eat?"

"I don't want anything."

"Well, I suggest that we get into the village as quick as we can and stay there till the rain stops. I was also going to suggest that we spent the time in having lunch, but as you don't want anything, we needn't."

"But I don't want to wait in the village, Mr. Speed. I was just going to start for home when it came on to rain."

Speed said: "Very well, if you want to get home you must let me take you. You're not going to walk home through a thunderstorm. We'll have a cab or something."

"And do you really think you'll get a cab in Parminters?"

He answered: "I always have a good try to get anything I want to."

For all her protests she came with him down the meadow and out into the sodden lane. As they passed the gate the first flash of lightning lit up the sky, followed five seconds after by a crash of thunder.

"There!" he exclaimed triumphantly, as if the thunder and lightning somehow strengthened his position with her: "You wouldn't like to walk to Millstead through that, would you?"

She shrugged her shoulders and looked at him as if she hated his interference yet found it irresistible.

VI

It was altogether by good luck that he did get a cab in the village; a Millstead cab had brought some people into Parminters and was just setting back empty on the return journey when Speed met it in the narrow lane. Once again, this time as he opened the cab-door and handed her inside, he gave her that look of triumph, though he was well aware of the luck that he had had. Inside on the black leather cushions he placed in a conspicuously central position his hat and his bundle of essays, and, himself occupying one corner, invited her to take the other. All the time the driver was bustling round lifting the bicycle on to the roof and tying it securely down, Speed sat in his corner, damp to the skin, watching her and remembering that Miss Harrington had told him that she hated men. All the way during that three-mile ride back to Millstead, with the swishing of the rain and the occasional thunder and the steady jog-trot of the horse's hoofs

mingling together in a memorable medley of sound, Speed sat snugly in his corner, watching and wondering.

Not much conversation passed between them. When they were nearing Millstead, Speed said: "The other day as I passed near your drawing-room window I heard somebody playing the Chopin waltzes. Was it you?"

"It might have been."

He continued after a pause: "I see there's a Chopin recital advertised in the town for next Monday week. Zobieski, the Polish pianist, is coming up. Would you care to come with me to it?"

It was very daring of him to say that, and he knew it. She coloured to the roots of her wet-gold hair, and replied, after a silence: "Monday, though, isn't it?—I'm afraid I couldn't manage it. I always see Clare on Mondays."

He answered instantly: "Bring Clare as well then."

"I—I don't think Clare would be interested," she replied, a little confused. She added, as if trying to make up for having rejected his offer rather rudely: "Clare and I don't get many chances of seeing each other. Only Mondays and Wednesday afternoons."

"But I see you with her almost every day."

"Yes, but only for a few minutes. Mondays are the only evenings that we have wholly to ourselves."

He thought, but did not dare to say: And is it absolutely necessary that you must have those evenings wholly to yourselves?

He said thoughtfully: "I see."

He said nothing further until the cab drew up outside the main gate of Millstead School. He was going to tell the driver to proceed inside as far as the porch of the Head's house, but she said she would prefer to get out there and walk across the lawns. He smiled and helped her out. As he looked inside the cab again to see if he had left any papers behind he saw that the gaudily-coloured novelette had fallen out of her pocket and on to the floor. He picked it up and handed it to her. "You dropped this," he said merely. She stared at him for several seconds and then took it almost sulkily.

"I suppose I can read what I like, anyway," she exclaimed, in a sudden hot torrent of indignation.

He smiled, completely astonished, yet managed to say, blandly: "I'm sure I never dreamt of suggesting otherwise."

He could see then from her eyes, half-filling with tears of

humiliation, that she realised that she had needlessly made a fool of herself.

"Please—please—don't come with me any further," she said, awkwardly. "And thanks—thanks—very much—for —for bringing me back."

He smiled again and raised his hat as she darted away across the wet lawns. Then, after paying the driver, he walked straightway into the school and down into the prefects' bathroom, where he turned on the scalding hot water with jubilant anticipation.

VII

The immediate result of the incident was an invitation to dine at the Head's a few days later. "It was very—um, yes—thoughtful and considerate of you, Mr. Speed," said the Head, mumblingly. "My daughter—a heedless child—just like her to omit the—um—precaution of taking some—um, yes—protection against any possible change in the weather."

"I was rather in the same boat myself, sir," said Speed, laughing. "The thunderstorm was quite unexpected."

"Um yes, quite so. *Quite* so." The Head paused and added, with apparent inconsequence: "My daughter is quite a child, Mr. Speed—loves to gather flowers—um—botany, you know, and—um—so forth."

Speed said: "Yes, I have noticed it."

Dinner at the Head's house was less formal than on the previous occasion. It was a Monday evening and Clare Harrington was there. Afterwards in the drawing-room Speed played a few Chopin studies and Mazurkas. He did not attempt to get into separate conversation with Miss Ervine; he chatted amiably with the Head while the two girls gossiped by themselves. And at ten o'clock, pleading work to do before bed, he arose to go, leaving the girls to make their own arrangements. Miss Ervine said good-bye to him with a shyness in which he thought he detected a touch of wistfulness.

When he got up to his own room he thought about her for a long while. He tried to settle down to an hour or so of marking books, but found it impossible. In the end he went downstairs and let himself outside into the school grounds by his own private key. It was a glorious night of starshine, and all the roofs were pale with the brightness of it. Wafts of perfume from the flowers and shrubbery of the Head's garden accosted him gently as he turned the corner by the

chapel and into the winding tree-hidden path that circumvented the entire grounds of Millstead. It was on such a night that his heart's core was always touched; for it seemed to him that then the strange spirit of the place was most alive, and that it came everywhere to meet him with open arms, drenching all his life in wild and unspeakable loveliness. Oh, how happy he was, and how hard it was to make others realise his happiness! In the Common-Room his happiness had become proverbial, and even amongst the boys, always quicker to notice unhappy than happy looks, his beaming smile and firm, kindling enthusiasm had earned him the nickname of "Smiler."

He sat down for a moment on the lowest tier of the pavilion seats, those seats where generations of Millsteadians had hurriedly prepared themselves for the fray of school and house matches. Now the spot was splendidly silent, with the cricket-pitch looming away mistily in front, and far behind, over the tips of the high trees, the winking lights of the still noisy dormitories. He watched a bat flitting haphazardly about the pillars of the pavilion stand. He could see, very faintly in the paleness, the score of that afternoon's match displayed on the indicator. Old Millstead parish bells, far away in the town, commenced the chiming of eleven.

He felt then, as he had never felt before he came to Millstead, that the world was full, brimming full, of wonderful majestic beauty, and that now, as the scented air swirled round him in slow magnificent eddies, it was searching for something, searching with passionate and infinite desire for something that eluded it always. He could not understand or analyse all that he felt, but sometimes lately a deep shaft of ultimate feeling would seem to grip him round the body and send the tears swimming into his eyes, as if for one glorious moment he had seen and heard something of another world. It came suddenly to him now, as he sat on the pavilion seats with the silver starshine above him and the air full of the smells of earth and flowers; it seemed to him that something mighty must be abroad in the world, that all this tremulous loveliness could not live without a meaning, that he was on the verge of some strange and magic revelation.

Clear as bells on the silent air came the sound of girls' voices. He heard a rich, tolling "Good night, Clare!" Then silence again, silence in which he seemed to know more things than he had ever known before.

CHAPTER THREE

I

One afternoon he called at Harrington's, in the High Street, to buy a book. It was a tiny low-roofed shop, the only one of its kind in Millstead, and with the sale of books it combined that of newspapers, stationery, pictures and fancy goods. It was always dark and shadowy, yet, unlike the Head's study at the school, this gloom possessed a cheerful soothing quality that made the shop a pleasant haven of refuge when the pavements outside were dazzling and sun-scorched. It was on such an afternoon that Speed visited the shop for the first time. Usually he had no occasion to, for, though he dealt with Harrington's, an errand-boy visited the school every morning to take orders and saved him the trouble of a walk into the village. This afternoon, however, he recollected a text-book that he wanted and had forgotten to order; besides, the heat of the mid-afternoon tempted him to seek shelter in one or other of the tranquil diamond-windowed shops whose sun-blinds sprawled unevenly along the street. It was the hottest day of the term, so far. A huge thermometer outside Harrington's gave the shade temperature as a little over seventy-nine; all the roadway was bubbling with little gouts of soft tar. The innumerable dogs of Millstead, quarrelsome by nature, had called an armistice on account of the heat, and lay languidly across shady sections of the pavement. Speed, tanned by a week of successive hot days, with a Panama pushed down over his forehead to shield his eyes from dazzle, pushed open the small door and entered the cool cavern of the shop.

His eyes, unaccustomed to the gloom, were blind for a moment, but he heard movement of some kind behind the counter. "I want an atlas of the British Isles," he said, feeling his way across the shop. "A school atlas, I mean. Cheap, rather, you know—about a shilling or one-and-sixpence."

He heard Clare's voice reply: "Yes, Mr. Speed, I know what you want. Hot weather, isn't it?"

"Very."

She went on, searching meanwhile along some shelves: "Nice of you not to bother about seeing me home the other night, Mr. Speed."

He said, with a touch of embarrassment: "Well, you see, you told me. About—about Miss Ervine getting jealous, you know."

"It was nice of you to take my information without doubting it."

He said, rather to his own surprise: "As a matter of fact, I'm not sure that I don't doubt it. Miss Ervine seems to me a perfectly delightful and natural girl, far too unsophisticated to be jealous of anybody. The more I see of her the more I like her."

After a pause she answered quietly: "Well, I'm not surprised at that."

"I suppose," he went on, "with her it's rather the opposite. I mean, the more she sees of me the less she likes me. Isn't that it?"

"I shouldn't think she likes you any less than she did at first. . . . Here's the atlas. It's one and three—I'd better put it on your account, eh?"

"Yes, yes, of course. . . . So you think—"

She interrupted him quickly with: "Mr. Speed, you'd better not ask me what I think. You're far more subtle in understanding people than I am, and it won't take you long to discover what Helen thinks of you if you set about with the intention. . . . Those sketch-blocks you ordered haven't come in yet. . . . Well, good afternoon!"

Another customer had entered the shop, so that all he could do was to return a rather dazed "Good afternoon" and emerge into the blazing High Street. He walked back to the school in a state of not unpleasant puzzlement.

II

The term progressed, and towards the end of May occurred the death of Sir Huntly Polk, Bart., Chairman of the Governors of Millstead School. This would not have in any way affected Speed (who had never even met Sir Huntly) had not a Memorial Service been arranged at which he was to play Chopin's Funeral March on the chapel organ. It was a decent modern instrument, operated usually by Raggs, the visiting

organist, who combined a past reputation of great splendour with a present passion for the *vox humana* stop; but Speed sometimes took the place of Raggs when Raggs wanted time off. And at the time fixed for the Sir Huntly Polk Memorial Service Raggs was adjudicating with great solemnity at a Northern musical festival.

Speed was not a particularly good organist, and it was only reluctantly that he undertook Raggs' duty for him. For one thing, he was always slightly nervous of doing things in public. And for another thing, he would have to practice a great deal in order to prepare himself for the occasion, and he had neither the time nor the inclination for hours of practice. However, when the Head said: "I know I can—um, yes—rely upon you, Mr. Speed," Speed knew that there was no way out of it. Besides, he was feeling his way in the school with marvellous ease and accuracy, and each new duty undertaken by special request increased and improved his prestige.

After a few days' trial he found it was rather pleasant to climb the ladder to the organ-loft amid the rich cool dusk of the chapel, switch on the buzzing motor that operated the electric power, and play, not only Chopin's Funeral March but anything else he liked. Often he would merely improvise, beginning with a simple theme announced on single notes, and broadening and loudening into climax. Always as he played he could see the shafts of sunlight falling amidst the dusty pews, the many-coloured glitter of the stained-glass in the oriel window, and in an opaque haze in the distance the white cavern of the chapel entrance beyond which all was light and sunshine. The whole effect, serene and tranquillising, hardly stirred him to any distinctly religious emotion, but it set up in him acutely that emotional sensitiveness to things secret and unseen, that insurgent consciousness, clear as the sky, yet impossible to translate into words, of deep wells of meaning beneath all the froth and commotion of his five passionate senses.

There was a mirror just above the level of his eyes as he sat at the keyboard, a mirror by means of which he could keep a casual eye on the pulpit and choir-stalls and the one or two front pews. And one golden afternoon as he was playing the *adagio* movement out of Beethoven's "Sonata Pathétique," a stray side-glance into the mirror showed him that he had an audience—of one. She was sitting at the end of the front pew of all, nearest the lectern; she was listening,

very simply and unspectacularly. Speed's first impulse was to stop; his second to switch off from the "Sonata Pathétique" into something more blatantly dramatic. He had, with the first kindling warmth of the sensation of seeing her, a passionate longing to touch somehow her emotions, or, if he could not do that, to stir her sentimentality, at any rate; he would have played the most saccharine picture-palace trash, with *vox humana* and *tremolo* stops combined, if he had thought that by doing so he could fill her eyes. Third thoughts, however, better than either the second or first, told him that he had better finish the *adagio* movement of the Sonata before betraying the fact that he knew she was present. He did so accordingly, playing rather well; then, when the last echoes had died away, he swung his legs over the bench and addressed her. He said, in a conversational tone that sounded rather incongruous in its surroundings: "Good afternoon, Miss Ervine!"

She looked up, evidently startled, and answered, with a half-smile: "Oh, good afternoon, Mr. Speed."

He went on: "I hope I haven't bored you. Is there anything in particular you'd like me to play to you?"

She walked out of the pew and along the tiled arena between the choir-stalls to a point where she stood gazing directly up at him. The organ was on the south side of the choir, perched rather precipitously in an overhead chamber that looked down on to the rest of the chapel rather as a bay-window looks on to a street. To Speed, as he saw her, the situation seemed somewhat like the balcony scene with the positions of Romeo and Juliet reversed. And never, he thought, had she looked so beautiful as she did then, with her head poised at an upward angle as if in mute and delicate appeal, and her arms limply at her side, motionless and inconspicuous, as though all the meaning and significance of her were flung upwards into the single soaring glance of her eyes. A shaft of sunlight, filtered through the crimson of an apostle's robe, struck her hair and kindled it at once into flame; her eyes, blue and laughing, gazed heavenwards with a look of matchless tranquillity. She might have been a saint, come to life out of the sun-drenched stained-glass.

She cried out, like a happy child: "Oh, I *have* enjoyed it, Mr. Speed! *All* of it. I *do* wish I could come up there and watch you play!"

With startled eagerness he answered: "Come up then—I

should be delighted! Go round into the vestry and I'll help you up the ladder."

Instinct warned him that she was only a child, interested in the merely mechanical tricks of how things were done; that she wanted to see the working of the stops and pedals more than to hear the music; that this impulse of hers did not betoken any particular friendliness for him or admiration for his playing. Yet some secondary instinct, some quick passionate enthusiasm, swept away the calculating logic of that, and made him a prey to the wildest and raptest of anticipations.

In the vestry she blushed violently as he met her; she seemed more a child than ever before. And she scampered up the steep ladder into the loft with an agility that bewildered him.

He never dreamt that she could so put away all fear and embarrassment of his presence; as she clambered up on to the end of the bench beside him (for there was no seating-room anywhere else) he wondered if this were merely a mood of hers, or if some real and deep change had come over her since their last meeting. She was so delicately lovely; to see her there, with her eyes upon him, so few inches from his, gave him a curious electrical pricking of the skin. Sometimes, he noticed, her eyes watched his hands steadily; sometimes, with a look half-bold, half-timid, they travelled for an instant to his face. He even wondered, with an egotism that made him smile inwardly, if she were thinking him good-looking.

"Now," he said, beginning to pull out the necessary stops, "what shall we have?—'The Moonlight Sonata,' eh?"

"Yes," she assented, eagerly. "I've heard Clare talk about it."

He played it to her; then he played her a medley of Bach, Dvorak, Mozart, Mendelssohn and Lemare. He was surprised and pleased to discover that, on the whole, she preferred the good music to the not so good, although, of course, her musical taste was completely unsophisticated. Mainly, too, it was the music that kept her attention, though she had a considerable childish interest in his manual dexterity and in the mechanical arrangement of the stops and couplings. She said once, in a pause between two pieces: "Aren't they strange hands?" He replied, laughing away his embarrassment: "I don't know. Are they?"

After he had played, rather badly but with great verve, the *Ruy Blas* Overture of Mendelssohn, she exclaimed: "Oh, I wish I could play like that!"

He said: "But you do play the piano, don't you? And I prefer the piano to the organ: it's less mechanical."

She clapped her hands together in a captivatingly childish gesture of excitement and said: "Oh yes, the piano's lovely, isn't it? But I can't play well—oh, I wish I could!"

"You could if you practised hard enough," he answered, with prosaic encouragement. "I can hear you sometimes, you know, when I'm in my room at nights and the window's open. I think you could become quite a good player."

She leaned her elbow on the keys and started in momentary fright at the resulting jangle of sound. "I—I get so nervous," she said. "I don't know why. I could never play except to myself—and Clare." She added, slowly, and as if the revelation had only barely come to her: "Do you know—it's strange, isn't it—I think—perhaps—I think I might be able to play in front of you—*now*—without being nervous!"

He laughed boisterously and swung himself off the bench. "Very well, then, that's fine news! You shall try. You shall play some of the Chopin waltzes to me. Not very suitable for an organ, but that doesn't matter. Sit further on this bench and play on the lower keyboard. Never mind about the pedals. And I'll manage the stops for you."

She wriggled excitedly into the position he had indicated and, laughing softly, began one of the best-known of the waltzes. The experiment was not entirely successful, for even an accomplished pianist does not play well on an organ for the first time, nor do the Chopin waltzes lend themselves aptly to such an instrument. But one thing, and to Speed the main thing of all, was quite obvious: she was, as she had said she would be, entirely free from nervousness of him. After ploughing rather disastrously through a dozen or so bars she stopped, turned to him with flushed cheeks and happy eyes, and exclaimed: "There! That's enough! It's not easy to play, is it?"

He said, smiling down at her: "No, it's rather hard, especially at first. . . . But you weren't nervous then, were you?"

"Not a bit," she answered, proudly. She added, with a note of warning: "Don't be surprised if I am when you come in to our house to dinner. I'm always nervous when father's there."

Almost he added: "So am I." But the way in which she had mentioned future invitations to dinner at the Head's house gave him the instant feeling that henceforward the atmosphere on such occasions would be subtly different from ever before. The Head's drawing-room, with the baby grand piano and the curio-cabinets and the faded cabbage-like design of the carpet, would never look quite the same again; the Head's drawing-room would look, perhaps, less like a cross between a lady's boudoir and the board-room of a City company; even the Head's study might take on a kindlier, less sinister hue.

He said, still with his eyes smiling upon her: "Who teaches you the piano?"

"A Miss Peacham used to. I don't have a teacher now."

"I don't know," he said, beginning to flush with the consciousness of his great daring, "if you would care to let me help you at all. I should be delighted to do so, you know, at any time. Since—" he laughed a little—"since you're no longer a scrap nervous of me, you might find me useful in giving you a few odd hints."

He waited, anxious and perturbed, for her reply. After a sufficient pause she answered slowly, as if thinking it out: "That would be—rather—fine—I think."

Most inopportunely then the bell began to ring for afternoon-school, and, most inopportunely also, he was due to take five *beta* in drawing. They clambered down the ladder, chatting vivaciously the while, and at the vestry door, when they separated she said eagerly: "Oh, I've had *such* a good time, Mr. Speed. Haven't you?"

"Rather!" he answered, with boyish emphasis and enthusiasm.

That afternoon hour, spent bewilderingly with five *beta* in the art-room that was full of plaster casts and free-hand models and framed reproductions of famous pictures, went for Speed like the passage of a moment. His heart and brain were tingling with excitement, teeming with suppressed consciousness. The green of the lawns as he looked out of the window seemed greener than ever before; the particles of dust that shone in the shafts of sunlight seemed to him each one mightily distinct; the glint of a boy's golden hair in the sunshine was, to his eyes, like a patch of flame that momentarily put all else in a haze. It seemed to him, passionately and tremendously, that for the first time in his life he was alive;

more than that even: it seemed to him that for the first time since the beginning of all things life had come shatteringly into the world.

III

"I should think, Mr. Speed, you have found out by now whether Helen likes you or not."

Those words of Clare Harrington echoed in his ears as he walked amidst the dappled sunlight on the Millstead road. They echoed first of all in the quiet tones in which Clare had uttered them; next, they took on a subtle, meaningful note of their own; finally, they submerged all else in a crescendo of passionate triumph. Speed was almost stupefied by their gradually self-revealing significance. He strode on faster, dug his heels more decisively into the dust of the roadside; he laughed aloud; his walking-stick pirouetted in a joyful circle. To any passer-by he must have seemed a little mad. And all because of a few words that Clare Harrington, riding along the lane on her bicycle, had stopped to say to him.

June, lovely and serene, had spread itself out over Millstead like a veil of purest magic; every day the sun climbed high and shone fiercely; every night the world slept under the starshine; all the passage of nights and days was one moving pageant of wonderment. And Speed was happy, gloriously, overwhelmingly happy. Never in all his life before had he been so happy; never had he tasted, even to an infinitesimal extent, the kind of happiness that bathed and drenched him now. Rapturously lovely were those long June days, days that turned Millstead into a flaming paradise of sights and sounds. In the mornings, he rose early, took a cold plunge in the swimming-bath, and breakfasted with the school amidst the cool morning freshness that, by its very quality of chill, seemed to suggest bewitchingly the warmth that was to come. Chapel followed breakfast, and after that, until noon, his time was spent in the Art and Music Rooms and the various form-rooms in which he contrived to satisfy parental avidity for that species of geography known as commercial. From noon until mid-day dinner he either marked books in his room or went shopping into the town. During that happy hour the cricket was beginning, and the dining-hall at one o'clock was gay with cream flannels and variously chromatic blazers. Speed loved the midday meal with the school; he

liked to chat with his neighbours at table, to listen to the catalogue of triumphs, anxieties, and anticipations that never failed to unfold itself to the sympathetic hearer. Afterwards he was free to spend the afternoon as he liked. He might cycle dreamily along the sleepy lanes and find himself at tea-time in some wrinkled little sun-scorched inn, with nothing to do but dream his own glorious dreams and play with the innkeeper's languid dog and read local newspapers a fortnight old. Or he might stay the whole afternoon at Millstead, lazily watching the cricket from a deck-chair on the pavilion verandah and sipping the tuck-shop's iced lemonade. Less often he would play cricket himself, never scoring more than ten or a dozen runs, but fielding with a dogged energy which occasionally only just missed deserving the epithet brilliant. And sometimes, in the excess of his enthusiasm, he would take selected parties of the boys to Pangbourne Cathedral, some eighteen miles distant, and show them the immense nave and the Lady Chapel with the decapitated statues and the marvellous stained-glass of the Octagon.

Then dinner, conversational and sometimes boisterous, in the Masters' Common-Room, and afterwards, unless it were his evening for taking preparation, an hour at least of silence before the corridors and dormitories became noisy. During this hour he would often sit by the open window in his room and hear the rooks cawing in the high trees and the *clankety-clank* of the roller on the cricket-pitch and all the mingled sounds and commotions that seemed to him to make the silence of the summer evenings more magical than ever. Often, too, he would hear the sound of the Head's piano, a faint half-pathetic tinkle from below.

Half-past eight let loose the glorious pandemonium; he could hear from his room the chiming of the school-bell, and then, softly at first, but soon rising to a tempestuous flood, the tide of invasion sweeping down the steps of the Big Hall and pouring into the houses. Always it thrilled him by its mere strength and volume of sound; thrilled him with pride and passion to think that he belonged to this heart that throbbed with such onrushing zest and vitality. Soon the first adventurous lappings of the tide reached the corridor outside his room; he loved the noise and commotion of it; he loved the shouting and singing and yelling and the boisterous laughter; he loved the faint murmur of conflicting gramophones and the smells of coffee and cocoa that rose up from the

downstairs studies; he loved the sound of old Hartopp's voice as he stood at the foot of the stairs at ten o'clock and shouted, in a key that sent up a melodious echoing through all the passages and landings: "Time, gentlemen, time!"—And when the lights in the dormitories had all been put out, and Millstead at last was silent under the stars, he loved above all things the strange magic of his own senses, that revealed him a Millstead that nobody else had ever seen, a Millstead rapt and ethereal, one with the haze of night and the summer starshine.

He told himself, in the moments when he reacted from the abandonment of his soul to dreaming, that he was sentimental, that he loved too readily, that beauty stirred him more than it ought, that life was too vividly emotional, too mighty a conqueror of his senses. But then, in the calm midst of reasoning, that same wild, tremulous consciousness of wonder and romance would envelop him afresh like a strong flood; it was a fierce, passionate ache in his bones, only to be forgotten for unreal, unliving instants. And one moment, when he sat by the window hearing the far-off murmur of Chopin on the Head's piano, he knew most simply and perfectly why it was that all this was so. It was because he was very deeply and passionately in love. In his dreams, his wild and bewitching dreams, she was a fairy-child, ethereal and half unreal, the rapt half-embodied spirit of Millstead itself, luring him by her sweet and fragrant vitality. He saw in the sunlight always the golden glint of her hair; in music no more than subtle and exquisite reminders of her; in all the world of sights and sounds and feelings a deep transfiguring passion that was his own for her.

And in the flesh he met her often in the school grounds, where she might say: "Oh, Mr. Speed, I'm *so* glad I've met you! I want you to come in and hear me play something." They would stroll together over the lawns into the Head's house and settle themselves in the stuffy-smelling drawing-room. Doctor and Mrs. Ervine were frequently out in the afternoons, and Potter, it was believed, dozed in the butler's pantry. Speed would play the piano to the girl and then she to him, and when they were both tired of playing they talked awhile. Everything of her seemed to him most perfect and delicious. Once he asked her tactfully about reading novelettes, and she said: "I read them sometimes because there's nothing in father's library that I care for. It's nearly all ser-

mons and Latin grammars." Immediately it appeared to him that all was satisfactory and entrancingly explained; a vague unrestfulness in him was made suddenly tranquil; her habit of reading novelettes made her more dear and lovable than ever. He said: "I wonder if you'd like me to lend you some books?—*Interesting* books, I promise you."—She answered, with her child-like enthusiasm: "Oh, I'd *love* that, Mr. Speed!"

He lent her Hans Andersen's fairy tales.

Once in chapel, as he declaimed the final verse of the eighty-eighth Psalm, he looked for a fraction of a second at the Head's pew and saw that she was watching him. "Lover and friend hast Thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness."—He saw a blush kindle her cheeks like flame.

One week-day morning he met the Head in the middle of the quadrangle. The Head beamed on him cordially and said: "I understand, Mr. Speed, that you—um—give my daughter —occasional—um, yes—assistance with her music. Very kind of you, I'm sure—um, yes—extremely kind of you, Mr. Speed."

He added, dreamily: "My daughter—still—um, yes—still a child in many ways—makes few friends—um, yes—very few. Seems to have taken quite an—um, yes—quite a *fancy* to you, Mr. Speed."

And Speed answered, with an embarrassment that was ridiculously schoolboyish: "Indeed, sir?—Indeed?"

IV

Speech Day at Millstead.

Speed sat shyly on his chair on the platform, wrapping his gown round him nervously, and gazing, every now and then, at the fashionably-dressed throng that crowded the Big Hall to its utmost capacity. It was a day of ordeals, but his own chief ordeal was safely past; the school-choir had grappled quite creditably with Stanford's *Te Deum* at the chapel service that morning. He was feeling very happy, even amidst his nervousness. His eyes wandered to the end of the front row of the auditorium, where Helen Ervine and Clare Harrington sat together. They were gossiping and laughing.

The Chairman, Sir Henry Briggs, rose to introduce the principal guest, Lord Portway. Lord Portway, so said Sir Henry Briggs, needed no introduction. Lord Portway. . . .

Speed listened dreamfully.

Then Lord Portway. Lord Portway confessed himself to be a poor speaker, but hoped that it would not always be those with a glib tongue that got on in the world. (Laughter and cheers.) When he (Lord Portway) was at school he was ashamed to say that he never received a single prize. (More laughter.) He hoped that all the boys of Millstead, whether they had prizes or not, would remember that it wasn't always the prize-winners at school who did best in the battle of life. (Hear, hear.) He would just like to give them all a word or two of advice. Be thorough. (Cheers.) Brilliance wasn't everything. If he were engaging an employee and he had the choice of two men, one brilliant and the other thorough, he should choose the thorough one. He was certain that some, at least, of those Millstead boys who had won no prizes would do great things and become famous in after-life. . . .

Speed watched Doctor Ervine's face; saw the firm mouth expand, from time to time, into a mirthless automatic smile whenever the audience was stirred to laughter. And Mrs. Ervine fidgeted with her dress and glanced about her with nervously sparkling eyes.

Finally, said Lord Portway, he would like to ask the Headmaster to grant the boys of Millstead a whole holiday. . . . (Cheers, deafening and continuous.)

It was, of course, the universal custom that Speech Day should be followed by a week-end's holiday in which those boys who lived within easy reach might go home. Many boys had already made their arrangements and chosen their trains, but, respecting the theory that the holiday depended on Lord Portway's asking for it, they cheered as if he had conferred an inestimable boon upon them.

The Head, raising his hand when the clamour had lasted a sufficient time, announced: "My Lord, I have—um—great pleasure in granting your request."

More deafening cheers. The masters round about Speed, witnesses of this little farce for a number of successive years varying from one to thirty, smiled and whispered together condescendingly.

Sir Henry Briggs, thick-voiced and ponderous. "I—I call upon the Headmaster. . . ."

Doctor Ervine rose, cleared his throat, and began: "My Lord,—um—and Ladies and Gentlemen—." A certain sage —he would leave it to his sixth-form boys to give the gentle-

man's name—(Laughter)—had declared that that nation was happy which had no history. It had often occurred to him that the remark could be neatly and appositely adapted to a public-school—happy was that public-school year about which, on Speech Day, the Headmaster could find very little to say. (Laughter.) Certainly it was true of this particular year. It had been a very happy one, a very successful one, and really, there was not much else to say. One or two things, however, he would like to mention especially. First, in the world of Sport. He put Sport first merely because alphabetically it came before Work. (Laughter.) Millstead had had a very successful football and hockey season, and only that week at cricket they had defeated Selhurst. (Cheers). . . . In the world of scholarship the year had also been successful, no fewer than thirty-eight Millsteadians having passed the Lower Certificate Examination of the Oxford and Cambridge Board. (Cheers.) One of the sixth-form boys, A. V. Cobham, had obtained an exhibition at Magdalen College, Cambridge. (Cheers.) H. O. Catterwall, who left some years back, had been appointed Deputy Revenue Commissioner for the district of—um—Bhungi-Bhoolu. (Cheers.) Two boys, R. Heming and B. Shales, had obtained distinctions at London University. (Cheers.) . . . . Of the Masters, all he could say was that he could not believe that any Headmaster in the country was supported by a staff more loyal and efficient. (Cheers.) They had to welcome one addition,—he might say, although he (the addition) had only been at Millstead a few weeks—a very valued addition—to the school staff. That was Mr. Speed. (Loud cheers). Mr. Speed was very young, and youth, as they all knew, was very enthusiastic. (Cheers and laughter.) In fact, although Mr. Speed had been at Millstead such a short time, he had already earned and deserved the name of the School Enthusiast. (Laughter.) He had had a very kind letter from Mr. Speed's father, Sir Charles Speed—(pause)—regretting his inability, owing to a previously contracted engagement, to be present at the Speech Day celebrations, and he (the Head) was particularly sorry he could not come because it would have done him good, he felt sure, to see how universally popular at Millstead was his enthusiastic son. (Cheers and laughter.) He hoped Millstead would have the benefit of Mr. Speed's gifts and personality for many, many years to come. (Loud cheers.) . . . . He must not conclude without some refer-

ence to the sad blow that had struck the school only a week or so before. He alluded to the lamented passing-away of Sir Huntly Polk, for many years Chairman on the Governing Board. . . .

Speed heard no more. He felt himself beginning to burn all over; he put one hand to his cheek in a vague and instinctive gesture of self-protection. Of course, behind his embarrassment he was pleased, rapturously pleased; but at first his predominant emotion was surprise. It had never occurred to him that the Head would mention him in a speech, or that he would invite his father to the Speech Day ceremonies. Then, as he heard the cheering of the boys at the mention of his name, emotion swallowed his surprise and everything became a blur.

After the ceremony he met the two girls outside the Big Hall. Clare said: "Poor man—you looked *so* uncomfortable while everybody was cheering you! But really, you know, it *is* nice to be praised, isn't it?"

And Helen, speaking softly so that no one else should hear, whispered: "I daresay I can get free about nine o'clock tonight. We can go for a walk, eh, Kenneth?—Nine o'clock by the pavilion steps, then."

Her voice, muffled and yet eager, trembled like the note of a bell on a windy day.

Speed whispered, joyously: "Righto, Helen, I'll be there."

To such a pitch had their relationship developed as a result of music-lessons and book-lendings and casual encounters. And now they were living the most exquisite of all moments, when each could guess but could not be quite certain of the other's love. Day had followed day, each one more tremulously beautiful than the one before, each one more exquisitely near to something whose beauty was too keen and blinding to be studied; each day the light in their eyes had grown brighter, fiercer, more bursting from within. But now, as they met and separated in the laughing crowd that squirmed its way down the steps of the Big Hall, some subtle telepathy between their minds told them that never again would they shrink from the vivid joy of confession. Tonight . . . thought Speed, as he went up to his room and slipped off his cap and gown. And the same wild ecstasy of anticipation was in Helen's mind as she walked with Clare across the lawns to the Head's house.

V

That night the moon was full and high; the leaden roofs and cupola of the pavilion gleamed like silver plaques; and all the cricket-pitch was covered with a thin, white, motionless tide into which the oblong shadows pushed out like the black piers of a jetty. Millstead was silent and serene. A third of its inhabitants had departed by the evening trains; perhaps another third was with its parents in the lounges of the town hotels; the remainder, reacting from the day's excitement and sobered by the unaccustomed sparseness of the population, was more silent than usual. Lights gleamed in the dormitories and basement bathrooms, but there was an absence of stir, rather than of sound, which gave to the whole place a curious aspect of forlornness; no sudden boisterous shout sent its message spinning along the corridor and out of some wide-open window into the night. It was a world of dreams and spells, and to Speed, standing in the jet-black shadow of the pavilion steps, it seemed that sight and sound were almost one; that he could hear moonlight humming everywhere around him, and see the tremor in the sky as the nine o'clock chiming fell from the chapel belfry.

She came to him like a shy wraith, resolving out of the haze of moonbeams. The bright gold of her hair, drenched now in silver, had turned to a glossy blackness that had in it some subtle and unearthly colour that could be touched rather than seen; Speed felt his fingers tingle as at a new sensation. Something richly and manifestly different was abroad in the world, something different from what had ever been there before; the grey shining pools of her eyes were like pictures in a trance. He knew, strangely and intimately, that he loved her and that she loved him, that there was exquisite sweetness in everything that could happen to them, that all the world was wonderfully in time and tune with their own blind-fold yet miraculously self-guiding inclinations. Tears, lovely in moonlight, shone in her clear eyes, eyes that were deep and dark under the night sky; he put his arm around her and touched his cheek with hers. It was as if his body began to dissolve at that first ineffable thrill; he trembled vitally; then, after a pause of magic, kissed her dark, wet, offering lips, not with passion, but with all the

wistful gentleness of the night itself, as if he were afraid that she might fly away, moth-like, from a rough touch. The moonlight, sight and sound fused into one, throbbed in his eyes and ears; his heart, beating quickly, hammered, it seemed, against the stars. It was the most exquisite and tremulous revelation of heaven, heaven that knew neither bound nor end.

"Wonderful child!" he whispered.

She replied, in a voice deep as the diapason note of an organ: "*Am* I wonderful?"

"*You* are," she said, after a pause.

He nodded.

"*I?*" He smiled, caressing her hair. "I feel—I feel, Helen, as if nothing in the world had ever happened to me until this night! Nothing at all!"

"*I* do," she whispered.

"As if—as if nothing in the world had ever happened to anybody until now."

"You love me?"

"Yes, Kenneth."

"I love you."

"I'm—I'm—I'm glad."

They stood together for a long while with the moonlight on their faces, watching and thinking and dreaming and wondering. The ten o'clock chimes littered the air with their mingled pathos and cheer; the hour had been like the dissolving moment of a dream.

As they entered the shadows of the high trees and came in sight of Milner's, a tall cliff of winking yellow windows, they stopped and kissed again, a shade more passionately than before.

"But oh," she exclaimed as they separated in the shadow of the Head's gateway, "I *wish* I was clever! I wish I was as clever as you! I'm not, Kenneth, and you mustn't think I am. I'm—I'm *stupid*, compared with you. And yet"—her voice kindled with a strange thrill—"and yet you say I'm wonderful! *Wonderful!—Am* I?—Really wonderful?"

"Wonderful," he whispered, fervently.

She cried, softly but with passion: "Oh, I'm glad—glad—I'm glad. It's—it's glorious to—to think that you think that. But oh, Kenneth, Kenneth, don't find out that I'm not." She added, very softly and almost as if reassuring herself of something: "I—I love you very—*very* much."

They could not tear themselves away from each other. The lights in the dormitories winked out one by one; the quarter-chimes sprinkled their music on the moon-white lawns; yet still, fearful to separate, they whispered amidst the shadows. Millstead, towering on all sides of them vast and radiant, bathed them in her own deep passionless tranquillity; Millstead, a little forlorn that night, yet ever a mighty parent, serenely watchful over her children.

VI

He decided that night that he would write a story about Millstead; that he would do for Millstead what other people had already done for Eton and Harrow and Rugby. He would put down all the magic that he had seen and felt; he would transfer to paper the subtle enchantment of the golden summer days, the moonlit nights, the steamy warmth of the bathrooms, the shouting in the dormitories, the buzz of movement and conversation in the dining hall, the cool gloom of the chapel—everything that came effortlessly into his mind whenever he thought of Millstead. All the beauty and emotion and rapture that he had seen and felt must not, he determined, be locked inside him: it clamoured to be set free, to flow strongly yet purposefully in the channel of some mighty undertaking.

Clanwell asked him in to coffee that night: from half-past ten till half-past eleven Speed lounged in one of Clanwell's easy chairs and found a great difficulty in paying attention to what Clanwell was saying. In the end his thoughts burst, as it were, their barriers: he said: "D'you know, Clanwell, I've had an idea—some time, you know—to write a tale about Millstead?"

"Really?—A school story, you mean?"

"Yes. You see—I feel—oh, well—there's a sort of atmosphere about the place, if you know what I mean—a rather wonderful sort of atmosphere. If somebody could only manage to express it in words they'd make rather a fine story, I should think."

Clanwell said: "Yes, I've known that atmosphere for a dozen years, but I'm quite certain I could never write about it. And you think you could?"

"I thought of trying, anyway, Millstead in summer-time—" Speed's voice quivered with rapture—"It's simply divine!"

"But you haven't seen it in winter-time yet. You can't write a story about one summer-term."

"No." Speed pondered, and said doubtfully: "No, I suppose not. It does sound rather arrogant, doesn't it, for me to talk of writing a school-story about Millstead after a few weeks at it, while you, after a dozen years, don't feel equal to the task?"

"When one is young and in love," declared Clanwell slowly, "one feels arrogant."

Speed laughed uproariously: it was as if Clanwell's remark had let loose a cataract of emotion in him. "You despise my condition a little, don't you?" he said.

"No," answered Clanwell, "I don't despise it at all: I just recognize it, that's all." He paused and began again: "I wonder if you'll let me speak to you a trifle seriously, Speed, without getting offended with me?"

"Of course I will. Fire away!"

Clanwell knocked out his pipe on the bars of the empty firegrate and said, rather curtly: "Don't see too much of Miss Ervine."

"What!"

Speed jerked forward in his chair and a sharp light entered his eyes. Clanwell continued, unmoved: "You said you weren't going to get offended, Speed. I hope you'll keep your promise. Understand, I've nothing to say against Miss Ervine at all, and if I had, I shouldn't take on the job of telling you about it. All that concerns me is just the matter of—of expediency, if you like to put it that way."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this. It doesn't do you any good in the school to be seen continually meeting her. The Common-Room, which liked you immensely at first when you came, is just beginning to be slightly amused at you. And the boys have noticed it, you may be sure. Probably you'll find yourself beginning to be ragged about it soon."

"But I'm not frightened of being ragged."

"Oh no, I daresay not. . . . Still, I've said all I wanted to say. Don't forget, Speed, that you're pledged not to take offence."

"Oh, I'll not do that."

Just before Speed left Clanwell said: "I wouldn't start that tale of Millstead life just yet if I were you, Speed. Better wait

till you're out of love, at any rate. After all, it's rather a highly coloured Millstead that you see at present, isn't it?"

"You think I'm sentimental, eh?"

"My dear fellow, I think you're by far the most sentimental chap I've ever come across!—Don't be hurt: it's not a crime. But it's just a bit of a danger, especially in writing a school-story. That atmosphere you talk about certainly *does* exist, and if I had the gift of self-expression I might try to write about it. I can see it clearly enough, even though I'm not a scrap in love, and even on the dreariest of days in the winter term. My advice to you is to wait and see if you can do the same. . . . Good night, Speed!"

"Good night," Speed called out, laughing.

Down Clanwell's corridor and up the stone flight of stairs and along his own corridor to the door of his own room his heart was thumping violently, for he knew that as soon as he was alone he would be drenched in the wild, tumultuous rapture of his own thoughts. Clanwell's advice, hazily remembered, faded before the splendour of that coming onrush; the whole interview with Clanwell vanished as if it had never happened, as if there had been a sort of cataleptic vacuum intervening between that scene by the Head's gateway and the climb upstairs to his room.

When he got to bed he could hardly sleep for joy.

CHAPTER FOUR

I

The first thing that Clare Harrington said to him when they met a few days later in Millstead High Street was: "Oh, congratulations, Mr. Speed!"

"Congratulations?" he echoed. "What for?"

She replied quietly: "Helen has told me."

He began to blush, and to hold his breath in an endeavour to prevent his cheeks from reddening to an extent that, so he felt, would be observed by passers-by. "Oh!" he gasped, with a half-embarrassed smile. Then, after a pause, he queried: "What has she told you?"

And Clare answered: "That you are going to marry her."

"Ah!" he exclaimed involuntarily, and he saw her eyes focussed on him strangely. A slow sensation of warmth began to envelop him; joy rose round him like a tide as he realised all the pivotal significance of what Clare had said. He was going to marry Helen!—Strange that, even amidst his most secret raptures, he had hardly dared to think of that! He had dreamed exquisite and fragile dreams of her, dreams in which she was too fairy-like and ethereal for marriage; doubtless, after some while, his ambitions would have crystallised normally, but up to the present they had no anchorage on earth at all. And to think that she had travelled in mind and intention more swiftly and further than he, to think that she had dared to deduce the final and ultimate reality, gave him, along with a surging overmastering joy, just a faint tinge of disappointment as well. But the joy, deepening and spreading, soon blotted out everything else: he sought Clare's hand and gripped it triumphantly. Tears were in his eyes and emotion clutching at his voice as he said: "I'm—I'm glad—she's told you. It's—it's fine, isn't it?—Don't you think we shall be—happy?"

"You ought to be," said Clare.

He struggled with the press of feeling for a moment and

then said: "Oh, let's go into Mason's and have a cup of coffee or something. I want to talk to you."

So they sat for a quarter of an hour at a little green-tiled table in Mason's highly respectable café. The room was over the shop, and besides affording from the window a panoramic view of the High Street, contained a small fire-grate, a framed picture of the interior of Mason's Hygienic Bakery, and a large ginger-and-white cat with kittens. Altogether it was a most secluded and comfortable rendezvous.

All the while that they conversed he was but slowly sizing up the situation and experiencing little alternating wafts of disappointment and exhilaration. Disappointment, perhaps, that he had not been left the bewitching task of bringing Helen's mind, along with his own, out of the clouds and mists of dreams; exhilaration also, because her mind, womanishly direct, had evidently not needed such guidance.

He talked rhapsodically to Clare; lashed himself, as it were, into a state of emotional fervour. He seemed eager to anticipate everything that anybody could possibly say to Helen's disadvantage, and to explain away the whole; it was as if he were championing Helen against subtle and inevitable disparagements. Once or twice he seemed to realise this, and to realise that he was defending where there was no attack, and then he stopped, looked confused, and waited for Clare to say something. Clare, as a matter of fact, said very little, and when she spoke Speed took hardly any notice, except, perhaps, to allow her words to suggest to him some fresh rhapsodical outbreak. He said, in a sudden outpouring: "Of course I know she's only a child. That's the wonderful charm of her —part of the wonderful charm, at any rate. Some people might say she wasn't clever, but she is *really*, you know. I admit she doesn't show up very well in company, but that's because she's nervous. *I'm* nervous and *I* don't show up well. She's got an acute little brain, though. You should hear the things she says sometimes. Simple little things, some people might think, but really, when you think about them, they're clever. Of course, she hasn't been educated up to a good many things, but then, if she had been, she wouldn't have kept her child-like simplicity, would she?—She's very quick at picking things up, and I'm lending her heaps of books. It's the most beautiful job in the world, being teacher to her. I'm rapturously happy about it and so is she. I could never stand these empty-headed society kind of women who can

jabber superficially in drawing-rooms about every subject under the sun, and really, you know, haven't got an original idea in their heads. Helen has the most wonderful and child-like originality, you know. You've noticed it yourself, I dare-say. Haven't you noticed it?—Yes, I'm sure you must have. And to think that she really does want to marry me!"

"Why shouldn't she want to marry you?" interjected Clare, but that was one of the remarks of which he took little notice. He went on eagerly: "I don't know what the Head will think when he gets to know about it. Most probably he'll be fearfully annoyed. Clanwell warned me the other night. Apparently—" a faint touch of bitterness came into his voice—"apparently it isn't the thing to treat your Headmaster's daughter with anything but the most distant reserve."

"Another question," said Clare shrewdly, "is what *your* people will think about it."

"My people," he replied, again with the note of bitterness in his voice, "will probably do what they have always done whenever I have proposed taking any fresh step in life."

"I can guess what that is. They oppose you, eh?"

"Oh, not absolutely that. They recognise my right to do what I want, but they think I'm a fool, all the same. They don't quarrel with me. They just go on wishing I was like my elder brother."

"What is he?"

"He works in my father's office in town. My father, you know—" he became suddenly confidential in tone—"is a rather typical sort of business-man. Materialist outlook—wanted me to manage a soap-works. We never got on absolutely well together. When I told him I was going to get a mastership at a public school he thought I was mad."

"And what will he think when you tell him you are going to marry the Headmaster's daughter?"

He looked at her curiously, for the first time intent upon her personally, for something in the way she had uttered that last question set up in him the suspicion that she was laughing at him. A careful scrutiny of her features, however, revealed no confirmation: he looked away again, shrugged his shoulders, and said: "Probably he'll think I'm madder than ever."

She gave him a curious glance with uptilted lips which he could not properly interpret. "Anyway," she said, quietly, "I shouldn't tell him that Helen's a child."

"Why not?"

Clare gave him again that curious, uninterpretable glance. "Because she isn't, that's all."

He was recovering from his surprise and was about to say something when she interrupted him with, perhaps, the first touch of animation that had so far distinguished her side of the conversation. "I told you," she said, "on the first night of term that you didn't understand Helen. And still you don't. If you did, you'd know that she was a woman, not a child at all."

"I wish you'd explain a little—"

"It doesn't need any explanation. You either know it or don't know it. Apparently you *don't* know it. . . . And now, Mr. Speed, I'm afraid I'll have to go—I can't leave the boy to manage the shop by himself all morning."

Speed had the sensation that she was slightly out of patience with him.

II

Clare brought him to earth; his dreams crumpled when he was with her; his emotional outlook sagged, as it were, with the perhaps imagined pricklings of her shrewdness. He hated her, ever so slightly, because he felt sometimes between her and himself a subtle and secret hostility, a hostility in which, because of her cool imperturbability, she had all the advantage. But when he was not with her his imagination soared and flamed up higher than ever; it was a fire that Clare's temperament could only make sulky. Those final weeks of the summer term were glorious beyond words. He took Clanwell's advice to the extent of not meeting Helen on the school premises, but hardly a day passed without some wonderful and secret assignation; the two of them would arrange afternoon excursions together, picnics, at Parminters, strolls along the Millstead road at dusk. It was all deeply and inexpressibly lovely. He told her a great many of his own dreams and ambitions, making her share them with him; she kindled aptly to his own enthusiasms, readily as a child might have done. For he was certain that Clare was wrong in that: Helen was only a child. To marry her seemed a thing of almost unearthly delicacy; he found himself pitying her sometimes because of the future. Above all, that she should wish to marry him, that her love should be capable of such a solemn and ineffable desire, seemed to him nearly a miracle. "Fragile little thing!"

he said to her once, as he kissed her—"I'm almost afraid of breaking you!"—She answered, in that wistful childlike voice that was perhaps incongruously sombre in tone: "*Am* I fragile?"

Once, towards dusk, they met the Head along the Millstead road. He raised his hat and passed them, muttering: "Taking an—um—stroll, Helen—um—beautiful evening—um, yes—good evening, Mr. Speed!"

He wore the air of being marvellously discreet.

III

Conversation at dinner in the Masters' Common-Room turned one evening upon Harrington. "Old Harrington's pretty bad again," Pritchard had said. "I heard in the town to-day that he'd had another stroke."

Speed, curiously startled by the utterance of the name, exclaimed, "What, the Harringtons who keep the bookshop? —I didn't know he was ill."

"Been ill ever since I can remember," replied Pritchard, laconically.

Then Speed remembered something that the Head had once told him about Harrington being a litterateur and an author of books on ethics.

"I never met him," he said, tentatively, seeking to guide the conversation into a discussion of the man.

Pritchard, ever ready to follow up a lead given to him, remarked: "You missed something, then. He was quite a character. Used to teach here once, you know."

"Really?"

"Used to *try* to, anyway, when they'd let him. Couldn't keep any sort of discipline. During his first prep they poured ink down his neck."

"Pritchard needn't talk," interposed Clanwell, laughing. "During *his* first prep they mixed carbide and water under his chair." The rest of the Common-Room, among whom Pritchard was no favourite, joined in the laughter. Then Clanwell took up the thread, kinder in his narrative than Pritchard had been. "I liked Harrington. He was a good sort, but he wasn't made for a schoolmaster. I told him so, and after his breakdown he took my advice and left the profession."

"Breakdown?" said Speed. "He had a breakdown then?"

"Yes, his wife died when his daughter was born. He never

told us anything about it. One morning he collapsed over a four *alpha* English form. I was next door. I was used to a row, but the terrible pandemonium made me wonder if anything had happened. I went in and found the little devils giving him sportive first-aid. They'd half undressed him. My word! —I picked out those that were in my house and gave them a tidy thrashing. Don't you remember, Lavery?"

"I remember," said the indolent Lavery, "you trying to persuade me to do the same with my little lot."

"But Harrington?" queried Speed, anxious that the conversation should not be diverted into other channels.

"Oh, well," resumed Clanwell, "he left Millstead and took to—shall we call it literature?"

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean?—" Clanwell laughed. "D'you mean to tell me you haven't heard of Samuel Harrington, author of the famous 'Helping-Hand-Books'?"

"I haven't."

"Then I must lend you one or two of them. They'll do you good. Lavery and I attribute our remarkable success in life to our careful study of them, don't we, Lavery?"

"Do we, Clanwell?"

Ransome, wizened and Voltairish, and agreeable company when stirred to anecdote, began: "Ah! 'How to be Powerful' was the best, though I think 'How to Become a Dominating Personality' was pretty good. The drollest of all was 'How to Meet Difficulties.' Speed has a treat in store if he hasn't read them. They're all in the school-library. The fellow used to send the Head free autographed copies of each one of them as it appeared."

Ransome, rarely beguiled into conversation, always secured a respectful audience. After a silence he went on: "I used to know old Harrington pretty well after he took to—writing. He once told me the entire circumstances of his début into the literary profession. It was rather droll."

Ransome paused, and Speed said: "I'd like to hear it."

A murmur of assent followed from the rest, and Ransome, not without pleasure at the flattery of his being eagerly listened to, crumbled a piece of bread by his plate and resumed. "He told me that one morning after he'd left Millstead he was feeling especially miserable and having a breakfast of tea and dry bread. So he *said*, anyway. Remember that, at that time, he had a baby to look after. The postman brought

him, that morning, a letter from an old school friend of his, a rector in Somerset, asking him if he would care to earn half-a-guinea by writing for him an address on 'Self-Control' for the Young Women's Sunshine Club at Little Pelthing, Somerset. I remember the name of the club and the village because I remember they struck me as being rather droll at the time. Harrington said the letter, or part of it, went something like this: 'I have just become the proud father of a most wonderful little baby boy, and you can imagine how infernally busy as well as infernally happy I am. Could you oblige me with an address on 'Self-Control'?—You were always rather good at dashing off essays when we were at school. The address should have a strong moral flavour and should last from half-an-hour to forty minutes.' . . . Well, Harrington sat down to write that address on 'Self-Control.' He told me that he knew all that anybody need know about self-control, because he was using prodigious quantities of it all the time he was writing. Anyway, it was a fine address. The Reverend Henry Beauchamp Northcroft—another name droll enough to be remembered—delivered it to the united assembly of the Little Pelthing Young Women's Sunshine Club, and everybody said it was the finest and most inspiring address they had ever heard from his lips. It glowed, as it were, from within; it radiated hope; it held a wonderful and sublime message for mankind. And, in addition, it lasted from half-an-hour to forty minutes. Nor was this all. A wealthy and philanthropic lady in the Reverend Henry Beauchamp Northcroft's congregation—Harrington *did* tell me her name, but I suspect it was not droll enough for me to remember it—suggested that, at her expense, the address should be printed and published in pamphlet form. With Harrington's consent this was done, and, so he told me, no fewer than twenty-five thousand copies of 'Self-Control' were despatched to various centres in England, America, the Colonies, and on board His Majesty's ships."

"Do you believe all this?" exclaimed Clanwell, laughing, to the Common-Room in general.

"Whether you believe it or not," replied Ransome, severely, "it's sufficiently droll for it to be worth hearing. And a large part of it is true, at any rate."

"Go on then," said Clanwell.

Ransome (spreading himself out luxuriously), went on: "It seemed to Harrington that having, to put it vulgarly,

scored a fine though anonymous bull's-eye with 'Self-Control,' he might, with profit, attempt to do similar business on his own account. Accordingly, he wrote a collection of some half-dozen didactic essays on such subjects as 'Immortality,' 'Health and Wealth,' 'The Art of Happiness,' and so on, and sent them to a well-known publisher of works on religion and ethics. This fellow, after a most unethical delay of several months, returned them with his curt regrets and the information that such stuff was a drug on the publishing market. Then Harrington, nothing in the least daunted, sent them straightway off again to a publisher of sensational novels. This last gentleman, he *was* a gentleman, for he replied almost immediately, agreeing to publish if Mr. Harrington would—I'm quoting hazily from the letter which Harrington showed me—if he would 'undertake to supply a further eighteen essays to make up a book of the customary eighty-thousand-word length.'—'You have a distinct vein of humour,' wrote Mr. Potts, of Larraby and Potts, Limited—that was the firm—'and we think your work would be very saleable if you would throw off what appears to be a feeling of restraint.'—So I guess Harrington just threw off this feeling of restraint, whatever exactly it was, and began on those eighteen essays. . . . I hope this tale isn't boring you."

"Not at all!"—"Go on!"—came the chorus. Ransome smiled.

"There isn't much to go on to. The book of essays was called 'Sky-Signs,' and it was reviewed rather pleasantly in some of the papers. Then followed 'About It and About,' a further bundle of didactic essays, which ran into five editions in six months. And then 'Through my Lattice Window,' which was the sort of book you were not ashamed to take into the pew with you and read during the offertory, provided, of course, that it was handsomely bound in black morocco. And lastly came the Helping-Hand-Books, which Mr. Speed must read if he is to consider his education complete. That's all. The story's over."

After the first buzz of comment Speed said: "I suppose he made plenty of money out of that sort of thing?"

Ransome replied: "Yes, he made it and then he lost it. He dabbled in finance and had a geometrical theory about the rise and fall of rubber shares. Then he got plentifully in debt and when his health began to give way he took the bookshop because he thought it would be an easy way to earn money.

He'd have lost on that if his daughter hadn't been a born business-woman."

"But surely," said Clanwell, "the money kept on trickling in from his books?"

Ransome shook his head. "No, because he'd sold the copyrights for cash down. He was a child in finance. But all the same he *knew* how to make money. For that you should refer to his book, 'How to be Successful,' *passim*. It's full of excellent fatherly advice."

Ransome added, with a hardly perceptible smile: "There's also a chapter about Courtship and Marriage. You might find it interesting, Mr. Speed."

Speed blushed furiously.

Afterwards, strolling over to the House with Clanwell, Speed said: "I say, was that long yarn Ransome told about Harrington true, do you think?"

Clanwell replied: "Well, it may have been. You can never be quite certain with Ransome, though. But he does know how to tell a story, doesn't he?"

Speed agreed.

Late that night the news percolated, somehow or other, that old Harrington was dead.

IV

Curious, perhaps, that Speed, who had never even seen the man, and whose knowledge of him was derived almost solely from Ransome's "droll" story, should experience a sensation of personal loss! Yet it was so, mysteriously and unaccountably: the old man's death took his mind further away from Millstead than anything had been able to do for some time. The following morning he met Helen in the lane outside the school and his first remark to her was: "I say, have you heard about old Harrington?"

Helen said: "Yes, isn't it terrible?—I'm so sorry for Clare—I went down to see her last night. Poor Clare!"

He saw tears in her eyes, and at this revelation of her abounding pity and warm-heartedness, his love for her welled up afresh, so that in a few seconds his soul was wholly in Millstead again. "You look tired, Helen," he said, taking her by the arm and looking down into her eyes.

Then she burst into tears.

"I'm all right," she said, between gulps of sobbing. "It's

so sad, though, isn't it?—Death always frightens me. Oh, I'm so sorry for Clare. Poor darling Clare! . . . Oh, Kenneth—I *was* miserable last night when I came home. I didn't know what to do, I was so miserable. I—I *did* want to see you, and I—I walked along the garden underneath Clanwell's room and I heard your voice in there."

He said, clasping her arm tightly: "Yes, I went to Clanwell for coffee after prep."

She went on pathetically: "You sounded so happy—I heard you laughing. Oh, it was terrible to hear you laughing when I was miserable!"

"Poor little child!"—He bent down suddenly and kissed her eyes. "What a sad and forlorn little girl you are this morning!—Don't you guess why I'm so happy nowadays?"

"Why are you?"

He said, very slowly and beautifully: "Because of you. Because you have made my life utterly and wonderfully different. Because all the beauty in the world reminds me of you. When I wake up in the morning with the sun on my face I want to roar with laughter—I don't know why, except that I'm so happy."

She smiled gratefully and looked up into his face with large, tender eyes. "Sometimes," she said, "beauty makes me want to cry, not to laugh. Last night, in the garden, everything was so lovely, and yet so sad. Don't you think beautiful things are sad sometimes?"—She paused and went on, with less excitement: "When I went in, about ten o'clock, I was so miserable I went in the dining-room to be alone. I was crying and father came in."

"Well?" he whispered, eagerly.

"He wanted to know what was the matter."

"And you told him about Clare's father, I suppose?"

"No," she answered. "Don't be angry," she pleaded, laying a hand on his arm. "I don't know what made me do it—I suppose it was instinct. Anyway, you were going to, soon, even if I hadn't. I—I told father about—us!"

"You did?"

"Yes. Don't be angry with me."

"My darling, I'm not angry with you. What did he say?"

She came so close to him that he could feel her body trembling with emotion. "He didn't mind," she whispered. "He didn't mind at all. Kenneth, aren't you glad?—Isn't it fine of him?"

"Glorious!" he answered, taking a deep breath. Again the tide of joy seemed to engulf him, joy immense and stupefying. He would have taken her in his arms and kissed her had he not seen people coming along the lane. "It's wonderful, Helen!" he whispered. Then some secondary thought seemed to strike him suddenly: he said: "But why were you miserable a little while ago? Didn't the good news make you feel happy?"

She answered, still with a touch of sadness: "I didn't know whether you would think it was good news."—"Helen!" he exclaimed, remonstratively, clasping her tightly to him: she went on, smiling at him: "Yes, it's silly of me, isn't it?—But Kenneth, Kenneth, I don't know how it is, I'm never quite certain of you—there's always a funny sort of fear in my mind! I know it's silly. I can't help it, though. Perhaps it will all be different some day."

"Some day!" he echoed, gazing into her uplifted eyes.

A vision, secret and excruciatingly lovely, filled their eyes for a moment. He knew then that to marry her had become his blinding and passionate ambition.

V

The *Millstead and District Advertiser* had a long and sympathetic appreciation of the late Mr. Samuel Harrington in its first July issue. The Helping-Hand-Books were described as "pleasant little homilies written with much charm and humour." Speed took one or two of them out of the School Library and read them.

About a week after the funeral he called at the shop, ostensibly to buy a book, but really to offer his condolences. He had been meaning to go, for several days in succession, but a curious dread of an interview with Clare had operated each time for postponement. Nor could he understand this dread. He tried to analyse it, to discover behind it any conceivable reason or motive; but the search was in vain. He was forced to suppose, vaguely, that the cause of it was that slight but noticeable temperamental hostility between himself and Clare which always resulted in a clouding over of his dreams.

It was a chilly day for July; there was no sun, and the gas was actually lit in the shop when he called. The boy, a smart under-sized youngster, was there to serve him, but he asked

for Miss Harrington. She must have heard his voice, for she appeared almost straightway, dressed neatly and soberly in black, and greeted him with a quite brisk: "Good afternoon, Mr. Speed!"

He shook hands with her gravely and began to stammer: "I should have called before, Miss Harrington, to offer you my sincerest sympathies, but—"

She held up her hand in an odd little gesture of reproof and said interrupting him: "Please don't. If you want a chat come into the back room. Thomas can attend to the shop."

He accepted her invitation almost mechanically. It was a small room, full of businesslike litter such as is usual in the back rooms of shops, but a piano and bookcase gave it a touch of individuality. As she pointed him to a seat she said: "Don't think me rude, but this is the place for conversation. The shop is for buying things. You'll know in future, won't you?"

He nodded somewhat vaguely. He could not determine what exactly was astounding in her, and yet he realised that the whole effect of her was somehow astounding. More than ever was he conscious of the subtle hostility, by no means amounting to unfriendliness, but perhaps importing into her regard for him a tinge of contempt.

"Do you know," he said, approaching the subject very deliberately, "that until a very short time ago I knew nothing at all about Mr. Harrington? You never told me."

"Why should I?" She was on her guard in an instant.

He went on: "You may think me sincere or not as you choose, but I should like to have met him."

"He had a dislike of being met."

She said that with a touch of almost vicious asperity.

He went on, far less daunted by her rudeness than he would have been if she had given way to emotion of any kind: "Anyway I have got to know him as well as I can by reading his books."

"What a way to get to know him!" she exclaimed, contemptuously. She looked him sternly in the face and said: "Be frank, Mr. Speed, and admit that you found my father's books the most infantile trash you ever read in your life!"

"Miss Harrington!" he exclaimed, protesting. She rose, stood over him menacingly, and cried: "You have your chance to be frank, mind!"

He looked at her, tried to frame some polite reply, and

found himself saying astonishingly: "Well, to be perfectly candid, that was rather my opinion."

"And mine," she added quietly.

She was calm in an instant. She looked at him almost sympathetically for a moment, and with a sudden gesture of satisfaction sat down in a chair opposite to his. "I'm glad you were frank with me, Mr. Speed," she said. "I can talk to anybody who's frank with me. It's your nature to confide in anybody who gives you the least encouragement, but it's not mine. I'm rather reticent. I remember once you talked to me a lot about your own people. Perhaps you thought it strange of me not to reciprocate."

"No, I never thought of it then."

"You didn't?—Well, I thought perhaps you might have done. Now that you've shown yourself candid I can tell you very briefly the sort of man my father was. He was a very dear old hypocrite, and I was very fond of him. He didn't feel half the things he said in his books, though I think he was honest enough to try to. He found a good thing and he stuck to it. After all, writing books was only his trade, and a man oughtn't to be judged entirely by what he's forced to do in order to make a living."

He stared at her half-incredulously. She was astounding him more than ever. She went on, with a curious smile: "He was fifty-seven years old. When he died he was half-way through his eleventh book. It was to have been called 'How to Live to Three-Score-Years-and-Ten.' All about eating nuts and keeping the bedroom windows open at nights, you know."

He wondered if he were expected to laugh.

He stammered, after a bewildered pause: "How is all this going to affect you?—Will you leave Millstead?"

She replied, with a touch in her voice of what he thought might have been mockery: "My father foresaw the plight I might be in some day and thoughtfully left me his counsel on the subject. Perhaps you'd like me to read it?"

She went over to the bookcase and took down an edition-de-luxe copy of one of the Helping-Hand-Books.

"Here it is—'How to Meet Difficulties'—Page 38—I'll read the passage—it's only a short one. 'How is it that the greatest and noblest of men and women are those against whom Fate has set her most tremendous obstacles?—Simply that it is good for a man or a woman to fight, good to

find paths fraught with dire perils and difficulties galore, good to accept the ringing challenge of the gods! Nay, I would almost go so far as to say: lucky is that boy or girl who is cast, forlorn and parentless upon the world at a tender age, for if there be greatness in him or her at all, it will be forced to show itself as surely as the warm suns of May compel each flower to put forth her bravest splendour!'. . . . So now you know, Mr. Speed!"

She had read the passage as if declaiming to an audience. It was quite a typical extract from the works of the late Mr. Harrington: such phrases as 'dire perils,' 'difficulties galore,' and 'ringing challenge of the gods' contained all that was most truly characteristic of the prose style of the Helping-Hand-Books.

Speed said, rather coldly: "Do you know what one would wonder, hearing you talk like this?"

"What?"

"One would wonder if you had any heart at all."

Again the curious look came into her eyes and the note of asperity into her voice. "If I had, do you think I would let you see it, Mr. Speed?" she said.

They stared at each other almost defiantly for a moment; then, as if by mutual consent, allowed the conversation to wander into unimportant gossip about Millstead. Nor from those placid channels did it afterwards stray away. Hostility of a kind persisted between them more patently than ever; yet, in a curiously instinctive way, they shook hands when they separated as if they were staunch friends.

As he stepped out into High Street the thought of Helen came to him as a shaft of sunlight round the edges of a dark cloud.

VI

Term finished in a scurry of House-matches and examinations. School House won the cricket trophy and there was a celebratory dinner at which Speed accompanied songs and made a nervously witty speech and was vociferously applauded. "We all know we're the best House," said Clanwell, emphatically, "and what we've got to do is just to prove to other people that we are." Speed said: "I've only been in School House a term, but it's been long enough time for me to be glad I'm where I am and not in any other House." (Cheers.)

Amidst such jingoist insincerities a very pleasant evening romped its way to a close. The following day, the last day of term, was nearly as full of new experiences as had been the first day. School House yard was full of boxes and trunks waiting to be collected by the railway carriers, and in amongst it all, small boys wandered forlornly, secretly happy yet weak with the cumulative passion of anticipation. In the evening there was the farewell dinner in the dining-hall, the distribution of the terminal magazine, and the end-of-term concert, this last concluding with the Millstead School-Song, the work of an uninspired composer in one of his most uninspired moments. Then, towards ten o'clock in the evening, a short service in chapel, followed by a "rag" on the school quadrangle, brought the long last day to a close. Cheers were shouted for the Masters, for Doctor and Mrs. Ervine, for those leaving, and (facetiously) for the school porter. That night there was singing and rowdyism in the dormitories, but Speed did not interfere.

He was ecstatically happy. His first term had been a triumph. And, fittingly enough, it had ended with the greatest triumph of all. Ever since Helen had told him of her confession to her father, Speed had been making up his mind to visit the Head and formally put the matter before him. That night, the last night of the summer term, after the service in chapel, when the term, so far as the Head was concerned with it, was finished, Speed had tapped at the door of the Head's study.

Once again the sight of that study, yellowly luminous in the incandescent glow, set up in him a sensation of sinister attraction, as if the room were full of melancholy ghosts. The Head was still in his surplice, swirling his arms about the writing-table in an endeavour to find some mislaid paper. The rows upon rows of shining leather-bound volumes, somebody on the Synoptic Gospels, somebody else's New Testament Commentary, seemed to surround him and enfold him like a protective rampart. The cool air of the summer night floated in through the slit of open window and blew the gas-light fitfully high and low. Speed thought, as he entered the room and saw the Head's shining bald head bowed over the writing-table: Here you have been for goodness knows how many years and terms, and now has come the end of another one. Don't you feel any emotion in it at all? —You are getting to be an old man: can you bear to think

of the day you first entered this old room and placed those books on the shelves instead of those that belonged to your predecessor?—Can you bear to think of all the generations that have passed by, all the boys, now men, who have stared at you inside this very room, while time, which bore them away in a happy tide, has left you for ever stranded?—Why I, even I, can feel, after the first term, something of that poignant melancholy which, if I were in your place, would overwhelm me. Don't you—can't you—feel anything at all?—

The Head looked up, observed Speed, and said: "Um, yes—pleased to see you, Mr. Speed—have you come to say good-bye—catching an early train tomorrow, perhaps—um, yes—eh?"

"No, sir. I wanted to speak to you on a private matter. Can you spare me a few moments?"

"Oh yes, most certainly. Not perhaps the—um—usual time for seeing me, but still—that is no matter. I shall be—um—happy to talk with you, Mr. Speed."

Speed cleared his throat, shifted from one foot to another, and began, rather loudly, as always when he was nervous: "Miss Ervine, sir, I believe, spoke to you some while ago about—about herself and me, sir."

The Head placed the tips of his fingers together and leaned back in his chair.

"That is so, Mr. Speed."

"I—I have been meaning to come and see you about it for some time. I hope—I hope you didn't think there was anything underhand in my not seeing you?"

The Head temporised suavely: "Well—um, yes—perhaps my curiosity did not go so—um—so far as that. When you return to your room, Mr. Speed, you will find there an—um—a note from me, requesting you to see me to-morrow morning. I take it you have not seen that note?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Ah, I see. I supposed when you entered that you were catching an early train in the morning and were—um—purposing to see me to-night instead. . . . No matter. You will understand why I wished to see you, no doubt."

"Possibly the same reason that I wished to see you."

"Ah, yes—possibly. Possibly. You have been—um—quite—um—speedy—in—um—pressing forward your suit with my daughter. Um, yes—*very* speedy, I think. . . . Speedy

—Ha—Ha—um, yes—the play upon words was quite accidental, I assure you."

Speed, with a wan smile, declared: "I daresay I am to blame for not having mentioned it to you before now. I decided—I scarcely know why—to wait until term was over. . . . I—I love your daughter, and I believe she loves me. That's all there is to say, I think."

"Indeed, Mr. Speed?—It must be a very—um—simple matter then."

Speed laughed, recovering his assurance now that he had made his principal statement. "I am aware that there are complexities, sir."

The Head played an imaginary tune on his desk with his outstretched fingers. "You must—um—listen to me for a little while, Mr. Speed. We like you very much—I will begin, perhaps unwisely, by telling you that. You have been all that we could have desired during this last term—given—um—every satisfaction, indeed. Naturally, I think too of my daughter's feelings. She is, as you say, extremely—um—fond of you, and on you depends to a quite considerable extent her—um—happiness. We could not therefore, my wife and I, refuse to give the matter our very careful consideration. Now I must—um—cross-examine you a little. You wish to marry my daughter, is that not so?"

"Yes."

"When?"

The Head flung out the question with disconcerting suddenness.

Speed, momentarily unbalanced, paused, recovered himself, and said wisely: "When I can afford to, sir. As soon as I can afford to. You know my salary and prospects, sir, and are the best judge of how soon I shall be able to give your daughter the comforts to which she has been accustomed."

"A clever reply, Mr. Speed. Um, yes—extremely clever. I gather that you are quite convinced that you will be happy with my daughter?"

"I am quite convinced, sir."

"Then money is the only difficulty. What a troublesome thing money is, Mr. Speed!—May I ask you whether you have yet consulted your own parents on the matter?"

"I have not done so yet. I wanted your reply first."

"I see. And what—um—do you anticipate will be *their* reply?"

Speed was silent for a moment and then said: "I cannot pretend that I think they will be enthusiastic. They have never agreed with my actions. But they have the sense to realise that I am old enough to do as I choose, especially in such a matter as marriage. They certainly wouldn't quarrel with me over it."

The Head stared fixedly at Speed for some while; then, with a soft, crooning tone, began to speak. "Well, you know, Mr. Speed, you are very young—only twenty-two, I believe." —(Speed interjected: "Twenty-three next month, sir.")— The Head proceeded: "Twenty-three then. It's—um—it's rather young for marriage. However, I am—um, yes—inclined to agree with Professor Potts that one of the—um—curses of our modern civilisation is that it pushes the—um—marriageable age too late for the educated man." (And who the devil, thought Speed, is Professor Potts?) . . . "Now it so happens, Mr. Speed, that this little problem of ours can be settled in a way which is satisfactory to myself and to the school, and which I think will be equally satisfactory to yourself and my daughter. I don't know whether you know that Lavery leaves this term?"

"I didn't know, sir."

"He has reached the—um—the retiring age. As perhaps you know, Mr. Speed, Lavery belonged to the—um—old school. In many ways, I think, the old methods were best, but, of course, one has to keep up with the times. I am quite certain that the Governors will look favourably on a very much younger man to be—um—Lavery's successor. It would also be an advantage if he were married."

"Married!" echoed Speed.

"Yes. Married house masters are always preferred. . . . Then, again, Mr. Speed, we should want a public-school man. . . . Of course, Lavery's is a large House and the position is not one to be—um—lightly undertaken. And, of course, it is for the Governors to decide, in the last resort. But if you think about it, Mr. Speed, and if you favour the idea, it will probably occur to you that you stand a rather good chance. Of course it requires thinking over a great deal. Um, yes—decide nothing in a hurry. . . ."

Speed's mind, hazily receiving the gist of what the Head was saying, began to execute a wild pirouette. He heard the Head's voice droning on, but he did not properly hear anything more that was said. He heard in snatches: "Of course

you would have to take up your new duties in—um, yes—September. . . . And for that purpose you would get married during the vacation. . . . A great chance for you, Mr. Speed . . . . the Governors . . . . very greatly impressed with you at Speech Day. . . . You would like Lavery's. . . . an excellent House. . . . Plenty of time to think it over, you know. . . . Um, yes—plenty of time. . . . When did you say you were going home?"

Speed recovered himself so far as to answer: "Tuesday, sir."

"Um, yes—delightful, that is—you will be able to dine with us to-morrow night then, no doubt?—Curious place, Millstead, when everybody has gone away . . . Um, yes—extremely delightful . . . Think it over very carefully, Mr. Speed. . . . we dine at seven-thirty during the vacations, remember. . . . Good night, then, Mr. Speed. . . . Um, yes—Good night!"

Speed staggered out as if intoxicated.

VII

That was why, hearing the singing and shouting in the dormitories that night, Speed did not interfere. With happiness surging all around him how could he have the heart to curtail the happiness of others?—About half-past ten he went round distributing journey-money, and to each dormitory in turn he said farewell and wished a pleasant vacation. The juniors were scampering over one another's beds and pelting one another with pillows. Speed said merely: "If I were you fellows I should get to sleep pretty soon: Hartopp will ring the bells at six, you know."

Then he went back into his own room, his room that would not be his any more, for next term he would be in Lavery's. Noisy and insincere as had been his protestations at the House Dinner about the superiority of School House over any other, there was yet a sense in which he felt deeply sorry to leave the place where he had been so happy and successful. He looked back in memory to that first evening of term, and remembered his first impression of the room assigned to him; then it had seemed to him lonely, forlorn, even a little dingy. Hardly a trace of that earliest aspect remained with it now. At eleven o'clock on the last night of term it glowed with the warmth of a friendly heart; it held out loving arms

that made Speed, even amidst his joy, piteously sorry to leave it. The empty firegrate, in which he had never seen a fire, lured him with the vision of all the cosy winter nights that he had missed.

Outside it was moonlight again, as when, a month before, he had waited by the pavilion steps on the evening of the Speech Day. From his open lattice-window he could see the silver tide lapping against the walls and trees, the pale sea of the pitch on which there would be no more cricket, the roof and turret of the pavilion gleaming with liquid radiance. All was soft and silent, glossy beneath the high moon. It was as if everything had endured agelessly, as if the passing of a term were no more than the half-heard tick of a clock in the life of Millstead.

Leaning out of the window he heard a voice, boyish and sudden, in the junior dormitory below.

"I say, Bennett, are you going by the 8:22?"

An answer came indistinguishably, and then the curt command of the prefect imposing silence, silence which, reigned over by the moon and the sky of stars, lasted through the short summer night until dawn.

BOOK II

THE WINTER TERM

CHAPTER ONE

I

He breakfasted with Helen upon the first morning of the winter term, inaptly named because winter does not begin until the term is over. They had returned the evening before from a month's holiday in Cornwall and now they were making themselves a little self-consciously at home in the first-floor rooms that had been assigned to them in Lavery's. The room in which they breakfasted overlooked the main quadrangle; the silver coffee-pot on the table shimmered in the rays of the late summer sun.

Midway through the meal Burton, the porter at Lavery's, tapped at the door and brought in the letters and the *Daily Telegraph*.

Speed said: "Hullo, that's luck!—I was thinking I should have to run down the town to get my paper this morning."

Burton replied, with a hint of reproach in his voice: "No sir. It was sent up from Harrington's as usual, sir. They always begin on the first day of term, sir."

Speed nodded, curiously conscious of a thrill at the mention of the name Harrington. Something made him suddenly nervous, so that he said, boisterously, as if determined to show Burton at all costs that he was not afraid of him: "Oh, by the way, Burton, you might shut that window a little, will you?—there's a draught."

"Yes, sir," replied Burton, again with a hint of subdued reproachfulness in his tone. While he was shutting the window, moving about very softly and stealthily himself yet making a tremendous noise with everything that had to be done with his large clumsy hands, it was necessary for Speed and Helen to converse on casual and ordinary subjects.

Speed said: "I should think the ground's far too hard for rugger, Helen."

She answered, somberly: "Yes, I daresay it is. It's really summer still, isn't it?—And I'm so glad. I hate the winters."

"You hate the winters, eh?—Why's that?"

"It's so cold, and the pitches are all muddy, and there are horrid locks-up after dark. Oh, I hate Millstead in winter-time."

He said, musingly: "We must have big fires when the cold weather comes, anyway."

Then Burton departed, closing the door very delicately after him, and the conversation languished. Speed glanced vaguely through his correspondence. He was ever so slightly nervous. That month's honeymoon in Cornwall had passed like a rapt and cloudless vision, but ever beyond the horizon of it had been the thought of this return to Millstead for the winter term. How the return to a place where he had been so happy and of which he had such wonderful memories could have taken in his mind the semblance of an ordeal, was a question that baffled him entirely. He felt strangely and unaccountably shy of entering the Masters' Common-Room again, of meeting Clanwell and Ransome and Pritchard and the rest, of seeing once again all the well-known faces of the boys whose summer vacations had been spent so much less eventfully than his. And yet, as he sat at the breakfast-table and saw Helen opposite him, a strange warming happiness surged up within him and made him long for the initial ordeal to be over so that he could pass on to the pure and wonderful life ahead, that life in which Helen and Millstead would reign jointly and magnificently. Surely he could call himself blessed with the most amazing good fortune, to be happily married at the age of twenty-three and installed in just the position which, more than any other in the world, he had always coveted!—Consciousness of his supreme happiness made him quicken with the richest and most rapturous enthusiasm; he would, he decided in a sudden blinding moment, make Lavery's the finest of all the houses at Millstead; he would develop alike the work and the games and the moral tone until the fame of Lavery's spread far beyond its local boundaries and actually enhanced the reputation of Millstead itself. Such achievements were not, he knew, beyond the possibilities of an energetic house master, and he, young and full of enthusiasms, would be a living fount of energy. All the proud glory of life was before him, and in the fullness of that life there was nothing that he might not do if he chose.

All that day he was at the mercy alternately of his tumultuous dreams of the future and of a presaging nervous-

ness of the imminent ordeals. In the morning he was occupied chiefly with clerical work, but in the afternoon, pleading a few errands in town, he took his bicycle out of the shed and promised Helen that he would not be gone longer than an hour or so. He felt a little sad to leave her, because he knew that with the very least encouragement she would have offered to come with him. Somehow, he would not have been pleased for her to do that; he felt acutely self-conscious, vaguely yet miserably apprehensive of trials that were in wait for him. In a few days, of course, everything would be all right.

He did not cycle into the town, but along the winding Millstead lane that led away from the houses and into the uplands around Parminters. The sun was glorious and warm, and the trees of that deep and heavy green that had not, so far, more than the faintest of autumnal hints in it. Along the lane twisting into the cleft of Parminters, memories assailed him at every yard. He had been so happy here—and here—and here; here he had laughed loudly at something she had said; here she had made one of her childish yet incomparably wise remarks. Those old serene days, those splendid flaming afternoons of the summer term, had been so sweet and exquisite and fragrantly memorable to him that he could not forbear to wonder if anything could ever be so lovely again.

Deep down beneath all the self-consciousness and apprehension and morbid researching of the past, he knew that he was richly and abundantly happy. He knew that she was still a child in his own mind; that life with her was dream-like as had been the rapt anticipation of it; that the dream, so far from marriage dispelling it, was enhanced by all the kindling intimacies that swung them both, as it were, into the same ethereal orbit. When he thought about it he came to the conclusion that their marriage must be the most wonderful marriage in the world. She was a child, a strange, winsome fairy-child, streaked with the most fitful and sombre passion that he had ever known. Nobody, perhaps, would guess that he and she were man and wife. The thought gratified his sense of the singularity of what had happened. At the Cornish hotel where they had stayed he had fancied that their identity as a honeymoon couple had not been guessed at all; he had thought, with many an inward chuckle, that people were supposing them to be mysteriously and romantically unwedded.

Time passed so slowly on that first day of the winter term.

He rode back at the end of the afternoon with the wind behind him, swinging him in through the main gateway where he could see the windows of Lavery's pink in the rays of the setting sun. Lavery's!—Lavery's!—Throughout the day he had found himself repeating the name constantly, until the syllables lost all shred of meaning. Lavery's!—Lav-er-izz. . . . The sounds boomed in his ears as he entered the tiny drawing-room in which Helen was waiting for him with the tea almost ready. Tea time!—In a few hours the great machine of Millstead would have begun to pound its inexorable way. He felt, listening to the chiming of the quarters, as if he were standing in the engine-room of an ocean liner, watching the mighty shafts, now silent and motionless, that would so soon begin their solemn crashing movement.

But that evening, about eleven o'clock, all his fears and shynesses were over, and he felt the most deeply contented man in the world. A fire was flickering a cheerful glow over the tiny drawing-room; Helen had complained of chilliness so he had told Burton to light it. He was glad now that this had been done, for it enabled him to grapple with his dreams more comfortably. Helen sat in an armchair opposite to him on the other side of the fire; she was leaning forward with her head on her hands, so that the firelight shone wonderfully on her hair. He looked at her from time to time, magnificently in love with her, and always amazed that she belonged to him.

The long day of ordeals had passed by. He had dined that evening in the Masters' Common-Room, and everybody there had pressed round him in a chorus of eager congratulation. Afterwards he had toured his House, introducing himself to those of the prefects whom he had not already met, and strolling round the dormitories to shake hands informally with the rank and file. Then he had interviewed new boys (there were nineteen of them), and had distributed a few words of pastoral advice, concluding with the strict injunction that if they made tea in the basements they were on no account to throw the slops down the waste-pipes of the baths. Lastly of all, he had put his head inside each of the dormitories, at about half-past ten, to bestow a brisk but genial goodnight.

So now, at eleven o'clock, rooted at last in everything that he most loved in the world, he could pause to gloat over his

happiness. Here, in the snug firelit room, secret and rich with warm shadows; and there, down the short corridor into the bleak emptiness of the classrooms, was everything that his heart desired: Helen and Millstead: the two deities that held passionate sway over him.—Eleven began to chime on the school clock. The dormitories above were almost silent. She did not speak, did not look up once from the redness of the fire; she was often like that, silent with thoughts whose nature he could guess from the dark, tossing passion that shook her sometimes when, in the midst of such silences, she suddenly clung to him. She loved him more than ever he could have imagined: that, more perhaps than anything else, had been the surprise of that month in Cornwall.

"Eleven," he said, breaking the rapt silence.

She said, half humorously, half sadly: "Are you pleased with me?—Are you satisfied?—Do I quite come up to expectations?"

He started, looked towards her, and laughed. The laugh disturbed the silence of the room like the intrusion of something from millions of miles away. He made a humorous pretence of puzzling it out, as if it were a baffling problem, and said, finally, with mocking doubtfulness: "Well, on the whole, I think you do."

"If I had been on trial for a month you'd still keep me, then?" she went on, without moving her head out of her hands.

He answered, in the same vein as before: "If you could guarantee always to remain up to sample, I daresay I would."

She raised her head and gave him such a look as, if he had not learned to know it, would have made him think she was angry with him; it was sharp with blade-like eagerness, as if she were piercing through his attitude of jocularity.

Then, wondering why she did not smile when he was smiling, he put his arm round her and drew her burning lips to his. "Bedtime," he said, gaily, "for we've got to be up early in the morning."

Over about them as they clung together the spirit of Millstead, like a watchful friend, came suddenly close and intimate, and to Speed, opening his soul to it joyously, it appeared in the likeness of a golden-haired child, shy yet sombrely passionate—a wraith of a child that was just like Helen. Above all, they loved each other, these two, with a

love that surrounded and enveloped all things in a magic haze: they were the perfect lovers. And over them the real corporeal Millstead brooded in constant magnificent calm.

II

Soon he was swallowed up in the joyous routine of term-time. He had never imagined that a housemaster had such a large amount of work to do. There were no early-morning forms during the winter term, however, and as also it was a housemaster's privilege to breakfast in his own rooms, Speed began the day with a happy three-quarters of an hour of newspaper-scanning, envelope-tearing, and chatting with Helen. After breakfast work began in earnest. Before term had lasted a week he discovered that he had at least twice as many duties as in the preceding term; the Head was certainly not intending to let him slack. There was the drawing and music of the whole school to superintend, as well as the choir and chapel-services which, as the once-famous Raggs became more and more decrepit, fell into Speed's direction almost automatically. Then also there were a large number of miscellaneous supervisory duties which the housemasters shared between them, and one or two, at least, which tradition decreed should be performed entirely by the junior housemaster. The result of it all was that Speed was, if he had been in the mood to desire a statutory eight hours' day, considerably overworked.

It was fortunate that the work was what he loved. He plunged into it with terrific zest. Lavery's was a large House, and Lavery himself had judged all its institutions by the test of whether or not they conduced to an economy in work for him. The result was an institution that managed itself with rough-and-ready efficiency, that offered no glaring scandal to the intrusive eye, yet was, in truth, honeycombed with corruption of a mild sort, and completely under the sway of powerfully vested interests. Against this and these Speed set himself out to do final battle. A prudent housemaster, and certainly one who valued his own personal comfort, would have postponed the contest, at any rate, until he had become settled in his position. But Speed, emboldened by the extraordinary success of his first term, and lured by his own dreams of a Lavery's that should be *the* great House at Millstead, would not delay. In his first week he found five of

the prefects enjoying a pleasant little smoking-party in the Senior prefect's study. They explained to him that Lavery had never objected to their smoking, provided they did it unostentatiously, and that Lavery never dreamed of "barging in upon them" during their evening study-hours. Speed, stung by their slightly insolent bearing, barked at them in his characteristic staccato voice when annoyed: "It doesn't matter to me a bit what Lavery used to let you do. You've got to obey me now, not Lavery. Prefects must set the example to the others. I shall ask for an undertaking from all of you that you don't smoke again during term-time. I'll give you till tomorrow night to decide. Those who refuse will be degraded from prefecture."

"You can't degrade without the Head's authority," said Smallwood, the most insolent of the party.

Speed replied, colouring suddenly (for he realised that Smallwood had spoken the truth): "I know my own business, thank you, Smallwood."

During the following twenty-four hours four out of the half-dozen House-prefects gave the required undertaking. The other two, Smallwood and a fellow named Biffin, refused, "on principle," as they said, without explaining what exactly the qualification meant. Speed went promptly to the Head and appealed for authority to degrade them. He found that they had already poured their tale into the Head's receptive ears, and that they had given the Head the impression that he (Speed) in a tactless excess of reforming zeal, had been listening at keyholes and prying around the study-doors at night. The Head, after listening to Speed's indignant protest, replied, suavely: "I think, Mr. Speed"—(Speed's relationship as son-in-law never tempted either of them to any intimacy of address)—"I think you must—um, yes—make some allowance for the—um—the natural inclination of elder boys to—um—to be jealous of privileges. Smoking is, of course, an—um, yes—an offence against school rules, but Mr. Lavery was perhaps—um, yes, perhaps—wise in turning the —um—the blind eye, when the offender was near the top of the school and where the offence was not flagrant. You must remember, Mr. Speed, that Smallwood is eighteen years of age, not so very many years younger than you are yourself. Besides, he is—um, yes, I think so—captain of the First Fifteen, is he not?—and I—um—I assure you—his degradation through you would do you an—um—an incalculable

amount of harm in the school. Don't make yourself unpopular, Mr. Speed. I will send a note round the school, prefects—um, yes—included, drawing—um—attention to the school rule against smoking. And I will talk to Smallwood and the other boy—Biffin, isn't he?—um, yes—privately. Privately, you see—a quiet friendly conversation in—um—in private, can achieve wonders."

Speed felt that he was being ever so gently snubbed. He left the Head's study in a state of subdued fury, and his temper was not improved when Helen seemed rather thoughtlessly inclined to take Smallwood's side. "Don't get people into trouble, Kenneth," she pleaded. "I don't think you ought to complain to father about them. After all, it isn't frightfully wicked to smoke, is it? and I know they all used to do it in Lavery's time. Why, I've seen them many a time when I've passed the study-windows in the evenings."

He stared at her for a few seconds, half indignantly, half incredulously: then, as if on sudden impulse, he smiled and placed his hands on her shoulders and looked searchingly into her eyes. "Soft-hearted little kid!" he exclaimed, laughing a slightly forced laugh. "All the same, I don't think you quite understand my position, dear."

"Tell me about it then," she said.

Perhaps instinct forewarned him that if he went into details, either his indignation would break its bounds or else she would make some further casual and infuriating comment. From both possibilities he shrank nervously. He said, with an affectation of nonchalance: "Oh, never mind about it, dear. It will all come right in the end. Don't you worry your pretty head about it. Kiss me!"

She kissed him passionately.

III

But Speed was still, in the main, happy, despite occasional worries. There was a wonderful half-sad charm about those fading autumn afternoons, each one more eager to dissolve into the twilight, each one more thickly spread with the brown and yellow leaves. To Speed, who remembered so well the summer term, the winter term seemed full of poignancies and regrets. And yet surrounding it all, this strange atmosphere which for want of a better designation must be

called simply Millstead, was no less apparent; it pervaded all those autumn days with a subtle essence which made Speed feel that this life that he was living would be impossible to forget, no matter what the world held in store for him. He could never forget the clammy, earthy smell of the rugger pitch after a match in rain; the steam rising from the heavy scrum; the grey clouds rolling over the sky; the patter of rain-drops on the corrugated-iron roof of the pavilion stand. Nor could anything efface the memory of those grey twilights when the afternoon games were finished; the crowded lamp-lit tuck-shop, a phantasy of chromatic blazers and pots of jam and muddy knees; the basements, cloudy with steam from the bathrooms; the bleak shivering corridors along which the Juniors scampered and envied the cosy warmth of the studies which might one day be their own. Even the lock-ups after dark held some strange and secret comfort: Burton and his huge keys and his noisy banging of the door were part of the curious witchery of it all.

And then at night-time when the sky was black as jet and the wind from the fenlands howled round the tall chimney-stacks of Lavery's, Speed could feel more than ever the bigness of this thing of which he had become a part. The very days and nights took on characters and individualities of their own; Speed could, if he had thought, have given them all an identifying sound and colour: Monday, for instance, was brown, deepening to crimson as night fell: he was always reminded of it by the chord of E flat on the piano. That, of course, was perhaps no more than half-imagined idiosyncrasy. But it was certain that the days and nights were all shaped and conditioned by Millstead; and that they were totally different from the days and nights that were elsewhere in the world. On Sunday nights, for instance, Speed, observing a Lavery's custom to which he saw no objection, read for an hour to the Junior dormitory. The book was Bram Stoker's "Dracula." Speed had never heard of the book until the Juniors informed him that Mr. Lavery had got half-way through it during the previous term. After about three successive readings Speed decided that the book was too horrible to be read to Juniors just before bedtime, and accordingly refused to go on with it. "I shall put it in the House library," he said, "so if any of you wish to finish it you can do so in the daytime. And now we'll try something else. Can

anybody suggest anything?" Somebody mentioned Stephen Leacock, and in future, Sunday evenings in the Junior dormitory at Lavery's were punctuated by roars of laughter. All the same, the sudden curtailment of *Dracula* was, for a long while, a sore point with the Juniors.

On the two half-holidays, Wednesdays and Saturdays, Speed had three or four of his House in to tea, taking them in rotation. This was a custom which Lavery, seeing in it no more than an unnecessary increase in his duties and obligations, had allowed to fall into disuse. Nor were the majority of the boys keen on Speed's resumption of what had been, more often than not, an irksome social infliction. They were, however, gratified by the evident interest that he took in them, and most of them, when they thankfully escaped from the ordeal back to their fellows in the Common-Room, admitted that he was "quite a decent sort of chap." Speed believed in the personal relationship between each boy and his housemaster with an almost fanatical zeal. He found out what each boy was interested in, and, without prying into anybody's private affairs, contrived to establish himself as a personal factor in the life of the House and not as a vague and slatternly deity such as Lavery had been. Four o'clock therefore, on Wednesdays and Saturdays, saw Speed's tiny drawing-room littered with cakes and toasted scones, and populated by three or four nervous youngsters trying desperately to respond to Speed's geniality and to balance cups and saucers and plates on their knees without upsetting anything.

It was part of Speed's dream of the ideal housemaster and his ideal House that the housemaster's wife should fulfil a certain difficult and scrupulously exact function in the scheme of things. She must not, of course, attempt any motherly intimacies, or call people by their Christian names, or do anything else that was silly or effusive; yet, on the other hand, there was a sense in which her relationship with the boys, especially the Juniors, might be less formal than her husband's. And, somehow, Speed was forced to admit that Helen did not achieve this extraordinary delicate equipoise. She was, he came to the conclusion, too young for it to be possible. When she grew older, no doubt she would, in that particular respect, improve, but for the present she was, perhaps naturally, nervous in the presence of the elder boys and apt to treat the Juniors as if they were babies. Gradually she formed the habit of going over to the Head's house for tea

whenever Speed entertained the boys in his room; it was an arrangement which, accomplished silently and without definition, Speed felt to be rather a wise one.

IV

Clare Harrington had left Millstead. One breakfast time a letter came from her with the Paris postmark. Out of the envelope tumbled a number of small snapshots; Speed scanned the letter through and remarked, summing up its contents roughly for Helen's benefit: "Oh, Clare's in France. Been having rather a good time, I should imagine—touring about, you know."

Helen looked up suddenly.

"I didn't know she wrote to *you*," she said.

Speed answered, casually: "She doesn't, as a rule. But she knows I'm interested in architecture—I expect that's why she sent me all these snaps. There's one here of . . ." he picked them up and glanced through them . . . "of Chartres Cathedral . . . the belfry at Bruges . . . some street in Rouen. . . . They're rather good—have a look at them!"

She examined them at first suspiciously, then with critical intensity. And finally she handed them back to him without remark.

CHAPTER TWO

I

One dark dusk in November that was full of wind and fine rain Speed stood up at his drawing-room window to pull down the blind. But before doing so he gazed out at the dreary twilight and saw the bare trees black and terrible beyond the quadrangle and the winking lights of Milner's across the way. He had seen all of it so many times before, had lived amongst it, so it now seemed to him, for ages; yet to-night there was something in it that he had never seen before: a sort of sadness that was abroad in the world. He heard the wind screaming through the sodden trees and the branches creaking, the rain drops splashing on the ivy underneath the window: it seemed to him that Millstead was full that night of beautiful sorrow, and that it came over the dark quadrangle to him with open arms, drenching all Lavery's in wild and forlorn pathos.

He let the blind fall gently in front of his rapt eyes while the yellow lamplight took on a richer, serener tinge. Those few weeks of occupation had made the room quite different; its walls were now crowded with prints and etchings; there was a sideboard, dull-glowing and huge for the size of the room, on which silver and pewter and cut glass glinted in tranquillity. Across one corner a baby-grand piano sprawled its sleek body like a drowsily basking sea-lion, and opposite, in the wall at right angles to the window, a large fire lulled itself into red contentment with flames that had hardly breath for an instant's flicker. But Speed left the window and stirred the coals into yellow riot that lit his face with tingling, delicious half-tones. In the firelight he seemed very tall and young-looking, with dark-brown, straggling hair, brown, eager eyes that were almost black, and a queer, sad-lipped mouth that looked for the present as if it would laugh and cry in the same way. A leather-seated stool stood by the fireside, and he dragged it in front of the open flames and sat

with his chin resting solemnly on his slim, long-fingered hands.

It was a Wednesday and Helen had gone with her mother to visit some friends in the town and would not be back until, perhaps, dinner-time. It was almost four o'clock, and that hour, or at any rate, a few seconds or minutes afterwards, three youngsters would be coming to tea. Their names were Felling, Fyfield, and Graham. All were Juniors, as it happened, and they would be frightfully nervous, and assuredly would not know when to depart.

Speed, liking them well enough, but feeling morbid for some reason or other, pictured them plastering their hair down and scrambling into their Sunday jackets in readiness for the ordeal. Poor little kids! he thought, and he almost longed to rush into the cold dormitories where they were preparing themselves and say: "Look here, Felling, Fyfield and Graham—you needn't come to tea with me this afternoon—you're excused!"

The hour of four boomed into the wind and rain outside. Speed looked round to see if Burton had set the correct number of cups, saucers and plates, and had obtained a sufficient quantity of cake and fancy pastry from the tuck-shop. After all, he ought to offer them some compensation for having to come to tea with him.

Tap at the door. "Come in. . . . Ah, that you, Felling . . . and you, Graham. . . . I expect Fyfield will be here in a minute. . . . Sit down, will you? . . . Take that easy-chair, Felling. . . . Isn't it depressing weather? . . . I suppose you saw the game against Oversham? That last try of Marshall's was a particularly fine one, I thought. . . . Come in. . . . Ah, here you are, Fyfield: now we can get busy with the tea, can't we? . . . How's the Junior Debating Society going, Fyfield?" (Fyfield was secretary of it.) "I must come round to one of your meetings, if you'll promise to do exactly as you would if I weren't there. . . . Come in. . . . You might bring me some more hot water, Burton. . . . By the way, Graham, congratulations on last Saturday's match: I didn't see it, but I'm told you did rather well."

And so on. They were nice boys, all three of them, but they were nervous. They answered in monosyllables or else embarked upon tortuous sentences which became finally embedded in meringues and chocolate *éclairs*. Felling, in particular, was overawed, for he was a new boy that term and

had only just emerged from six weeks in the sanatorium with whooping-cough. Virtually, this was his first week at school.

In the midst of the ponderously jocular, artificially sustained conversation a knock came on the door. Speed shouted out "Come in," as usual. The door opened and somebody came in. Speed could not see who it was. He thought it must be a boy and turned back the red lampshade so that the rays, nakedly yellow, glanced upwards. Then he saw.

Clare!

II

She was dressed in a long flowing mackintosh which had something in it reminiscent still of the swirl of wind and rain. She came forward very simply, held out her hand to Speed, and said: "How are you, Mr. Speed? I thought perhaps I should find Helen in."

He said, overmastering his astonishment: "Helen's out somewhere with Mrs. Ervine. . . . I'm quite well. How—how are you?"

"Quite as well as you are," she said, laughing. "Tell Helen I'll call round some other time, then, will you?—I mustn't interrupt your tea-party."

That made him say: "Indeed you're not doing that at all. Won't you stay and have a cup of tea? Surely you won't go back into the rain so soon! Let me introduce you—this is Felling . . . Miss Harrington . . . and this is Fyfield . . . and Graham. . . ."

What on earth had made him do that? He wondered, as he saw the boys shaking hands with her so stiffly and nervously; what was possessing him? Yet, accepting his invitation calmly and decisively, she sat down in the midst of them as soon as she had taken off her wet mackintosh, and appeared perfectly comfortable and at home. Speed busied himself in obtaining a cup of tea for her, and by the time he had at last succeeded he heard her talking in the most amazing way to Graham, and, which was more, Graham was answering her as if they had known each other for weeks. She had somehow found out that Graham's home was in Perth, and they were indulging in an eager, if rather vacuous, exchange of "Do-you-know's." Then quite suddenly she was managing to include Fyfield in the conversation, and in a little while after that Felling demonstrated both his present cordiality and

his former absent-mindedness by calling her "Mrs. Speed." She said, with perfect calmness and without so much as the faintest suggestion in her voice of any but the mere literal meaning of her words: "I'm not Mrs. Speed; I'm Miss Harrington."

Speed had hardly anything to do with the talk at all. He kept supplying the participators with fuel in the way of cakes and *éclairs*, but he was content to leave the rest of the management in Clare's hands. She paid little attention to him, reserving most of her conversation for the three boys. The chatter developed into a gossip that was easy, yet perfectly respectful; Speed, putting in his word or two occasionally, was astonished at the miracle that was being performed under his eyes. Who could have believed that Felling, Fyfield and Graham could ever be induced to talk like that in their housemaster's drawing-room? Of course, a man couldn't do it at all, he thought, in self-defence: it was a woman's miracle entirely.

The school-clock began the chime of five, and five was the hour when it was generally considered that housemasterly teas were due to finish. Speed waited till ten minutes past and then interjected during a pause in the conversation: "Well, I'm sorry you can't stay any longer. . . ."

The three boys rose, thankful for the hint although the affair had turned out to be not quite such an ordeal as they had expected. After hand-shaking with Clare they backed awkwardly out of the room followed by Speed's brisk "Goodnight."

When they had gone Clare cried, laughing: "Oh, fancy getting rid of them like that, Mr. Speed!—I should be insulted if you tried it on with me."

Speed said: "It's the best way with boys, Miss Harrington. They don't like to say they must go themselves, and they'd feel hurt if you told them to go outright. Really they're immensely grateful for a plain hint."

Now that he was alone in the room with her he began to feel nervous in a very peculiar and exciting way; as if something unimaginably strange were surely going to happen. Outside, the wind and rain seemed suddenly to grow loud, louder, terrifically loud; a strong whiff of air came down the chimney and blew smoke into the room. All around, everywhere, there were noises, clumping of feet on the floor above, chatter and shouting in the corridors, the distant jangle of

pianos in the practice-rooms; and yet, in a deep significant sense, it was as if he and Clare were quite alone amidst the wind and rain. He poked the fire with a gesture that was almost irritable; the flames prodded into the red-tinted gloom and revealed Clare perfectly serene and imperturbable. Evidently nothing was going to happen at all. He looked at her with keen quickness, thinking amazedly: And, by the way, what *could* have happened?

"How is Helen?" she asked.

He answered: "Oh, she's quite well. Very well, in fact."

"And I suppose you are, also."

"I look it, don't I?"

She said, after a pause: "And quite happy, of course."

He started, kicked the fender with a clatter that, for the moment, frightened him, and exclaimed: "Happy! Did you mean am *I* happy?"

"Yes."

He did not answer immediately. He gave the question careful and scrupulous weighing-up. He thought deliberately and calculatingly of Helen, pictured her in his mind, saw her sitting opposite to him in the chair where Felling had sat, saw her and her hair lit with the glow of the fire, her blue eyes sparkling; then, for a while, he listened to her, heard her rich, sombre whisper piercing the gloom; lastly, as if sight and hearing were not evidence enough, he brought her close to him, so that his hands could touch her. He said then, with deep certainty: "Yes, I'm happy."

"That's fine," she replied. "Now tell me how you're getting on with Lavery's?"

He chatted to her for a while about the House, communicating to her something of his enthusiasm but not touching upon any of his difficulties. Then he asked her what she had been doing in France. She replied: "Combining business with pleasure."

"How?"

"Well, you see, first of all I bought back from my father's publishers all transcription rights. (They'd never used them themselves.) Then, with the help of a French friend, I translated one or two of the Helping-Hand-Books into French and placed them with a Paris agent. Business you see. He disposed of them fairly advantageously, and on part of the proceeds I treated myself to a holiday. I had an excellent

time. Now I've come back to Millstead to translate a few more of my father's books."

"But you're continuing to run the shop, I suppose?"

"I've brought over my French friend to do that for me. She's a clever girl with plenty of brains and no money. She speaks English perfectly. In the daytime she'll do most of the shop-work for me and she'll always be handy to help me with translations. You must meet her—you'll find her most outrageously un-English."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that she's not sentimental."

By the time that he had digested that a tap came at the door.

"That's Helen!" said Speed, joyously, recognising the quiet double rap. He felt delightfully eager to see the meeting of the two friends. Helen entered. Clare rose. Speed cried, like an excited youngster: "Helen, we've got a visitor. Who do you think it is?"

Helen replied, puzzled: "I don't know. Tell me."

"Clare!" he cried, with boisterous enthusiasm. "It's Clare!"

Then he remembered that he had never called her Clare before; always it had been Miss Harrington. And yet the name had come so easily and effortlessly to his tongue!

Helen gasped: "Clare! Is it you, Clare?"

And Clare advanced through the shadows and kissed Helen very simply and quietly. Again Speed felt that strange, presaging emotion of something about to happen, of some train being laid for the future. The rain was now a torrent, and the wind a great gale shrieking across the fenlands.

Helen said: "I'm drenched with rain—let me take my coat off." After a short pause she added: "Why didn't you let me know you were coming, Clare? If you had I could have stayed in for you."

III

Speed was always inclined to drop out of conversations that were proceeding well enough without him. In a few moments Helen and Clare were chatting together exactly as if he had not been present. He did not mind; he was rather glad, in fact, because it relieved him from the task of mastering his

nervousness. He felt too, what he always felt when Helen was talking to another woman; a feeling that women as a sex were hostile to men, and that when they were together there was a sort of secret freemasonry between them which enforced a rigid and almost contemptuous attitude towards the other sex. Nothing in Clare's manner encouraged this belief, but Helen's side of the conversation was a distinct suggestion of it. Not that anything said or discussed was inimical to him; merely that whenever the conversation came near to a point at which he might naturally have begun to take part in it, Helen seemed somehow to get hold of it by the neck and pull it out of his reach. And Clare was quite impassive, allowing Helen to do just what she liked. These were Speed's perhaps exaggerated impressions as he sat very uncomfortably in the armchair, almost frightened to move lest movement on his part might be wrongly interpreted as irritation, fear, or boredom. When he felt uncomfortable his discomfort was always added to by a usually groundless fear that other people were noticing it and speculating as to its reason.

At six the bell rang for school tea in the dining-hall, and this was his week to superintend that function. Most mercifully then he was permitted to leave the red-glowing drawing-room and scamper across the rain-swept quadrangle. "Sorry I must leave you," he said, hastily, rising from his chair. Helen said, as if her confirmation were essential before his words could be believed: "It's his week for reading grace, you know."

"And after that I've got some youngsters with piano-lessons," he said, snatching up his gown and, in his nervousness, putting it on wrong side out. "So I'll say good-bye, Miss Harrington."

He shook hands with her and escaped into the cold rain. It was over a hundred yards to the dining-hall, and with the rain slanting down in torrential gusts he was almost drenched during the few seconds' run. Somehow, the bare, bleak dining-hall, draughty and fireless and lit with flaring gas-jets, seemed to him exhilaratingly cheerful as he gazed down upon it from the Master's rostrum at the end. He leaned his arms over the edge of the lectern, watching the boys as they streamed in noisily, with muddy boots and turned-up collars and wet ruddy cheeks. The long tables, loaded with smeared jam-pots and towers of bread-slices and tins of fruit jaggedly opened, seemed, in their teeming, careless ugliness, im-

mensely real and joyous: there was a simplicity too, an almost mathematical simplicity, in the photographs of all the rugger fifteens and cricket and hockey elevens that adorned the green-distempered walls. The photographs were complete for the last thirty-eight years; therefore there would be four hundred and eighteen plus four hundred and eighteen plus five hundred and seventy separate faces upon the walls. Total: one thousand four hundred and six. . . . Speed never thought of it except when he stood on the rostrum waiting to read grace, and as he was not good at mental arithmetic he always had a misgiving that he had calculated wrongly, and so would go over it again multiplying with his brain while his eyes were on the clock. And this evening his mind, once enslaved by the numerical fascination of the photographs, obtained no release until a stamping of feet at the far end of the hall awakened him to the realisation that it was time he said grace. He had been dreaming. Silly of him to stand there on the rostrum openly and obviously dreaming before the eyes of all Millstead! He blushed slightly, smiled more slightly still, and gave the knob of the hand-bell a vigorous punch. Clatter of forms and shuffling of feet as all Millstead rose. . . . "For these and all His mercies the Lord's name we praise. . . ." About the utterance of the word "mercies," conversation, prohibited before grace, began to murmur from one end of the room to the other; the final "praise," hardly audible even to Speed himself, was engulfed in a mighty swelling of hundreds of unleashed voices, clumping of feet, clattering of forms, banging of plates, shrill appeals for one thing and another, and general pandemonium amidst which, Speed, picking his way amongst the groups of servants, made his escape.

How strange was Millstead to-night, he thought, as he made his way along the covered cloisters to the music-rooms. The rain had slackened somewhat, but the wind was still high and shrieking; the floor of the cloisters, wet from hundreds of muddy boots, shone greasily in the rays of the wind-blown lamps. Over the darkness of the quadrangle he could see Lavery's rising like a tall cliff at the other side of an ocean; and the dull red square that was the window of his own drawing-room. Had Clare gone?—Clare! It was unfortunate, perhaps, that he had called her Clare in his excitement; unfortunate because she might think he had done it deliberately with a view to deepening the nature of their

friendship. That was his only reason for thinking it unfortunate.

Down in the dark vaults beneath the Big Hall, wherein the piano-rooms were situated, he found Porritt Secundus waiting for him. Porritt was in Lavery's, and therefore Speed was more than ordinarily interested in him.

"Do you have to miss your tea in order to have a lesson at this hour?" Speed asked, putting his hand in a friendly way on Porritt's shoulder, as he guided him through the gloomy corridor into the single room where a small light was showing.

Porritt replied: "I didn't to-day, sir. Smallwood asked me to tea with him."

Speed's hand dropped from Porritt's shoulder as if it had been shot away. His imagination, fanned into sudden perceptivity, detected in the boy's voice a touch of—of what? Impertinence? Hardly, and yet surely a boy could be impertinent without saying anything that was in itself impertinent. . . . Porritt had been to tea with Smallwood. And Smallwood was Speed's inveterate enemy, as the latter well knew. Was it possible that Smallwood was adopting a methodical policy of setting the Juniors against him? Possibilities invaded Speed's mind in a scorching torrent. Moments afterwards, when he had regained composure, it occurred to him that it was the habit of prefects to invite their Juniors to tea occasionally, and that it was perfectly natural that Porritt, so recently the guest of the Olympian Smallwood, should be eager to tell people about it.

IV

That night, sitting by the fire before bedtime, Helen said: "Was Clare here a long time before I came in?"

Speed answered: "Not very long. She came while I was having three Juniors to tea, and they stayed until after five. . . . After they'd gone she told me about her holiday in France."

"She's been bargaining over her father's books in Paris, so she says."

"Well, not exactly that. You see, Mr. Harrington's publishers never arranged for his books to be translated, so she bought the rights off them so as to be able to arrange it herself."

"I think it's rather mean to go haggling about that sort of

thing after the man's dead, don't you? After all, if he'd wanted them to be translated, surely he'd have done it himself while he was alive—don't you think so? Clare seems to be out to make as much money as she can without any thought about what would have been her father's wishes."

"I confess," replied Speed, slowly, "that it never struck me in that light. Harrington had about as much business in him as a two-year-old, and if he let himself be swindled right and left, surely that's no reason why his daughter should continue in the same way. Besides, she hasn't much money and it couldn't have been her father's wish that she should neglect chances of getting some."

"She has the shop."

"It can't be very profitable."

"I daresay it won't allow her to take holidays abroad, but that's not to say it won't give her a decent living."

"Of course," said Speed, mildly, "I really don't know anything about her private affairs. You may be right in everything you say. . . . It's nearly eleven. Shall we go to bed?"

"Soon," she said, broodingly, gazing into the fire. She was silent for a moment and then said, slowly and deliberately: "Kenneth."

"Yes, Helen?"

"Do you know—I—I—I don't think I—I quite like Clare—as much as I used to."

"You don't, Helen? Why not?"

"I don't know why not. But it's true. . . . She—she makes me feel frightened—somehow. I hope she doesn't come here often. I—I don't think I shall ask her to. Do you—do you mind?"

"Mind, Helen? Why should I mind? If she frightens you she certainly shan't come again." He added, with a fierceness which, somehow, did not strike him as absurd: "I won't let her. Helen—*dear* Helen, you're unhappy about something—tell me all about it!"

She cried vehemently: "Nothing—nothing—nothing!—Kenneth, I want to learn things—will you teach me?—I'm a ridiculously ignorant person, Kenneth, and some day I shall make you feel ashamed of me if I don't learn a few things more. *Will* you teach me?"

"My darling, I'll teach you everything in the world. What shall we begin with?"

"Geography. I was looking through some of the exercise-books you had to mark. Do you know, I don't know anything about exports and imports?"

"Neither did I until I had them to teach."

"And you'll teach me?"

"Yes. I'll teach you anything you want to learn. But I don't think we'll have our first lesson until tomorrow. Bedtime now, Helen."

She flung her arms round his neck passionately, offered her lips to his almost with abandonment, and cried, in the low, thrilling voice that seemed so full of unspoken dreads and secrecies: "Oh, Kenneth—Kenneth—you *do* love me, don't you? You aren't tired of me? You aren't even a little bit dissatisfied, are you?"

He took her in his arms and kissed her more passionately than he had ever done before. It seemed to him then that he did love her, more deeply than anybody had loved anybody else since the world began, and that, so far from his being the least bit dissatisfied with her, she was still guiding him into fresh avenues of unexplored delight. She was the loveliest and most delicate thing in the world.

V

The great event of the winter term was the concert in aid of the local hospitals. It had taken place so many years in succession that it had become institutional and thoroughly enmeshed in Millstead tradition. It was held during the last week of the term in the Big Hall; the boys paid half-a-crown each for admission (the sum was included in their terminal bills), and outsiders, for whom there was a limited amount of accommodation, five shillings. The sum was artfully designed to exclude shop assistants and such-like from a function which was intended to be, in the strictest sense, exclusive. Millstead, on this solemn annual occasion, arrayed itself for its own pleasure and satisfaction; took a look at itself, so to say, in order to reassure itself that another year of social perturbation had mercifully left it entire. And by Millstead is meant, in the first instance, the School. The Masters, for once, discarded their gowns and mortar-boards and appeared in resplendent evening-suits which, in some cases, were not used at all during the rest of the year. Masters, retired and of immense age, rumbled up to the main gateway in funereal four-wheelers and tottered to their seats beneath the curious

eyes of an age that knew them not. The wives of non-resident Masters, like deep-sea fishes that rarely come to the surface, blinked their pleased astonishment at finding everything, apparently, different from what they had been led to expect. And certain half-mythical inhabitants of the neighbourhood, doctors and colonels and captains and landed gentry, parked themselves in the few front rows like curious social specimens on exhibition. In every way the winter term concert at Millstead was a great affair, rivalling in splendour even the concentrated festivities of Speech Day.

Speed, in virtue of his position as music-master, found himself involved in the scurry and turmoil of preparation. This concert, he decided, with his customary enthusiasm, should be the best one that Millstead had had for many a year. He would have introduced into it all sorts of innovations had he not found, very soon after he began to try, that mysteriously rigid traditions stood in the way. He was compelled, for instance, to open with the Millstead School Song. Now the Millstead School Song had been likened by a witty though irreverent Master to the funeral-march of a smoked haddock. It began with a ferocious yell of "*Haec olim revocare*" and continued through yards of uneuphonious Latin into a remorseless *clump-clump* of a chorus. Speed believed that, even supposing the words were sacrosanct, that ought to be no reason for the tune to be so, and suggested to the Head that some reputable modern composer should be commissioned to write one. The Head, of course, would not agree. "The tune, Mr. Speed, has—um, yes—associations. As a newcomer you cannot be expected to feel them, but, believe me, they do—um, yes—they do most certainly exist. An old foundation, Mr. Speed, and if you take away from us our—um—traditions, then you—um—take away that which not enriches you and makes us—um, yes—poor indeed." And, with a glint of satisfaction at having made use of a quotation rather aptly, the Head indicated that Speed must not depart from the recognised routine.

Even without innovations, however, the concert demanded a great deal of practising and rehearsal, and in this Speed had the rather hazy co-operation of Raggs, the visiting organist. He it was who told Speed exactly what items must, on no account, be omitted; and who further informed him of items which must on no account be included; these latter consisted chiefly of things which Speed suggested himself. It was finally arranged, however, and the programme submitted to

and passed by the Head: there was to be a pianoforte solo, a trio for piano, violin and 'cello, a good, resounding song by the choir, a quartet singing Christmas carols, and one or two "suitable" songs from operas. The performers, where possible, were to be boys of the school, but there were precedents for drawing on the services of outsiders when necessary. Thus when it was found that the school orchestra lacked first violins, Raggs gave Speed the names of several ladies and gentlemen in the town who had on former occasions lent their services in this capacity. And among these names was that of Miss Clare Harrington.

Speed, making his preparations about the middle of November, was in a dilemma with this list of names. He knew that, for some reason or other, Helen did not care for Clare's company, and that if Clare were to take part, not only in the concert itself, but in all the preceding rehearsals, she would be brought almost inevitably into frequent contact with Helen. He thought also that if he canvassed all the other people first, Clare might, if she came to hear of it, think that he had treated her spitefully. In the end he solved the difficulty by throwing the burden of selection on to Raggs and undertaking in exchange some vastly more onerous task that Raggs was anxious to get rid of. A few days later Raggs accosted Speed in the cloisters and said: "I've got you a few first violins. Here's their names and addresses on this card. They'll turn up to the next rehearsal if you'll send them word."

When Raggs had shambled away, Speed looked curiously at the card which he had pushed into his hand. Scanning down the list, scribbled in Raggs' most illegible pencilled script, he found himself suddenly conscious of pleasure, slight yet strangely distinct; something that made him go on his way whistling a tune. Clare's name was on the list.

VI

Those crowded winter nights of rehearsals for the concert were full of incident for Speed. As soon as the school had finished preparation in the Big Hall, the piano was uncovered and pushed into the middle of the platform; the violinists and 'cellists began to tune up; the choir assembled with much noise and a disposition to regard rehearsals as a boisterous form of entertainment; lastly, the visitors from the town ap-

peared, adapting themselves condescendingly to the rollicking atmosphere.

Speed discovered Clare to be a rather good violinist. She played quietly and accurately, with an absence (rare in good violinists) of superfluous emotion. Once she said to Speed, referring to one of the other imported violinists: "Listen! This Mozart's only a decorative frieze, and that man's playing it as if it were the whole gateway to the temple of Eros." Speed, who liked architectural similes himself, nodded appreciatively. Clare went on: "I always want to laugh at emotion in the wrong place. Violinists who are too fond of the mute, for instance." Speed said, laughing: "Yes, and organists who are too fond of the *vox humana*." To which Clare added: "And don't forget to mention the audiences that are too fond of both. It's their fault principally."

At ten o'clock, when rehearsals were over, Speed accompanied Clare home to the shop in High Street. There was something in those walks which crept over him like a slow fascination, so that after the first few occasions he found himself sitting at the piano during the rehearsal with everything in his mind subordinate to the tingling anticipation of the stroll afterwards. When they left the Big Hall and descended the steps into the cool dusk of the cloisters, his spirits rose as with wine; and when from the cloisters they turned into the crisp-cold night, crunching softly over the frosted quadrangle and shivering joyously in the first keen lash of the wind, he could have scampered for sheer happiness like a schoolboy granted an unexpected holiday. Sometimes the moon was white on roofs and roadways; sometimes the sky was densely black; sometimes it was raining and Millstead High Street was no more than a vista of pavements with the yellow lamplight shining on the pools in them: once, at least, it was snowing soft, dancing flakes that covered the ground inches deep as they walked. But whatever the world was like on those evenings on which Speed accompanied Clare, one thing was common to them all: an atmosphere of robust companionship, impervious to all things else. The gales that romped and frolicked over the fenlands were no more vigorous and coldly sweet than something that romped and frolicked in Speed's inmost soul.

Once they were discussing the things that they hated most of all. "I hate myself more than anything else—sometimes," said Speed.

Clare said: "And I hate people who think that a thing's bound to be sordid because it's real: people who think a thing's beautiful merely because it's hazy and doesn't mean anything. I'm afraid I hate Mendelssohn."

Speed said: "Mendelssohn? Why, that was what Helen used to be keen on, wasn't it?—last term, don't you remember?"

A curious silence supervened.

Clare said, after a pause: "Yes, I believe it was."

VII

Helen's attitude towards Clare at this time was strangely at variance with her former one. As soon as she learned that Clare was playing in the concert she wrote to her and told her always to come into Lavery's before the rehearsal began. "It will be nice seeing you so often, Clare," she wrote, "and you needn't worry about getting back in the evenings because Kenneth will always see you home."

Speed said, when he heard of Helen's invitation: "But I thought you didn't like Clare, Helen?"

"Oh, I was silly," she answered. "I do like her, really. And besides, we must be hospitable. You'll see her back in the evenings, won't you?"

"I daresay I *can* do," he said.

Then, suddenly laughing aloud, he caught her into his arms and kissed her. "I'm so glad it's all right again, Helen. I don't like my little Helen to throw away her old friends. It isn't like her. You see how happy we shall all be, now that we're friendly again with Clare."

"I know," she said.

"I believe you are the most lovable and loving little girl in the world except—" he frowned at her playfully—"when the devil persuades you that you don't like people. Some day he'll persuade you that you don't like me."

"He won't," she said.

"I hope he won't."

She seemed to him then more than ever a child, a child whose winsomeness was alloyed with quaint and baffling caprice. He loved her, too, very gladly and affectionately; and he knew then, quite clearly because the phase was past, that her announced dislike of Clare had made him love her not quite so much. But now all was happy and unruffled again, so what did it matter?

CHAPTER THREE

I

Smallwood was one of a type more commonly found at a university than at a public school; in fact it was due to his decision not to go to the former that he had stayed so long at Millstead. He was nineteen years old, and when he left he would enter his father's office in the City. The disciplinary problems of dealing with him and others of his type bristled with awkwardness, especially for a Master so young as Speed; the difficulty was enhanced by the fact that Smallwood, having stayed at Millstead long enough to achieve all athletic distinctions merely by inevitability, was a power in the school of considerable magnitude. Personally, he was popular; he was in no sense a bully; he was a kindly and certainly not too strict prefect; his disposition was friendly and easy-going. But for the unfortunate clash at the beginning of the term Speed might have found in him a powerful ally instead of a sinister enemy. One quality Smallwood possessed above all others—vanity; and Speed, having affronted that vanity, could count on a more virulent enmity than Smallwood's lackadaisical temperament was ordinarily capable of.

The error lay, of course, in the system which allowed Smallwood to stay at Millstead so long. Smallwood at nineteen was distinctly and quite naturally a man, not a boy; and whatever in him seemed unnatural was forced on him by the Millstead atmosphere. There was nothing at all surprising in his study-walls being covered with photographs of women and amorous prints obtained from French magazines, Nor was it surprising that he was that very usual combination—the athlete and the dandy, that his bathroom was a boudoir of pastes and oils and cosmetics, and that, with his natural good looks, he should have the reputation of being a lady-killer. Compelled by the restraints of Millstead life to a resignation of this branch of his activities during term-time, he found partial solace in winking at the less unattractive of the school-servants (who, it was reported, were chosen by the matron on the score of

ugliness), and in relating to his friends lurid stories of his adventures in London during the vacations. He had had, for a nineteen-year-old, the most amazing experiences, and sometimes the more innocuous of these percolated, by heaven knows what devious channels, to the amused ears of the Masters' Common-Room. The Masters as a whole, it should be noted, liked Smallwood, because, with a little flattery and smoothing-down, they could always cajole him into agreement with them. Titivate his vanity and he was Samson shorn of his locks.

Now the masters, for various reasons, did not like Speed so much in his second term as they had done in his first. Like all bodies of averagely tolerant men they tended to be kindly to newcomers, and Speed, young, quiet, modest, and rather attractively nervous, had won more of their hearts than some of them afterwards cared to remember. The fact that his father was a titled man and that Speed never talked about it, was bound to impress a group of men who, by the unalterable circumstances of their lives, were compelled to spend a large portion of their time in cultivating an attitude of snobbery. But in his second term Speed found them not so friendly. That was to be expected in any case, for while much may be forgiven a man during his first probationary term, his second is one in which he must prepare to be judged by stricter standards. Besides the normal hardening of judgment, Speed was affected by another even more serious circumstance. He had committed the unpardonable offence of being too successful. Secretly, more than half the staff were acutely jealous of him. Even those who were entirely ineligible for the post at Lavery's, and would not have accepted it if it had been offered them, were yet conscious of some subtle personal chagrin in seeing Speed, after his first term, step into a place of such power and dignity. They had the feeling that the whole business had been done discreditably behind their backs, although, of course, the Masters had no right, either virtual or technical, to be consulted in the matter of appointments. Yet when they arrived at Millstead at the beginning of the term and learned that Speed, their junior by ever so many years, had married the Head's daughter during the vacation and had been forthwith appointed to the mastership of Lavery's, they could not forbear an instant sensation of ruefulness which developed later into more or less open antagonism. Not all the talk about the desirability of young

married housemasters could dispel that curious feeling of having been slighted.

Secretly, no doubt, they hoped that Lavery's would be too much for Speed. And on the occasion of the row between Speed and Smallwood they sympathised with the latter, regarding him as the victim of Speed's monstrous and aggressive self-assertion. The circumstance that Speed took few meals now in the Masters' Common-Room prevented the legend of his self-assertiveness from being effectively smashed; as term progressed and as Speed's eager and pertinacious enthusiasm about the concert became apparent, the legend rather grew than diminished. Clanwell, alone, perhaps, of all the staff, still thought of Speed without feelings of jealousy, and that was rather because he regarded him as one of his elder boys, to be looked after and advised when necessary. He formed the habit of inviting Speed into his room to coffee once or twice a week, and on these occasions he gave the young man many hints drawn from his full-blooded, though rather facile, philosophy.

At the conclusion of one of these evening confabulations he caught hold of Speed's arm as the latter was going out by the door and said: "I say, Speed,—just before you go—there's a little matter I've been wondering all night whether I'd mention to you or not. I hope you won't be offended. I'm the last man to go round making trouble or telling tales, and I'm aware that I'm risking your friendship if I say what I have in mind."

"You won't do that," said Speed. "Say what you want to say." He stared at Clanwell nervously, for at a call such as this a cloud of vague apprehensions would swarm round and over him, filling the future with dark dreads.

"It's about your wife," said Clanwell. "I'm not going to say much. It isn't anything to worry about, I daresay. Perhaps it doesn't justify my mentioning it to you. Your wife . . ."

"Well?"

"I should—keep an eye on her, if I were you. She's young, Speed, remember. She's—"

"What do you mean—keep an eye on her? What should I keep an eye on her for?"

"I told you, Speed, I wasn't going to say much. You mustn't imagine yourself on the verge of a scandal—I don't suppose there's anything really the matter at all. Only, as I was saying, she's young, and she—she's apt to do unwise things. Once

or twice lately, while you've been out, she's had Smallwood in to tea."

"Smallwood!—Alone?"

"Yes, alone."

Speed blushed furiously and was silent. A sudden new feeling, which he diagnosed as jealousy, swept across him; followed by a further series of feelings which were no more than various forms of annoyance and exacerbation. He clenched his fists and gave a slight shrug of his shoulders.

"How do you know all this?" he queried, in the staccato bark that was so accurate a register of his temper.

"Smallwood isn't the fellow to keep such an affair secret," replied Clanwell. "But don't, Speed, go and do anything rash. If I were you I should go back and—"

"I shan't do anything rash," interrupted Speed, curtly. "You needn't worry. Good-night. . . . I suppose I ought to thank you for your kindness in telling me what you have."

When he had gone he regretted that final remark. It was, he decided, uselessly and pointlessly cynical.

II

It was a pity, perhaps, that in his present mood he went straight back to Lavery's and to Helen. He found her sitting, as usual, by the fire when he entered; he made no remark, but came and sat opposite to her. Neither of them spoke for a few moments. That was not unusual for them, for Helen had frequent fits of taciturnity, and Speed, becoming familiar with them, found himself adopting similar habits. After, however, a short space of silence, he broke it by saying: "Helen, do you mind if we have a serious talk for a little while."

She looked up and said, quietly: "Where have you been?"

"Clanwell's," he replied, and as soon as he had done so he realised that she would easily guess who had informed him. A pity that he had answered her so readily.

"What do you want to ask me?"

He said, rather loudly, as always when he was nervous: "Helen, I'm going to be quite straightforward. No beating about the bush, you understand?—You've had Smallwood in here to tea lately, while I've been out."

"Well?" Her voice, irritatingly soft, just as his own was

irritatingly loud, contained a mixture of surprise and mockery. "And what if I have?"

He gripped the arms of the wicker-chair with his fists, causing a creaking sound that seemed additionally to discompose him. "Helen, you can't do it, that's all. You mustn't. It won't do. . . . It . . ."

Suddenly she was talking at him, slowly and softly at first, then in a rising, gathering, tempestuous torrent; her eyes, lit by the firelight, blazed through the tears in them. "Can't I? Mustn't I? You say it won't do? You can go out whenever and wherever you like, you can go out to Clanwell's in the evening, you can walk down to the town with Clare, you can have anybody you like in to tea, you choose your own friends, you live your own life—and then you actually dare to tell me I can't!—What is it to you if I make a friend of Smallwood?—Haven't I the right to make friends without your permission?—Haven't I the right to entertain *my* friends in here as much as you have the right to entertain *your* friends? —Kenneth, you think I'm a child, you call me a child, you treat me as a child. *That's* what won't do. I'm a woman and I won't be domineered over. So now you know it."

Her passion made him suddenly icily cool; he was no longer the least bit nervous. He perceived, with calm intuition, that this was going to be their first quarrel.

"In the first place," he began quietly, "you must be fair to me. Surely, it is not extraordinary that I should go up to see Clanwell once or twice during the week. He's a colleague and a friend. Secondly, walking down into the town to see Clare home after rehearsals is a matter of common politeness, which you, I think, asked me particularly to do. And as for asking people in to tea, you have, as you say, as free a choice in that as I have, except when you do something absolutely unwise. Helen, I'm serious. Don't insist on this argument becoming a quarrel. If it does, it will be our first quarrel, remember."

"You think you can move me by talking like that!"

"My dear, I think nothing of the sort. I simply do not want to quarrel. I want you to see my point of view, and I'm equally anxious to see yours. With regard to this Smallwood business, you must, if you think a little, realise that in a place like Millstead you can't behave absolutely without regard for conventions. Smallwood, remember, is nearly your own age. You see what I mean?"

"You mean that I'm not to be trusted with any man nearly my own age?"

"No, I don't mean that. The thought that there could be anything in the least discreditable in the friendship between Smallwood and you never once crossed my mind. I know, of course, that it is perfectly honest and above-board. Don't please, put my attitude down to mere jealousy. I'm not in the least jealous."

What surprised him more than anything else in this amazing chain of circumstances, was that he was sitting there talking to her so calmly and deliberately, almost as if he were arguing an abstruse point in a court of law! Of this new cold self that was suddenly to the front he had had no former experience. And certainly it was true to say that at that moment there was not in him an atom of jealousy.

She seemed to shrivel up beneath the coldness of his argument. She said, doggedly: "I'm not going to give way, Kenneth."

They both looked at each other then, quite calmly and subconsciously a little awed, as if they could see suddenly the brink on which they were standing.

"Helen, I don't want to domineer over you at all. I want you to be as free to do what you like as I am. But there are some things, which, for my sake and for the sake of the position I hold here, you ought not to do. And having Smallwood here alone when I am away is one of those things."

"I don't agree. I have as much right to make a friend of Smallwood as you have to make a friend of—say Clare!"

The mention of Clare shifted him swiftly out of his cool, calculating mood and back into the mood which had possessed him when he first came into the room. "Not at all," he replied, sharply. "The cases are totally different. Smallwood is a boy—a boy in my House. That makes all the difference."

"I don't see that it makes any difference."

"Good heavens, Helen!—You don't see? Don't you realise the sort of talk that is getting about? Doesn't it occur to you that Smallwood will chatter about this all over the school and make out that he's conducting a clandestine flirtation with you? Don't you see how it will undermine all the discipline of the House—will make people laugh at me when my back's turned—will—"

"And I'm to give up my freedom just to stop people from laughing at you, am I?"

"Helen, *why* can't you see my point of view? Would you like to see me a failure at Lavery's? Wouldn't you feel hurt to hear everybody sniggering about me?"

"I should feel hurt to think that you could only succeed at Lavery's by taking away my freedom."

"Helen, marriage isn't freedom. It's partnership. I can't do what I like. Neither can you."

"I can try, though."

"Yes, and you can succeed in making my life at Millstead unendurable."

She cried fiercely: "I won't talk about it any longer, Kenneth. We don't agree and apparently we shan't, however long we argue. I still think I've a right to ask Smallwood in to tea if I want to."

"And I still think you haven't."

"Very well, then—" with a laugh—"that's a deadlock, isn't it?"

He stared at the fire silently for some moments, then rose, and came to the back of her chair. Something in her attitude seemed to him blindingly, achingly pathetic; the tears rushed to his eyes; he felt he had been cruel to her. One part of him urged him to have pity on her, not to let her suffer, to give way, at all costs, rather than bring shadows over her life; to appeal, passionately and perhaps sentimentally, that she would, for his sake, if she loved him, make his task at Lavery's no harder than it need be. The other part of him said: No, you have said what is perfectly fair and true; you have nothing at all to apologise for. If you apologise you will only weaken your position for ever afterwards.

In the end the two conflicting parts of him effected a compromise. He said, good-humouredly, almost gaily, to her: "Yes, Helen, I'm afraid it is a deadlock. But that's no reason why it should be a quarrel. After all, we ought to be able to disagree without quarrelling. Now, let's allow the matter to drop, eh? Eh, Helen? Smile at me, Helen!"

But instead of smiling, she burst into sudden passionate sobbing. Her head dropped heavily into her hands and all her hair, loosened by the fall, dispersed itself over her hands and cheeks in an attitude of terrific despair. On Speed the effect of it was as that of a knife cutting him in two. He could not bear to see her misery, evoked by something said or done, however justifiably, by him; pity swelled over him in a warm, aching tide; he stooped to her and put a hand hesitatingly on

her shoulder. He was almost afraid to touch her, and when, at the first sensation of his hand, she drew away hurriedly, he crept back also as if he were terrified by her. Then gradually he came near her again and told her, with his emotion making his voice gruff, that he was sorry. He had treated her unkindly and oh—he was *so* sorry. He could not bear to see her cry. It hurt him. . . . Dear, darling Helen, would she forgive him? If she would only forgive him she could have Smallwood in to tea every day if she wished, and damn what anybody said about it! Helen, Helen. . . .

Yet the other part of him, submerged, perhaps, but by no means silent, still urged: You haven't treated her unkindly, and you know you haven't. You have nothing to apologise for at all. And if she does keep on inviting Smallwood in you'll have the same row with her again, sooner or later.

"Helen, *dear* Helen—*do* answer me!—Don't cry like that —I can't bear it!—Answer me, Helen, answer me!"

Then she raised her head and put her arms out to him and kissed him with fierce passion, so that she almost hurt his neck. Even then she did not, for a moment, answer, but he did not mind, because he knew now that she had forgiven him. And strangely enough, in that moment of passionate embrace, there returned to him a feeling of crude, rudimentary jealousy; he felt that for the future he would, as Clanwell had advised him, have to keep an eye on her to make sure that none of this high, mountainous love escaped from within the four walls of his own house. He felt suddenly greedy, physically greedy; the thought, even instantly contradicted, of half-amorous episodes between her and Smallwood affected him with an insurgent bitterness which made the future heavy with foreboding.

She whispered to him that she had been very silly and that she wouldn't have Smallwood in again if he wished her not to.

Even amidst his joy at her submission, the word "silly" struck him as an absurdly inadequate word to apply to her attitude.

He said, deliberately against his will: "Helen, darling, it was I who was silly. Have Smallwood in as much as you like. I don't want to interfere with your happiness."

He expected her then to protest that she had no real desire to have Smallwood in, and when she failed to protest, he was disappointed. The fear came to him that perhaps Small-

wood did attract her, being so good-looking, and that his granting her full permission to see him would give that attraction a chance to develop. Jealousy once again stormed at him.

But how sweet the reconciliation, after all! For concentrated loveliness nothing in his life could equal the magic of that first hour with her after she had ceased crying. It was moonlight outside and about midnight they leaned for a moment out of the window with the icy wind stinging their cheeks. Millstead asleep in the pallor, took on the semblance of his own mood and seemed tremulous with delight. Somewhere, too, amidst the dreaming loveliness of the moon-washed roofs and turrets, there was a touch of something that was just a little exquisitely sad, and that too, faint, yet quite perceptible, was in his own mood.

III

There came the concert in the first week of December. No one, not even those of the Common-Room who were least cordially disposed to him, could deny that Speed had worked indefatigably and that his efforts deserved success. Yet the success, merited though it was, was hardly likely to increase his popularity among those inclined to be jealous of him.

Briskly energetic and full of high spirits throughout all the rehearsals, and most energetic of all on the actual evening of the performance, he yet felt, when all was over and he knew that the affair had been a success, the onrush of a wave of acute depression. He had, no doubt, been working too hard, and this was the natural reaction of nerves. It was a cold night with hardly any wind, and during the evening a thick fog had drifted up from the fenlands, so that there was much excited talk among the visitors about the difficulties of getting to their homes. Nothing was to be seen more than five or six yards ahead, and there was the prospect that as the night advanced the fog would become worse. The Millstead boys, enjoying the novelty, were scampering across the forbidden quadrangle, revelling in the delightful risk of being caught and in the still more delightful possibility of knocking over, by accident, some one or other of the Masters. Speed, standing on the top step of the flight leading down from the Big Hall, gazed into the dense inky-black cloisters where two faint pin-pricks of light indicated lamps no more than a few yards away. He felt acutely miserable, and he

could not think why. In a way, he was sorry that the bustle of rehearsals, to which he had become quite accustomed, was all finished with; but surely that was hardly a sufficient reason for feeling miserable? Hearing the boyish cries from across the quadrangle he suddenly felt that he was old, and that he wished he were young again, as young as the youngest of the boys at Millstead.

Since the quarrel about Smallwood he and Helen had got on tolerably well together. She had not asked Smallwood in to tea again, and he judged that she did not intend to, though to save her dignity she would still persist in her right to do so whenever she wished. The arrangement was quite satisfactory to him. But, despite the settlement of that affair, their relationship had suddenly become a thing of fierce, alternating contrasts. They were either terrifically happy or else desperately miserable. The atmosphere, when he came into Lavery's after an absence of even a quarter of an hour, might either be dull and glowering or else radiant with joy. He could never guess which it would be, and he could never discover reasons for whichever atmosphere he encountered. But invariably he was forced into responding; if Helen were moody and silent he also remained quiet, even if his inclinations were to go to the piano and sing comic songs. And if Helen were bright and joyful he forced himself to boisterousness, no matter what press of gravity was upon him. He sometimes found himself stopping short on his own threshold, frightened to enter lest Helen's mood, vastly different from his own, might drag him up or down too disconcertingly. Even their times of happiness, more wonderful now than ever, were drug-like in possessing after-effects which projected themselves backward in a tide of sweet melancholy that suffused everything. He knew that he loved her more passionately than ever, and he knew also that the beauty of it was mysteriously impregnated with sadness.

She stole up to him now in the fog, dainty and pretty in her heavy fur cloak. She put a hand on his sleeve; evidently this was one of her happy moods.

"Oh, Kenneth—*what* a fog! Aren't you glad everything's all over? It went off wonderfully, didn't it? Do you think the Rayners will ge able to get home all right—they live out at Deepersdale, you know?"

Replying to the last of her queries, he said: "Oh yes, I don't think it's quite bad enough to stop them altogether."

Then after a pause she went on: "Clare's just putting her things on and I told her to meet you here. You'll see her home, won't you?"

He wondered in a vague kind of way why Helen was so desperately anxious that he should take Clare on her way home, but he was far too exhausted mentally to give the matter sustained excogitation. It seemed to him that Helen suddenly vanished, that he waited hours in the fog, and that Clare appeared mysteriously by his side, speaking to him in a voice that was full of sharp, recuperative magic. "My dear man, aren't you going to put your coat on?" Then he deliberately laughed and said: "Heavens, yes, I'd forgotten —just a minute if you don't mind waiting!"

He groped his way back into the hall and to the alcove where he had laid his coat and hat. The yellow light blurred his eyes with a film of half-blindness; phantasies of doubt and dread enveloped him; he felt, with that almost barometric instinct that he possessed, that things momentous and incalculable were looming in the future. This Millstead that had seemed to him so bright and lovely was now heavy with dark mysterious menace; as he walked back across the hall through the long avenues of disturbed chairs it occurred to him suddenly that perhaps this foreboding that was hovering about him was not mental at all, but physical; that he had overworked himself and was going to be ill. Perhaps, even, he was ill already. He had a curious desire that someone should confirm him in this supposition; when Clare, meeting him at the doorway, said: "You're looking thoroughly tired out Mr. Speed," he smiled and answered, with a touch of thankfulness: "I'm feeling, perhaps, a little that way."

"Then," said Clare, immediately, "please don't trouble to see me home. I can quite easily find my own way, I assure you. You go back to Lavery's and get straight off to bed."

The thought, thus presented to him, of foregoing this walk into the town with her, sent a sharp flush into his cheeks and pulled down the hovering gloom almost on to his eyes; he knew then, more acutely than he had ever guessed before, that he was desiring Clare's company in a way that was a good deal more than casual. The realisation surprised him just a little at first, and then surprised him a great deal because at first it had surprised him only a little.

"I'd rather come with you if you don't mind," he said. "The walk will do me good."

"What, *this* weather!" she exclaimed softly, and then laughed a sharp, instant laugh.

That laugh galvanised him into determination. "I'm coming anyway," he said quietly, and took her arm and led her away into the fog.

Out in the high road it was blacker and denser; the school railings, dripping with grimy moisture, provided the only sure clue to position. Half, at least, of Speed's energies were devoted to the task of not losing the way; with the other half he was unable to carry out much of the strange programme of conversation that had been gathering in his mind. For many days past he had been accumulating a store of things to say to her upon this memorable walk which, so far as he could judge, was bound to be the last; now, with the opportunity arrived, he said hardly anything at all. She chattered to him about music and Millstead and odd topics of slight importance; she pressed her scarf to her lips and the words came out curiously muffled and deep-toned, with the air of having incalculable issues depending on them. But he hardly answered her at all. And at last they reached Harrington's shop in the High Street, and she shook hands with him and told him to get back as quickly as he could and be off to bed. "And don't work so hard," were her last words to him, "or you'll be ill."

Thicker and blacker than ever was the fog on the way back to the school, and somehow, through what error he never discovered, he lost himself amongst the narrow, old fashioned streets in the centre of the town. He wandered about, as it seemed to him, for hours, creeping along walls and hoping to meet some passer-by who could direct him. Once he heard Millstead Parish Church beginning the chime of midnight, but it was from the direction he least expected. At last, after devious manœuvring, he discovered himself again on the main road up to the School, and this time with great care he managed to keep to the route. As he entered the main gateway he heard the school clock sounding the three-quarters. A quarter to one! All was silent at Lavery's. He rang the bell timorously. After a pause he heard footsteps approaching on the other side, but they seemed to him light and airy; the bolts were pushed back, not with Burton's customary noise, but softly, almost frightenedly.

He could see that it was Helen standing there in the porch,

not Burton. She flashed an electric torch in his face and then at his feet so that he should see the step.

She said: "Come in quickly—don't let the fog in. You're awfully late, aren't you? I told Burton to go to bed. I didn't know you were going to stay at Clare's."

He answered: "I didn't stay at Clare's. I got lost in the fog on the way back."

"Lost!" she echoed, walking ahead of him down the corridor towards his sitting-room. The word echoed weirdly in the silence. "*Lost*, were you?—So that's why you were late?"

"That's why," he said.

He followed her into the tiny lamp-lit room, full of firelight that was somehow melancholy and not cheerful.

IV

She was silent. She sat in one of the chairs with her eyes looking straight into the fire; while he took off his coat and hat and drew up his own chair opposite to hers she neither moved nor spoke. It seemed to him as he watched her that the room grew redder and warmer and more melancholy; the flames lapped so noisily in the silence that he had for an instant the absurd fear that the scores of sleepers in the dormitories would be awakened. Then he heard, very faintly from above, what he imagined must be an especially loud snore; it made him smile. As he smiled he saw Helen's eyes turned suddenly upon him; he blushed as if caught in some guilty act. He said: "Can you hear somebody snoring up in the Senior dormitory?"

She stared at him curiously for a moment and then replied: "No, and neither can you. You said that to make conversation."

"I didn't!" he cried, with genuine indignation. "I distinctly heard it. That's what made me smile."

"And do you really think that the sound of anybody snoring in the Senior dormitory would reach us in here? Why, we never hear the maids in a morning and they make ever such a noise!"

"Yes, but then there are so many other noises to drown it. However, it may have been my imagination."

"Or it may have been your invention, eh?"

"I tell you, Helen, I *did* think that I heard it! It *wasn't* my invention. What reason on earth should I have for inventing it? Oh, well, anyway, it's such a trifling matter—it's not worth arguing about."

"Then let's stop arguing. You started it."

Silence again. The melancholy in the atmosphere was charged now with an added quality, something that weighed and threatened and was dangerous. He knew that Helen had something pressing on her mind, and that until she flung it off there would be no friendliness with her. And he wanted friendliness. He could not endure the torture of her bitter silences.

"Helen," he said, nervously eager, "Helen, there's something the matter. Tell me what it is."

"There's nothing the matter."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Then why are you so silent?"

"Because I would rather be silent than *make* conversation."

"That's sarcastic."

"Is it? If you think it is——"

"Helen, *please* be kind to me. If you go on as you are doing I'm sure I shall either cry or lose my temper. I'm tired to death after all the work of the concert and I simply can't bear this attitude of yours."

"Well, I can't change my attitude to please you."

"Apparently not."

"*Now* who's sarcastic? Good heavens, do you think I've nothing to do but suit your mood when you come home tired at one o'clock in the morning—You spend half the night with some other woman and then when you come home, tired out, you expect me to soothe and make a fuss of you!"

"Helen, that's a lie! I walked straight home with Clare. You specially asked me to do that."

"I didn't specially ask you to stay out with her till one o'clock in the morning."

"I didn't stay with her till then. To begin with, it isn't one o'clock even yet. . . . Remember that the concert was over about eleven. I took Clare straight home and left her long before midnight. It wasn't my fault I lost my way in the fog."

"Nor mine either. But perhaps it was Clare's, eh?"

"Helen, I can't bear you to insinuate like that! Tell me frankly what you suspect, and then I'll answer frankly!"

"You wouldn't answer frankly. And that's why I can't tell you frankly."

"Well, I think it's scandalous——"

She interrupted him fiercely with: "Oh, yes, it's scandalous that I should dare to be annoyed when you give all your friendship to another woman and none to me, isn't it? It's scandalous that when you come home after seeing this other woman I shouldn't be perfectly happy and bright and ready to kiss and comfort you and wheedle you out of the misery you're in at having to leave her! You only want me for a comforter, and it's so scandalous when I don't feel in the humour to oblige, isn't it?"

"Helen, it's not true! My friendship belongs to you more than to——"

"Don't tell me lies just to calm me into suiting your mood. Do you think I haven't noticed that we haven't anything in common except that we love each other? We don't know what on earth to talk about when we're alone together. We just know how to bore each other and to torture each other with our love. Don't you realize the truth of that? Don't you find yourself eagerly looking forward to seeing Clare; Clare whom you can talk to and be friendly with; Clare who's your equal, perhaps your superior, in intellect? Lately, I've given you as many chances to see her as I could, because if you're going to tire of me I'd rather you do it quickly. But I'm sorry I can't promise to be always gay and amusing while it's going on. It may be scandalous that I can't, but it's the truth, anyway!"

"But, my dear Helen, what an extraordinary bundle of misunderstandings you've got hold of! Why——"

"Oh yes, you'd like to smooth me down and persuade me it's all my own misunderstanding, I daresay, as you've always been able to do! But the effect doesn't last for very long; sooner or later it all crops up again. It's no use, Kenneth. I'm not letting myself be angry, but I tell you it's not a bit of use. I'm sick to death of wanting from you what I can't get. I've tried hard to educate myself into being your equal, but it doesn't seem to make you value me any more. Possibly you like me best as a child; perhaps you wouldn't have married me if you'd known I was really a woman. Anyway, Kenneth, I can't help it. And there's another thing—I'm miserably jealous—of Clare. If you'd had a grain of ordinary sense you might have guessed it before now."

"My dear Helen——"

Then he stopped, seeing that she was staring at him fearlessly. She was different, somehow, from what she had ever been before; and this quarrel, if it could be called a quarrel, was also different both in size and texture. There was no anger in her; nothing but stormy sincerity and passionate outpouring of the truth. A new sensation overspread him; a thrill of surprised and detached admiration for her. If she were always like this, he thought—if she were always proud, passionate, and sincere—how splendidly she would take possession of him! For he wanted to belong to her, finally and utterly; he was anxious for any enslavement that should give him calm and absolute anchorage.

His admiration was quickly superseded by astonishment at her self-revelation.

"But Helen—" he gasped, leaning over the arm of his chair and putting his hand on her wrist, "Helen, I'd no idea! *Jealous!* You jealous of Clare! What on earth for? Clare's only an acquaintance! Why, you're a thousand times more to me than Clare ever is or could be!"

"Kenneth!" She drew her arm away from the touch of his hand with a gesture that was determined but not contemptuous. "Kenneth, I don't believe it. Perhaps you're not trying to deceive me; probably you're trying to deceive yourself and succeeding. Tell me, Kenneth, truthfully, don't you sometimes wish I were Clare when you're talking to me? When we're both alone together, when we're neither doing nor saying anything particular, don't you wish you could make me vanish suddenly and have Clare in my place, and—and—" bitterness crept into her voice here—"and call me back when you wanted the only gift of mine which you find satisfactory? You came back to-night, miserable, because you'd said good-bye to Clare, and because you couldn't see in the future any chances of meeting her as often as you've been able to do lately. You wanted—you're wanting it now—Clare's company and Clare's conversation and Clare's friendship. And because you can't have it you're willing to soothe yourself with my pretty little babyish ways, and when you find you can't have *them* either you think it's scandalous! Kenneth, my dear, dear Kenneth, I'm not a baby any longer, even if I ever was one—I'm a woman now, and you don't like me as much. I can't help it. I can't help being tortured with jealousy all the time you're with Clare. I can't help wanting

what Clare has of you more than I want what I have of you myself. I can't help—sometimes—hating her—loathing her!"

He was speechless now, made so by a curious dignity with which she spoke and the kindness to him that sounded in everything that she said. He was so tired and sorry. He leaned his head in his arms and sobbed. Some tragedy that had seemed to linger in the lamp-lit room ever since he had come into it out of the fog, was now about his head blinding and crushing him; all the world of Millstead, spread out in the panorama of days to come, appeared in a haze of forlorn melancholy. The love that he had for Helen ached in him with a sadness that was deeper now than it had ever been.

And then, suddenly, she was all about him, kneeling beside him, stroking his hair, taking his hand and pressing it to her breast, crying softly and without words.

He whispered, indistinctly: "Helen, Helen, it's all right. Don't you worry, little Helen. I'm not quite well to-night, I think. It must be the strain of all that concert work. . . . But I'll be all right when I've had a rest for a little while. . . . Helen, darling, you mustn't cry about me like that!"

Then she said, proudly, though her voice still quivered: "I'm not worrying, dear. And you'll see Clare again soon, because I shall ask her to come here. You've got to choose between us, and Clare shall have a fair chance, anyway. . . . And now come to bed and sleep."

He gave her a smile that was more babyish than anything that she had ever been or done. And with her calm answering smile the sadness seemed somehow a little lifted.

CHAPTER FOUR

I

He was in bed for three days with a temperature (but nothing more serious); Howard, the School doctor, chaffed him unmercifully. "You're a lucky man, Speed, to be ill in bed with Mrs. Speed to nurse you! Better than being up in the Sick-room, isn't it?" Once the idea occurred to Speed that he might be sickening for some infectious complaint, in which case he would be taken away and isolated in the Sanatorium. When he half-hinted the possibility of this to Howard, the latter said, laughing loudly: "You needn't worry, Speed. I know you don't want to lose your pretty little nurse, do you? I understand you, young man—I was your age once, you know."

But the strange thing was that what Howard supposed Speed didn't want was just what he did want. He wanted to lose Helen for a little while. Not because he didn't love her. Not because of any reason which he could dare to offer himself. Merely, he would admit, a whimsical desire to be without her for a short time; it would, he thought, clutching hold of the excuse, save her the work of attending to him. He could hardly understand himself. But the fact was, Helen saddened him. It was difficult to explain in detail; but there was a kind of aura of melancholy which seemed to follow her about wherever she went. In the short winter afternoons he lay awake watching her, listening to the distant cheering on the footer pitches, sniffing the aroma of tea that she was preparing for him; it was all so delicious and cosy, and yet, in a curious, blinding way, it was all so sad. He felt he should slide into madness if he were condemned to live all his days like these, with warm fires and twilit meals and Helen always about him in attendance. He could not understand why it was that though he loved her so dearly yet he should not be perfectly happy with her.

How strange it was to lie there all day listening to all the sounds of Millstead! He heard the School-bell ringing the

end of every period, the shouts of the boys at call-over, the hymns in the chapel—(his Senior organ-pupil was deputising for him)—Burton locking up at night, the murmur of gramophones in the prefects' studies; and everything, it seemed to him, was full of this same rich sadness. Then he reasoned with himself; the sadness must be a part of him, since he saw and felt it in so many things and places. It was unfair to blame Helen. Poor Helen, how kind she was to him, and how unkindly he treated her in return! Sometimes he imagined himself a blackguard and a cad, wrecking the happiness of the woman who would sacrifice everything for his sake. Once (it was nearly dark, but the lamp had not yet been lit) he called her to him and said, brokenly: "Helen, darling—Helen, I'm so sorry." "Sorry for what, Kenneth?" she enquired naturally. And he thought and pondered and could only add: "I don't know—nothing in particular. I'm just sorry, that's all." And once also he lashed himself into a fervour of promises. "I *will* be kind to you, Helen, dearest. We *will* be friends, we two. There's nothing that anybody shall have of me that you shan't have also. I *do* want you to be happy, Helen." And she *was* happy, then, happy and miserable at the same time; crying for joy at the beautiful sadness of it all.

Those long days and nights! The wind howled up from the fenlands and whiffed through the ivy on the walls; the skies were grey and desolate, the quadrangle a waste of dingy green. It was the time of the terminal House-Matches, and when Milner's beat School House in the Semi-Final the cheering throng passed right under Speed's window, yelling at the tops of their voices and swinging deafening rattles. In a few days Milner's would play Lavery's in the Final, and he hoped to be up by then and able to watch it.

Of course, he had visitors. Clanwell came and gave him endless chatter about the House-Matches; a few of the less influential prefects paid him a perfunctory visit of condolence and hoped he would soon be all right again. And then Doctor and Mrs. Ervine. "Howard tells me it is nothing—um—to be—um, er, perturbed about. Just, to use an—um—colloquialism, run down, eh, Speed? The strain of the—um—concert must have been quite—um—considerable. By the way, Speed, I ought to congratulate you—the whole evening passed in the most—um, yes—the most satisfactory manner." And Mrs. Ervine said, in her rather tart way: "It's quite a

mercy they only come once a year, or we should all be dead very soon, I think."

And Clare.

Helen had kept her promise. She had written to Clare asking her to tea on a certain afternoon, and she had also contrived that when Clare came she should be transacting important and rather lengthy business with the Matron. The result was that Speed, now in his sitting-room though still not allowed out of doors, was there alone to welcome her.

He had got into such a curious state of excitement as the time neared for her arrival that when she did come he was almost speechless. She smiled and shook hands with him and said, immediately: "I'm so sorry to hear you haven't been very well. I feel partly responsible, since I dragged you all that way in the fog the other night. But I'm not going to waste too much pity on you, because I think you waste quite enough on yourself, don't you?"

He laughed weakly and said that perhaps he did.

Then there was a long pause which she broke by saying suddenly: "What's the matter with you?"

"Matter with me? Oh, nothing serious—only a chill——"

"That's not what I mean. I want to know what's the matter with you that makes you look at me as you were doing just then."

"I—I—I didn't know I was. I—I——"

He stopped. What on earth were they going to talk about? And what *was* this look that he had been giving her? He felt his cheeks burning; a fire rising up all around him and bathing his body in warmth.

She said, obviously with the desire to change the subject: "What are you and Helen going to do at Christmas?"

Pulling himself together with an effort, he replied: "Well, we're not certain yet. My—er—my people have asked us down to their place."

"And of course you'll go."

"I'm not certain."

"But why not?"

He paused. "Well, you see—in a way, it's a private reason. I mean——"

"Oh, well, if it's a private reason, you certainly mustn't tell me. Let's change the subject again. How are the House-Matches going?"

"Look here, I didn't mean to be rude. And I *do* want to tell you, as it happens. In fact, I wouldn't mind your advice if you'd give it me. Will you?"

"Better put the case before me first."

"Well, you see, it's like this." He was so desperately and unaccountably nervous that he found himself plunging into the midst of his story almost before he realised what he was doing. "You see, my people were in Australia for a holiday when I married Helen. I had to marry her quickly, you remember, because of taking this housemastership. And I don't think they quite liked me marrying somebody they'd never seen."

"Perfectly natural on their part, my dear man. You may as well admit that much of their case to start with."

"Yes, I suppose it is rather natural. But you don't know what my people are like. I don't think they'll care for Helen very much. And Helen is bound to be nervous at meeting them. I expect we should have a pretty miserable Christmas if we went."

"I should think in your present mood you'd have a pretty miserable Christmas whatever you did. And since you asked for my advice I'll give it you. Buck yourself up; don't let your imagination carry you away; and take Helen to see your people. After all, she's perfectly presentable, and since you've married her there's nothing to be gained by keeping her out of their sight, is there? Don't think I'm callous and unfeeling because I take a more practical view of things than you do. I'm a practical person, you see, Mr. Speed, and if *I* had married you I should insist on being taken to see your people at the earliest possible opportunity."

"Why?"

"Because," she answered, "I should be anxious for them to see what an excellent choice you'd made!"

That was thoughtlessly said and thoughtfully heard. After a pause Speed said, curiously: "That brings one to the question—supposing I had married you, *should* I have made an excellent choice?"

With a touch of surprise and coldness she replied: "That wasn't in my mind, Mr. Speed. You evidently misunderstood me."

And at this point Helen came into the room.

II

During that strange twilight hour while the three of them were tea-drinking and conducting a rather limp conversation about local matters, Speed came suddenly to the decision that he would not see Clare again. Partly, perhaps, because her last remark just before Helen entered had hurt him; he felt that she had deliberately led him into a position from which she could and did administer a stinging snub. But chiefly his decision was due to a careful and pitiful observation of Helen; he saw her in a dazzling white light of admiration, for she was deliberately (he could see) torturing herself to please him. She was acutely jealous of Clare, and yet, because she thought he liked Clare, she was willing to give her open hospitality and encouragement, despite the stab that every word and gesture must mean to her. It reminded him of Hans Andersen's story about the mermaid who danced to please her lover-prince even though each step cost her agonies. The pathos of it, made more apparent to him by the literary comparison, overwhelmed him into a blind fervour of resolution: he would do everything in his power to bring happiness to one who was capable of such love and such nobility. And as Helen thus swung into the focus of his heroine-worship, so Clare, without his realising it, took up in his mind the other inevitable position in the triangle; she was something, at least, of the adventuress, scheming to lure his affections away from his brave little wife. The fact that he was not conscious of this conventional outlook upon the situation prevented his reason from assuring him that Clare, so far from scheming to lure his affections from Helen, had just snubbed him unmercifully for a remark which any capable adventuress would have rejoiced over.

Anyway, he decided there and then, he would put a stop to this tangled and uncomfortable situation. And after tea, when Helen, on a pretext which he knew quite well to be a fabrication, left him alone again with Clare, he could think of no better method of procedure than a straightforward request.

So he summed up the necessary determination to begin: "Miss Harrington, I hope you won't be offended at what I'm going to say——"

Whereat she interrupted: "Oh, I don't often take offence at what people *say*. So please don't be frightened."

"You see . . ." He paused, watching her. He noticed, curiously enough for the first time, that she was—well, not perhaps pretty, but certainly—in a way—attractive. In the firelight especially, she seemed to have the most searching and diabolically disturbing eyes. They made him nervous. At last he continued: "You see, I'm in somewhat of a dilemma. A quandary, as it were. In fact—in fact I——"

"Supposing we use our ordinary English language and say that you're in a mess, eh? 'Quandary'! 'Dilemma'!" She laughed with slight contempt.

"I don't—I don't quite see the point of—of your—objection," he said, staring at her with a certain puzzled ruefulness. "What has my choice of a word got to do with it?"

"To do with what?" she replied, instantly.

"With what—with what we're going to talk about."

"Since I haven't the faintest idea what we're going to talk about, how can I say?"

"Look here!" He got up out of his chair and stood with his back to the fire. He kept a fretful silence for a moment and then said, with a sharp burst of exasperation: "Look here, I don't know what you're driving at! I only know that you're being most infernally rude!"

"Don't forget that a moment ago you were asking me not to take offence."

"You're damned clever, aren't you?" he almost snarled.

That was all he could think of in the way of an answer to her. He stood there swaying lightly in front of the fire, nursing, as it were, his angry bafflement.

"Thank you," she replied. "I regard that as a very high tribute. And I'm nearly as pleased at one other thing—I seem to have shaken you partly out of your delightful and infuriating urbanity. . . . But now, we're not here to compliment each other. You've got something you want to say to me, haven't you?"

He stared at her severely and said: "Yes, I have. I want to ask you not to come here any more."

"Why?" She shot the word out at him almost before he had finished speaking.

"Because I don't wish you to."

"You forget that I come at Helen's invitation, not at yours."

"I see I shall have to tell you the real reason, then. I would have preferred not to have done. My wife is jealous of you."

He expected her to show great surprise, but the surprise was his when she replied almost casually: "Oh yes, she was jealous of *you* once—that first evening we met at the Head's house—do you remember?"

No, he did not remember. At least, he did now that she called it to his memory, but he had not remembered until then. Curious . . .

He was half-disappointed that she was so calm and unconcerned about it all. He had anticipated some sort of a scene, either of surprise, remorse, indignation, or sympathy. Instead of which she just said "Oh, yes," and indulged in some perfectly irrelevant reminiscence. Well, not perhaps irrelevant, but certainly inappropriate in the circumstances.

"You see," he went on, hating her blindly because she was so serene; "you see she generously invites you here, because she thinks I like you to come. Well, of course, I do, but then, I don't want to make it hard for her. You understand what I mean? I think it is very generous of her to—to act as she does."

"I think it is very foolish unless she has the idea that in time she can conquer her jealousy. . . . But I quite understand, Mr. Speed. I won't come any more."

"I hope you don't think——"

"Fortunately I have other things to think about. I assure you I'm not troubling at all. Even loss of friendship——"

"But," he interrupted eagerly, "surely it's not going to mean that, Miss Harrington? Just because you don't come here doesn't mean that you and I——"

She laughed in his face as she replied, cutting short his remarks: "My dear Mr. Speed, you are too much of an egoist. It wasn't your friendship I was thinking about—it was Helen's. You forget that I've been Helen's friend for ten years. . . . Well, good-bye. . . ."

The last straw! He shook hands with her stiffly.

When she had gone his face grew hard and solemn, and he clenched his fists as he stood again with his back to the fire. He felt—the word *came* to his mind was a staggering inevitability—he felt *dead*. Absolutely *dead*. And all because she had gone and he knew that she would not come again.

III

Those were the dark days of the winter term, when Burton came round the dormitories at half-past seven in the mornings and lit all the flaring gas-jets. There was a cold spell at the beginning of December when it was great fun to have to smash the film of ice on the top of the water in the water-jugs, and one afternoon the school got an extra half-holiday to go skating on one of the neighbouring fens that had been flooded and frozen over. Now Speed could skate very well, even to the point of figure-skating and a few easy tricks, and he took a very simple and human delight in exhibiting his prowess before the Millstead boys. He possessed a good deal of that very charming boyish pride in athletic achievement which is so often mistaken for modesty, and there was no doubt that the reports of his accomplishments on the wide expanse of Dinglay Fen gave a considerable fillip to his popularity in the school.

A popularity, by the way, which was otherwise very distinctly on the wane. He knew it, felt it as anyone might have felt it, and perhaps, additionally, as only he in all the world could feel it; it was the dark spectre in his life. He loved success; he was prepared to fight the sternest of battles provided they were victories on the road of progress; but to see his power slipping from him elusively and without commotion of any kind, was the sort of thing his soul was not made to endure. Fears grew up in him and exaggerated reality. He imagined all kinds of schemes and conspiracies against him in his own House. The enigma of the Head became suddenly resolved into a sinister hostility to himself. If a boy passed him in the road with a touch of the cap and a "Good morning" he would ask himself whether the words contained any ominous subtlety of meaning. And when, on rare occasions, he dined in the Masters' Common-Room he could be seen to feel hostility rising in clouds all about him, hostility that would not speak or act, that was waiting mute for the signal to uprise.

He was glad that the term was nearly over, not, he told himself, because he was unhappy at Millstead, but because he needed a holiday after the hard work of his first term of housemastership. The next term, he decided, would be

easier; and the term after that easier still, and so on, until a time would come when his work at Millstead would be exactly the ideal combination of activity and comfort. Moreover, the next term he would not see Clare at all. He had made up his mind about that. It would be easier to see her not at all than to see her only a little. And with the absolute snapping of his relations with her would come that which he desired most in all the world; happiness with Helen. He wanted to be happy with Helen. He wanted to love her passionately, just as he wanted to hate Clare passionately. For it was Clare who had caused all the trouble. He hugged the comfortable thought to himself; it was Clare, and Clare only, who had so far disturbed the serenity of his world. Without Clare his world would have been calm and unruffled, a paradise of contentment and love of Helen.

Well, next term, anyway, his world should be without Clare.

IV

On the day that term ended he felt quite boyish and cheerful. For during that final week he and Helen had been, he considered, perfectly happy; moreover, she had agreed to go with him to his parents for Christmas, and though the visit would, in some sense, be an ordeal, the anticipation of it was distinctly pleasant. Somehow—he would not analyse his sensation exactly—somehow he wanted to leave the creeper-hung rooms at Lavery's and charge full tilt into the world outside; it was as if Lavery's contained something morbidly beautiful that he loved achingly, but desired to leave in order that he might return to love it more and again. When he saw the railway vans being loaded up with luggage in the courtyard he felt himself tingling with excitement, just as if he were a schoolboy and this the close of his first miserable term. Miserable! Well, yes, looking back upon it he could agree that in a certain way it had been miserable, and in another way it had been splendid, rapturous, and lovely. It had been full, brimming full, of *feelings*. The feelings had whirled tirelessly about him in the dark drawing-room, had wrapped him amidst themselves, had tossed him high and low to the most dizzy heights and the most submerged depths; and now, aching from it all, he was not sorry to leave for a short while this world of pressing, congesting sensation.

He even caught himself looking forward to his visit to his parents, a thing he had hardly ever done before. For his parents were, he had always considered, "impossible" parents, good and generous enough in their way, but "impossible" from his point of view. They were—he hesitated to use the word "vulgar," because that word implied so many things that they certainly were not—he would use instead the rather less insulting word "materialist." They lived in a world that was full of "things"—soap-factories and cars and Turkey carpets and gramophones and tennis-courts. Moreover, they were almost disgustingly wealthy, and their wealth had followed him doggedly about wherever he had tried to escape from it. They had regarded his taking a post in a public-school as a kind of eccentric wild oats, and did not doubt that, sooner or later, he would come to his senses and prefer one or other of the various well-paid business posts that Sir Charles Speed could get for him. Oh, yes, undoubtedly they were impossible people. And yet their very impossibility would be a relief from the tensely charged atmosphere of Lavery's.

On the train he chatted gaily to Helen and gave her some indication of the sort of people his parents were. "You mustn't be nervous of them," he warned her. "They've pots of money, but they're not people to get nervous about. Dad's all right if you stick up for yourself in front of him, and mother's nice to everybody whether she likes them or not. So you'll be quite safe . . . and if it freezes there'll be ice on the Marshpond. . . ."

At the thought of this last possibility his face kindled with anticipation. "Cold, Helen?" he queried, and when she replied "Yes, rather," he said jubilantly: "I shouldn't be surprised if it's started to freeze already."

Then for many minutes he gazed out through the carriage window at the pleasant monotony of the Essex countryside, and in a short while he felt her head against his shoulder. She was sleeping. "I *do* love her!" he thought triumphantly, giving her a side-glance. And then the sight of a pond with a thin coating of ice gave him another sort of triumph.

INTERLUDE

CHRISTMAS AT BEACHINGS OVER

I

"Beachings Over, near Framlingay, Essex. Tel. Framlingay 32. Stations: Framlingay 2½ miles; Pumphrey Bassett 3 miles."

So ran the inscription on Lady Speed's opulent bluish notepaper. The house was an old one, unobtrusively modernised, with about a half-mile of upland carriage-drive leading to the portico. As Helen saw it from the window of the closed Daimler that had met them at Framlingay station, her admiration secured momentary advantage of her nervousness.

In another moment Speed was introducing her to his mother.

Lady Speed was undoubtedly a fine woman. "Fine" was exactly the right word for her, for she was just a little too elderly to be called beautiful and perhaps too tall ever to have been called pretty. Though she was upright and clear-skinned and finely-featured, and although the two decades of her married life had seemed to leave very little conspicuous impression on her, yet there was a sense, perhaps, in which she looked her age; it might have been guessed rightly as between forty and fifty. She had blue eyes of that distinctively English hue that might almost be the result of gazing continually upon miles and miles of rolling English landscape; and her nose, still attractively *retroussé*, though without a great deal of the pertness it must have had in her youth, held just enough of patricianly bearing to enable her to manage competently the twenty odd domestics whose labours combined to make Beachings Over habitable.

She kissed Helen warmly. "My dear, I'm so pleased to meet you. But you'll have to rough it along with us, you know—I'm afraid we don't live at all in style. We're just ordinary country folks, that's all. . . . And when you've had your lunch and got refreshed I must take you over the house and show you everything. . . ."

Speed laughed and said: "Mother always tells visitors that they've got to rough it. But there's nothing to rough. I won-

der what she'd say if she had to live three months at Lavery's."

"Lavery's?" said Lady Speed, uncomprehendingly.

"Lavery's is the name of my House at Millstead. I was made housemaster of it at the beginning of the term." He spoke a little proudly.

"Oh, yes, I seem to know the name. I believe your father was mentioning something about it to me once, but I hardly remember—"

"But how on earth did he know anything about it? I never wrote telling him."

"Well, I expect he heard it from somebody. . . . I really couldn't tell you exactly. . . . I've had a most awful morning before you came—had to dismiss one of the maids—she'd stolen a thermos-flask. So ungrateful of her, because I'd have given it to her if she'd only asked me for it. One of my best maids, she was."

After lunch Richard arrived. Richard was Speed's younger brother, on vacation from school; a pleasant-faced, rather ordinary youngster, obviously prepared to enter the soap-boiling industry as soon as he left school. In the afternoon Richard conducted the pair of them round the grounds and outbuildings, showing them the new Italian garden and the pergola and the new sunken lawn and the clock-tower built over the garage and the new gas-engine to work the electric light plant and the new pavilion alongside the rubble tennis courts and the new wing of the servants' quarters that "dad" was "throwing out" from the end of the old coach-house. Then, when they returned indoors, Lady Speed was ready to conduct them over the interior and show them the panelled bed-rooms and the lacquered cabinets in the music-room and the bathroom with a solid silver bath and the gramophone worked by electricity and the wonderful old-fashioned bureau that somebody had offered to buy off "dad" for fifteen hundred guineas.

"Visitors always have to go through it," said Speed, when his mother had left them. "Personally I'm never the least bit impressed, and I can't understand anyone else being it."

Helen answered, rather doubtfully: "But it's a lovely house, Kenneth, isn't it? I'd no idea your people were like this."

"Like what?"

"So—so well-off."

"Oh, then the display *has* impressed you?" He laughed and said, quietly: "I'd rather have our own little place at Lavery's, wouldn't you?"

While he was saying it he felt: Yes, I'd rather have it, no doubt, but to be there now would make me utterly miserable.

She replied softly: "Yes, because it's our own."

He pondered a moment and then said: "Yes, I suppose that's one of the reasons why *I* would."

After a pleasant tea in the library he took Helen into the music-room, where he played Chopin diligently for half-an-hour and then, by special request of Richard, ran over some of the latest revue songs. Towards seven o'clock Lady Speed sailed in to remind Richard that it was getting near dinner-time. "I wish you'd run upstairs and change your clothes, dear—you know father doesn't like you to come in to dinner in tweeds. . . . You know," she went on, turning to Helen, "Charles isn't a bit fussy—none of us trouble to really *dress* for dinner, except when we're in town—only—only you have to put a limit somewhere, haven't you?"

As the hour for dinner approached it seemed as if a certain mysteriously incalculable imminence were in the air, as if the whole world of Beachings Over were steeling itself in readiness for some searching and stupendous test of its worth. It was, indeed, ten minutes past eight when the sound of a motor-horn was heard in the far distance. "That's Edwards," cried Lady Speed, apprehensively. "He always sounds his horn to let us know. . . . Now, Dick dear, don't let him know we've been waiting for him—you know how he hates to think he's late. . . ."

And in another moment a gruff voice in the hall could be heard dismissing the chauffeur with instructions for the morrow. "Ten-thirty sharp, Edwards. The Daimler if it's wet. Gotter go over and see Woffenheimer."

And in yet another moment Lady Speed was rushing forward with an eager, wifely kiss. "You aren't late, Charles. All the clocks are a little fast. . . . Kenneth has come . . . and this . . ." she spoke a trifle nervously . . . "this is Helen. . . ."

Sir Charles distributed a gruff nod to the assembly, afterwards holding out his hand to be shaken. "Ahdedoo, Kenneth, my lad. . . . How are you? Still kicking eh? . . . Ahdedoo, Helen . . . don't mind me calling you Helen, do you? Well, Richard, my lad. . . ."

A bald-headed, moustached, white-spatted, morning-coated man, Sir Charles Speed.

Dinner opened in an atmosphere of gloomy silence. Lady Speed kept inaugurating conversations that petered out into a stillness that was broken only by Sir Charles' morose ingurgitation of soup. Something was obviously amiss with him. Over the *entrée* it came out.

"Had to sack one of the foremen to-day."

Lady Speed looked up with an appropriate gesture of horror and indignation. "And I had to dismiss one of my maids too! What a curious coincidence! How ungrateful people are!"

"Sneaking timber out of the woodyard," continued Sir Charles, apparently without the least interest in his wife's adventure with the maid.

But with the trouble of the sacked foreman off his chest Sir Charles seemed considerably relieved, though his gloom returned when Richard had the misfortune to refer to one of the "fellows" at his school as "no class at all—an absolute outsider." "See here, my lad," exclaimed Sir Charles, holding up his fork with a peach on the end of it, "don't you ever let me hear you talking *that* sort of nonsense! Don't you forget that *I* started life as an office-boy cleaning out ink-wells!" Richard flushed deeply and Lady Speed looked rather uncomfortable. "Don't you forget it," added Sir Charles, mouthing characteristically, and it was clear that he was speaking principally for the benefit of Helen. "I don't want people to think I am what I'm not. If I hadn't been lucky—and—and" he seemed to experience a difficulty in choosing the right adjective—"and *smart—smart*, mind—I might have been still cleaning out ink-wells. See?" He filled up his glass with port and for a moment there was sultry silence again. Eventually, he licked his lips and broke it. "You know," turning to address Kenneth, "it's all this education that's at the root of the trouble. Makes the workers too big for their shoes, as often as not. . . . Mind you, I'm a democrat, I am. Can't abide snobbery at any price. But I don't believe in all this education business. I paid for you at Cambridge and what's it done for you? You go an' get a job in some stuffy little school or other—salary about two hundred a year—and God knows how long you'd stay there without a promotion if I hadn't given somebody the tip to shove you up!"

"What's that?" Kenneth exclaimed, almost under his breath.

Sir Charles appeared not to have heard the interruption. He went on, warming to his subject and addressing an imaginary disputant: "No, sir, I do *not* believe in what is termed Education in this country. It don't help a man to rise if he hasn't got it in him. . . . Why, look at *me*! *I* got on without education. Don't you suppose other lads, if they're smart enough, can do the same? Don't you think I'm an example of what a man can become when he's had no education?"

The younger Speed nodded. The argument was irrefutable.

II

After dinner Speed managed to get his father alone in the library. "I want to know," he said, quietly, "what you meant when you said something about giving somebody the tip to shove me up. I want to know exactly, mind."

Sir Charles waved his arm across a table.

"Don't you talk to me like that, my lad. I'm too old for you to cross-examine. I'm willin' to tell you anythin' you like, only I won't be bullied into it. So now you know. Light yourself a cigar an', for God's sake, sit down and look comfortable."

"Perhaps I could look it if I felt it."

"Your own fault if you don't feel it. Damned ingratitude, I call it. Sit down. I shan't answer a question till you're sitting down and smoking as if you was a friend of mine an' not a damned commercial traveller."

Speed decided that he had better humour him; he sat down and toyed with a cigar. "Now, if you'll please tell me."

"What is it you want me to tell you?" grunted Sir Charles.

"I want you to tell me what you meant by saying that you gave somebody a tip to shove me up?"

"Well, my lad, you don't want to stay an assistant-master all your life, do you?"

"That's not the point. I want to know what you did."

"Why, I did the usual thing that I'd always do to help somebody I'm interested in."

"What's that?"

"Well, *you* know. Pull a few wires. . . . Man like me has a few wires he can pull. I *know* people, you see—and if I just mention a little thing—well, they generally remember it all right."

And he spread himself luxuriously in the arm-chair and actually smiled!

The other flushed hotly. "I see. May I ask whose help you solicited on my behalf?"

"Don't talk like a melodrama, my lad. I'm your best friend if you only knew it. What is it you want to know now?"

"I want to know whose help you asked for?"

"Well, I had a little conversation with Lord Portway. And I had five minutes' chat over the telephone with old Ervine. Don't you see—" he leaned forward with a touch of pleading in his voice—"don't you see that I want you to *get* on? I've always wanted you to do well in the world. Your brother's doing well and there's not a prouder father in England to-day than I am of him. And when young Richard leaves school I hope he'll get on well too. Now, you're a bit different. Dunno why you are, but you are, an' I've always recognised it. You can't say I've ever tried to force you to anythin' you didn't want, can you? You wanted to go to the 'varsity—well, I don't believe it's a good thing for a young man to waste his years till he's twenty-two—nevertheless it was your choice, an' I let you do it. I paid for you, I gave you as much money as you wanted, an' I didn't complain. Well, then you wanted to be a Master in a school. You got yourself the job without even consulting me about it, but did I complain? No, I let you go your own way. I let you do what I considered an absolutely damsilly thing. Still, I thought, if you're going to be a teacher you may as well have ambitions an' rise to the top of the profession. So I thought I'd just put in a word for you. That was all. I want you to *get on*, my lad, no matter what line you're in. I've always bin as ambitious for you as I have bin for myself."

The other said: "I can see you meant well."

"*Meant well?* And is it extraordinary that I should mean well to my own son? Then, there's another thing. You go and get married. Well, I don't mind that. I believe in marriage. I was married myself when I was nineteen an' I've never once regretted it. But you go an' get married all of a hurry while I'm travellin' the other side o' the world, an' you don't even send me so much as a bit o' weddin'-cake! I don't say: is it *fair?* I just say: is it *natural?* I come home to England to find a letter tellin' me you've married the Headmaster's daughter!"

"Well, why shouldn't I?"

"I'm not sayin' you shouldn't, my lad. I'm not a snob, an' I don't care who you marry s'long as she's as good as you are.

I don't want you to marry a duchess. I don't even care if the girl you marry hasn't a cent. See—I don't mind if she's a dustman's daughter, s'long—s'long, mind, as she's your equal! That's all. Now you understand me. *Do* you?"

"I think I understand you."

"Good. Now have some more port. An' while you're spendin' Christmas with us, for God's sake, have a good time and give the girl a good time, too. Is she fond of theatres?"

"I—I don't know—well—she might be—"

"Well, you can have the closed Daimler any night you like to take you into town and bring you back. And if she's fond of motorin' you can have the Sunbeam durin' the daytime. Remember that. I want you to have a dam' good time. . . . Dam' good. . . . See? Now have some more port before we join your mother. . . ."

"No thanks. I should be drunk if I had any more."

"Nonsense, my lad. Port won' make you drunk. Dam' good port, isn't it? . . . Wouldn' make you drunk, though. . . . Don' talk dam' nonsense to me. . . ."

He was slightly drunk himself.

III

That interview with his father had a disturbing effect upon Speed. He had expected a row in which his father would endeavour to tyrannise over him, instead of which Sir Charles, if there had been any argument at all, had certainly got the better of it. In a sort of way it did seem rather unfair to have married without letting his parents know a word about it beforehand. But, of course, there had been good reasons. First, the housemastership. He couldn't have been given Lavery's unless he had married. Ervine had stressed very strongly the desirability of married housemasters. And it had therefore been necessary to do everything rather hurriedly in order to be able to begin at Lavery's in the September.

It was when he reflected that, but for his father's intervention, he would probably never have been offered Lavery's that he felt the keenest feeling of unrest. The more he thought about it the more manifestly certain incidents in the past became explainable to him. The hostility of the Common-Room for instance. Did they guess the sort of "wire-pulling" that had been going on? Probably they did not know

anything definitely, but wasn't it likely that they would conclude that such a startling appointment must have been the result of some ulterior intrigue? And wasn't it natural that they should be jealous of him?

He hated Ervine because, behind all the man's kindness to him, he saw now merely the ignoble desire to placate influence. Ervine had done it all to please his father. It was galling to think that that adulatory speech on the Prize-Day, which had given him such real and genuine pleasure, had been dictated merely by a willingness to serve the whim of an important man. It was galling to think that Lord Portway's smiles and words of commendation had been similarly motivated. It was galling to think that, however reticent he was about being the son of Sir Charles Speed, the relationship seemed fated to project itself into his career in the most unfortunate and detestable of ways.

Then he thought of Helen. Her motives, of all, were pure and untainted; she shared neither her father's sycophancy nor his own father's unscrupulousness. She had married him for no other reason than that she loved him. And in the midst of the haze of indecent revelations that seemed to be enveloping him, her love for him and his for her brightened like stars when the night deepens.

And then, slowly and subtly at first, came even the suspicion of her. Was it possible that she had been the dupe of her father? Was it possible that Ervine very neatly and cleverly had Sir Charles hoist with his own petard, making the young housemaster of Lavery's at the same time his own son-in-law? And if so, had Helen played up to the game? The thought tortured him evilly. He felt it to be such an ignoble one that he must never breathe it to Helen, lest it should be utterly untrue. Yet to keep it to himself was not the best way of getting rid of it. It grew within him like a cancer; it filled all the unoccupied niches of his mind; it made him sick with apprehension.

And then, at last, on Christmas Eve he was cruel to her. There had been a large party at Beachings Over and she had been very shy and nervous all the evening. And now, after midnight, when they had gone up to their bedroom, he said, furiously: "What was the matter with you all to-night?"

She said: "Nothing."

He said: "Funny reason for not speaking a word all

the evening. Whatever must people have thought of you?"

"I don't know. I told you I should be nervous. I can't help it. You shouldn't have brought me if you hadn't been prepared for it."

"You might have at least said you'd got a headache and gone off to bed."

She said, frightenedly: "Oh, Kenneth, Kenneth, what's the matter—*why* are you talking to me like this?"

"I hope I'm not being unfair," he replied, imperturbably.

She flung herself on the bed and began to sob.

He went on unfastening his dress tie and thinking: She married me because my father has money. She married me because her father told her to. She schemed to get me. The housemastership was a plant to get me married to her before I knew whether I really wanted her or not.

He was carefully silent the whole rest of the night, though it was hard to lie awake and hear her sobbing.

IV

The next evening, Christmas Day, there was another party. She looked rather pale and unhappy, but he saw she was trying to be lively. He felt acutely sorry for her, and yet, whenever he felt in the mood to relent, he fortified his mind by thinking of her duplicity. He thought of other things besides her duplicity. He thought of her stupidity. Why was she so stupid? Why had he married a woman who couldn't gossip at a small Christmas party without being nervous? Why had he married a woman who never spoke at table unless she were spoken to? Other women said the silliest things and they sounded ordinary; Helen, forcing herself in sheer desperation to do so, occasionally said the most ordinary things and they sounded silly. If she ventured on any deliberate remark the atmosphere was always as if the whole world had stopped moving in order to see her make a fool of herself; what she said was probably no more foolish than what anybody else might have said, yet somehow it seemed outlined against the rest of the conversation as a piece of stark, unmitigated lunacy. Speed found himself holding his breath when she began to speak.

After the rest of the party had gone away he went into the library for a cigarette. Helen had gone up to bed; it was past two o'clock, but he felt very wakeful and disturbed. The

morning-room adjoined the library, and as he sat smoking by the remains of the fire, he heard conversation. He heard his father's gruff voice saying: "God knows, Fanny, I don't."

A remark apposite to a great many subjects, he reflected, with a half-smile. He had no intention to eavesdrop, but he did not see why he should move away merely because they were talking so loudly about some probably unimportant topic that their voices carried into the next room.

Then he heard his mother say: "I think she means well, Charles. Probably she's not used to the kind of life here."

His father replied: "Oh, I could tell if it was just that. What I think is that she's a silly little empty-headed piece of goods, an' I'd like to know what the devil that fool of a boy sees in her!"

The blood rushed to his cheeks and temples; he gripped the arms of his chair, listening intently now to every word, with no thought of the right or wrong of it.

The conversation went on.

"She's more intelligent when you get her alone, Charles. And I'm rather afraid you frighten her too."

"Frighten her be damned. If she'd any guts in her she'd like me. The right sort of women always do like me."

"Perhaps she does like you. That wouldn't stop her from being frightened of you, would it? I'm frightened of you myself, sometimes."

"Don't say damsilly things to me, Fanny. All I say is, I'm not a snob, an' I've always felt I'd let all my lads choose for themselves absolutely in a matter like marriage. But I've always hoped and trusted that they'd marry somebody worth marryin'. I told the boy the other night—if he'd married a dustman's daughter I'd have welcomed her if she'd been pretty or clever or smart or something or other about her."

"But Charles, she *is* pretty."

"Think so? Not my style, anyway. An' what's prettiness when there's nothing else? I like a girl with her wits about her, smart business-like sort o' girl, pretty if you like—all the better if she is—but a girl that needn't depend on her looks. Why, I'd rather the lad have married my typist than that silly little thing! Fact, I've a few factory girls I'd rather have had for a daughter-in-law than the one I've got!"

"Well, it's no good troubling about it, Charles. He's done it now, and if he can put up with her I think we ought to. She's fond enough of him, I should think."

"Good God, she ought to be! Probably she's got enough sense to know what's a bargain, anyway."

"I think you're a bit too severe, Charles. After all, we've only seen her for a week."

"Well, Fanny, answer me a straight question—are *you* really pleased with her?"

"No, I can't say I am, but I realise we've got to make the best of her. After all, men do make silly mistakes, don't they?"

"Over women they do, that's a fact. . . . You know, it's just struck me—that old chap Ervine's played a dam' smart game."

"What do you mean?"

"I bet he put her on to it. I thought I was getting somethin' out of him when I had that talk over the 'phone, but I'll acknowledge he's gone one better on me. Smart man, Ervine. I like a smart man, even if it's me he puts it across. I like him better than his daughter."

"I should hate him. I think the whole business is dreadful. Perfectly dreadful. . . . Did you tell Rogers he could go to bed? . . . I said breakfast at nine-thirty . . . yes, ten if you like. . . ."

The voices trailed off into the distance.

V

He crept up the stairs carefully, trying not to let them creak. At the landing outside his room he paused, looking out of the window. It was a night full of beautiful moonlight, and on the new clock-tower over the garage the weather-vane glinted like a silver arrow. Snow lay in patches against the walls, and the pools amidst the cobble-stones in the courtyard were filmed over with thin ice. As he looked out upon the scene the clock chimed the quarter.

He took a few paces back and turned the handle of the door. He felt frightened to enter. What should he say to her? Would she be in bed and asleep? Would she be pretending to be asleep? Should he say nothing at all, but wait till morning, when he had thought it all over?

He switched on the light and saw that she was in bed. He saw her golden hair straggling forlornly over the pillow. Something in that touched him, and suspicion, always on guard against the softness of his heart, struck at him with a sudden stab. She had plotted. She was a schemer. The for-

lorn spread of her hair over the pillow was part of the duplicity of her.

He hardened. He said, very quietly and calmly: "Are you awake, Helen?"

The hair moved and shook itself. "Kenneth!"

"I want to speak to you."

"What is it, Kenneth?"

"Did you—?—Look here—" He paused. How could he put it to her? If he said straight out: "Did you plot with your father to marry me?" she would, of course, say no. He must be careful. He must try to trap her without her being aware.

"Look here—did you know that it was due to my father's influence that I got Lavery's?"

"No, was it? It was good of your father to help you, wasn't it?"

Stupid little fool! he thought. (Good God, that was nearly what his father had said she was!)

He said: "He meant it kindly, no doubt. But you didn't know?"

"How should I know?"

"I thought perhaps your father might have told you."

"I was never interested in his business."

Pause. A sudden sharp wave of irritation made him continue:

"I say, Helen, you might remember whom you're talking to when you're at dinner. The Lord Randolph you were saying the uncomplimentary things about happens to be the cousin of the lady sitting on your left."

"Really? Oh, I'm so sorry, Kenneth. I didn't know. D'you think she'd be offended?"

"I shouldn't think she'd trouble very much about your opinion, but the publicity which you gave to it would probably annoy her a little."

She suddenly hid her head in her arms and burst into tears.

"Oh, Kenneth—let's go away to-morrow! Let's go back to Millstead! Oh, I can't bear this any more—I've been miserable ever since I came. I told you it would all go wrong, Kenneth!—Kenneth, I *have* tried, but it's no good—I can't be happy!—Take me away to-morrow, Kenneth. Kenneth, if you don't I shall run away myself—I simply can't bear any more of it. You've hated me ever since you came here, because I don't make you feel proud of me. Oh, I *wish* I did—

I *do* wish I could! But I've tried so many times—I've made myself sick with trying—and now that I know it's no good, let me go back to Millstead where I can give up trying for a while. Kenneth, be kind to me—I can't help it—I can't help not being all that you want me to be!"

She held out her arms for him to have taken hold of, but he stood aside.

"I think perhaps a return to Millstead would be the best thing we could do," he said, calmly. "We certainly don't seem to be having a very exhilarating time here. . . . Breakfast is at ten, I think. That means that the car can take us down to catch the 11.50. . . . I'd better 'phone Burton in the morning, then he can air the place for us. Would you like to dine at School tomorrow? I was thinking that probably your father would invite us if he knew we were coming back so soon?"

It was in his mind that perhaps he could scheme some trap at the Head's dinner-table that would enmesh them both.

She said drearily: "Oh, I don't mind, Kenneth. Just whatever you want."

"Very well," he replied, and said no more.

He lay awake until he fancied it must be almost dawn, and all the time he was acutely miserable. He was so achingly sorry for her, and yet the suspicion in his mind fortified him against all kindly impulses. He felt that he would never again weakly give way to her, because the thought of her duplicity would give him strength, strength even against her tears and misery. And yet there was one thing the thought of her duplicity did not give him; it did not give him peace. It made him bitter, unrestful, angry with the world.

And he decided, just before he went to sleep, that these new circumstances that had arisen justified him in taking what attitude he liked towards Clare. If he wanted to see her he would see her. He would no longer make sacrifices of his friends for Helen's sake.

BOOK III

THE LENT TERM

CHAPTER ONE

I

"The worst term uv the three, sir, that's my opinion," said Burton, pulling the curtains across the window at dusk.

"What makes you think that?" asked Speed, forcing himself to be affable.

"Well, you see, sir, the winter term—or, prop'ly speakin', sir, I should say the Michaelmas term—isn't so bad because there's the Christmas 'olidays to look forward to. But the Lent Term always seems to me to be ten times worse, because there's nothin' at the end of it to look forward to. Is there now, sir?"

"There's the Easter holidays and the spring weather."

Burton grinned. "That's if you're an optimist, sir."

He was an old man, deeply attached to the school and very reliable, but prone to take odd liberties on the strength of age and service. Speed always felt that in Burton's eyes he was a youngster, hardly less a youngster than one of the prefects, and that Burton considered himself as the central planet of Lavery's round which Speed revolved as merely a satellite. The situation had amused him until now; but on this afternoon of the return from Beachings Over a whole crowd of sinister suspicions assailed him. In Burton's attitude he seemed to detect a certain carefully-veiled mockery; was it possible that Burton knew or guessed the secret of his appointment to Lavery's? Was it also possible that Burton had pierced through his marriage with Helen and had seen the sinister scheme behind it?

He stared hard at Burton. The man was old in a rather theatrical way; he clumped about exactly like the faithful retainer in the old-fashioned melodrama; if you addressed him he would turn round, put one hand to his ear, to leer at you, and say grotesquely: "Sir?" He was the terror of all the housemaids, the pet of all the Junior boys, and a sort of communal butler and valet to the prefects. And, beyond all

doubt, he was one of the sights of Lavery's. For the moment Speed detested him.

"I say, Burton."

The turn, the hand to ear, the leer, and the grotesque interrogative: "Sir?"

"How long have you been at Millstead?"

"Fifty-one year, sir, come next July. I started when I was fourteen year old, sir, peelin' potaties in the old kitchins that used to be underneath Milner's. I come to Lavery's when I was twenty-four as underporter. I remember old Mr. Hardacre that wuz 'ousemaster before Mr. Lavery, Sir. Mr. Lavery was 'ousemaster for thirty-eight year, sir, an' a very great friend of mine. He came to see me only larst Toosday, sir, a-knockin' at the pantry door just like an old pal o' mine might. He wuz wantin' to know 'ow the old place was gettin' on."

Speed's glance hardened. He could imagine Lavery and Burton having a malicious conversation about himself.

Burton went on, grinning: "He was arskin' after you, Mr. Speed. I told 'im you wuz away spendin' the Christmas with Sir Charles and Lady Speed. An' I told him you wuz doin' very well an' bein' very popular, if you'll pard'n the liberty I took."

"Oh, certainly," said Speed, rather coldly.

When Burton had gone out he poked up the fire and pondered. Now that he was back at Millstead he wished he had stayed longer in Beachings Over. Millstead was absolutely a dead place in vacation time, and in the Christmas vacation nothing more dreary and uniformly depressing had ever come within his experience. Dr. and Mrs. Ervine, so Potter informed him, had gone to town for a few days and would not be back until after the New Year. None of the other housemasters was in residence. The huge empty footer pitches, hardly convalescent after the frays of the past term, were being marked off for hockey by the groundsman; the chapel was undergoing a slothful scrubbing by a platoon of chattering charwomen; the music-rooms were closed; the school organ was in the hands of the repairers; the clock in the chapel belfry had stopped, apparently because it was nobody's business to wind it up during vacation-time.

Perhaps it would freeze enough for skating on Dinglay Fen, was his most rapturous hope. Helen was shopping in the village, and he expected her back very soon. It was nearly

dark now, but the groundsman was still busy. There was something exquisitely forlorn in that patient transference from cricket to footer, from footer to hockey, and then from hockey to cricket again, which marked the passage of the years at Millstead. He wondered how long it would all last. He wondered what sort of an upheaval would be required to change it. Would famine or pestilence or war or revolution be enough?

Helen came in. It was curious that his suspicion of her, at first admitted to be without confirmation, had now become almost a certainty; so that he no longer felt inclined to give her the benefit of the doubt, or even that there was any doubt whose benefit he could give her.

While they were having tea he suddenly decided that he would go out that evening alone and walk himself into a better humour. A half-whimsical consciousness of his own condition made him rather more kind to her; he felt sorry for anybody who had to put up with him in his present mood. He said: "I think I'll have a walk after tea, Helen. I'll be back about eight. It'll do me good to take some exercise."

She gave him a sudden, swift, challenging look, and he could see exactly what was in her eyes. She thought he was going to see Clare.

The thought had not been in his mind before. But now he was at the mercy of it; it invaded him; after all, why shouldn't he visit Clare? Furthermore, what right had Helen to stop him? He put on his hat and coat in secret tingling excitement; he would go down into the village and visit Clare. Curious that he hadn't thought of it before! Helen had simply no *right* to object. And as he turned his mind to all the suspicions that he had so lately crowded into it, he felt that he was abundantly justified in visiting a friend of his, even if his wife were foolishly jealous of her.

"Back about eight," he repeated, as he opened the door to go out. Somehow, he wanted to kiss her. He had always kissed her before going out from Lavery's. But now, since she made no reply to his remark, presumably she did not expect it.

II

The Millstead road was black as jet, for the moon was hidden behind the thickest of clouds. It was just beginning to freeze,

and as he strode along the path by the school railings he thought of those evenings in the winter term when he had seen Clare home after the concert rehearsals. Somehow, all that seemed ages ago. The interlude at Beachings Over had given all the previous term the perspective of immense distance; he felt as if he had been housemaster at Lavery's for years, as if he had been married to Helen for years, and as if Clare were a friend whom he had known long years ago and had lost sight of since.

As he reached the High Street he began to feel nervous. After all, Clare might not want to see him. He remembered vaguely their last interview and the snub she had given him. He looked further back and remembered the first time he had ever seen her; that dinner at the Head's house on the first evening of the summer term. . . .

But he could not help being nervous. He tried to think that what he was doing was something perfectly natural and ordinary; that he was just paying a call on a friend as anybody might have done on a return from a holiday. He was angry with himself for getting so excited about the business. And when he rang the bell of the side-door next to the shop he had the distinct hope that she would not be in.

But she was in.

She came to the door herself, and it was so dark outside that she could not see him. "Who is it?" she asked, and he replied, rather fatuously expecting her to recognise his voice immediately: "Me. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

She answered, in that characteristically unafraid way of hers: "I'm sure I don't know in the least who you are. Will you tell me your name?"

Then he said, rather embarrassedly: "Speed, my name is."

"Oh?"

Such a strange surprised little "Oh?" He could not see her any more than she could see him, but he knew that she was startled.

"*Am* I disturbing you?" he went on.

"Oh, no. You'd better come inside. There's nobody in except myself, so I warn you."

"Warn me of what?"

"Of the conventions you are breaking by coming in."

"Would you rather I didn't?"

"Oh, don't trouble about me. It's yourself you must think about."

"Very well then, I'll come in."

"Right. There are five steps, then two paces along the level, and then two more steps. It's an old house, you see."

In the dark and narrow lobby, with the front door closed behind him, and Clare somewhere near him in the darkness, he suddenly felt no longer nervous but immensely exhilarated, as if he had taken some decisive and long contemplated step—some step that, wise or unwise, would at least bring him into a new set of circumstances.

Something in her matter-of-fact directions was immensely reassuring; a feeling of buoyancy came over him as he felt his way along the corridor with Clare somewhat ahead of him. She opened a door and a shaft of yellow lamplight came out and prodded the shadows.

"My little sitting-room," she said.

It was a long low-roofed apartment with curtained windows at either end. Persian rugs and tall tiers of bookshelves and some rather good pieces of old furniture gave it a deliciously warm appearance; a heavily shaded lamp was the sole illumination. Speed, quick to appreciate anything artistic, was immediately impressed; he exclaimed, on the threshold: "I say, what a gloriously old-fashioned room!"

"Not all of it," she answered quietly. She turned the shade of the lamp so that its rays focussed themselves on a writing-desk in an alcove. "The typewriter and the telephone are signs that I am not at all an old-fashioned person."

"I didn't say that, did I?" he replied, smiling.

She laughed. "Please sit down and be comfortable. It's nice to have such an unexpected call. And I'm glad that though I'm banned from Lavery's you don't consider yourself banned from here."

"Ah," he said. He was surprised that she had broached the question so directly. He flushed slightly and went on, after a pause: "I think perhaps the ban had better be withdrawn altogether."

"Why?"

"Oh, well—well, it doesn't matter—I didn't come here to talk about it."

"Oh, yes, you did. That's just what you did come here to talk about. Either that or something more serious. You don't

mean to tell me that you pay an unconventional call like this just to tell me what an enjoyable holiday you've had."

"I didn't have an enjoyable holiday at all," he answered.

"There! I guessed as much! After all, you wouldn't have come home so soon if you'd been having a thoroughly good time, would you?"

"Helen wanted to come home."

She ceased her raillery of him and went suddenly serious. For some time she stared into the fire without speaking, and then, in a different tone of voice altogether she said: "Why did she want to come home?"

He began to talk rather fast and staccato. "I—I don't know whether I ought to tell you this—except that you were Helen's friend and can perhaps help me. . . . You see, Helen was very nervous the whole time, and there were one or two dinner-parties, and she—well, not exactly put her foot in it, you know, but was—well, rather obviously out of everything. I don't know how it is—she seems quite unable to converse in the ordinary way that people do—I don't mean anything brilliant—few people converse brilliantly—what I mean is that—well, she—"

She interrupted: "You mean that when her neighbour says, 'Have you heard Caruso in Carmen?'—she hasn't got the sense to reply: 'Oh, yes, isn't he simply gorgeous?' "

"That's a rather satirical way of putting it."

"Well, anyway, it seems a small reason for coming home. If I were constitutionally incapable of sustaining dinner-party small-talk and my husband brought me away from his parents for that reason, I'd leave him for good."

"I didn't bring her away. She begged me to let her go."

"Then you must have been cruel to her. You must have made her think that it mattered."

"Well, doesn't it matter?"

She laughed a little harshly. "What a different man you're becoming, Mr. Speed! Before you married Helen you knew perfectly well that she was horribly nervous in front of strangers and that she'd never show off well at rather tiresome society functions. And yet if I or anybody else had dared to suggest that it mattered you'd have been most tremendously indignant. You used to think her nervousness rather charming, in fact."

He said, rather pathetically: "You've cornered me, I confess. And I suppose I'd better tell you the real reason. Helen's

nervousness doesn't matter to me. It never has mattered and it doesn't matter now. It wasn't that, or rather, that would never have annoyed me but for something infinitely more serious. While I was at home I found out about my appointment at Lavery's."

"Well, what about it?"

"It was my father got it for me. He interviewed Portway and Ervine and God knows who else."

"Well?"

"Well?—Do you think I *like* to be dependent on that sort of help? Do you think I like to remember all the kind things that people at Millstead have said about me, and to feel that they weren't sincere, that they were simply the result of a little of my father's wire-pulling?"

She did not answer.

"I left home," he went on, "because my father wanted to shove me into a nice comfortable job in a soap-works. I wanted to earn my own living on my own merits. And then, when I manage to get free, he thoughtfully steps in front of me, so to speak, and without my knowing it, makes the path smooth for me!"

"What an idealist you are, Mr. Speed!"

"What?"

"An idealist. So innocent of the world! Personally, I think your father's action extremely kind. And also I regard your own condition as one of babyish innocence. Did you really suppose that an unknown man, aged twenty-three, with a middling degree and only one moderately successful term's experience, would be offered the Mastership of the most important House at Millstead, unless there'd been a little private manœuvring behind the scenes? Did you think that, in the ordinary course of nature, a man like Ervine would be only too willing to set you up in Lavery's with his daughter for a wife?"

"Ah, that's it! He wanted me to marry Helen, didn't he?"

"My dear man, wasn't it perfectly obvious that he did? All through last summer term you kept meeting her in the school grounds and behaving in a manner for which any other Master would have been instantly sacked, and all he did was to smile and be nice and keep inviting you to dinner!"

Speed cried excitedly: "Yes, that's what my father said. He said it was a plant; that Ervine in the end proved himself the cleverer of the two."

"Your father told you that?"

"No, I overheard it."

"Your father, I take it, didn't like Helen?"

"He didn't see the best of her. She was so nervous."

He went on eagerly: "Don't you see the suspicion that's in my mind?—That Ervine plotted with Helen to get me married to her! That she married me for all sorts of sordid and miserable reasons!"

And then Clare said, with as near passion as he had ever yet seen in her: "Mr. Speed, you're a fool! You don't understand Helen. She has faults, but there's one certain thing about her—she's straight—*absolutely* straight! And if you've been cruel to her because you suspected her of being crooked, then you've done her a fearful injustice! She's straight—straight to the point of obstinacy."

"You think that?"

"*Think* it? Why, man, I'm *certain* of it!"

And at the sound of her words, spoken so confidently and indignantly, it seemed so to him. Of course she was straight. And he had been cruel to her. He was always the cause of her troubles. It was always his fault. And at that very moment, might be, she was crying miserably in the drawing-room at Lavery's, crying for jealousy of Clare. A sudden fierce hostility to Clare swept over him; she was too strong, too clever, too clear-seeing. He hated her because it was so easy for her to see things as they were; because all problems seemed to yield to the probing of her candid eyes. He hated her because he knew, and had felt, how easy it was to take help from her. He hated her because her sympathy was so practical and abundant and devoid of sentiment. He hated her, perhaps, because he feared to do anything else.

She said softly: "What a strange combination of strength and weakness you are, Mr. Speed! Strong enough to follow out an ideal, and weak enough to be at the mercy of any silly little suspicion that comes into your mind!"

He was too much cowed down by the magnitude of his blunder to say a great deal more, and in a short while he left, thanking her rather embarrassedly for having helped him. And he said, in the pitch-dark lobby as she showed him to the front door: "Clare, I think this visit of mine had better be a secret, don't you?"

And she replied: "You needn't fear that I shall tell anybody."

When the door had closed on him outside and he was walking back along the Millstead lane it occurred to him quite suddenly: Why, I called her Clare! He was surprised, and perhaps slightly annoyed with himself for having done unconsciously what he would never have done intentionally. Then he wondered if she had noticed it, and if so, what she had thought. He reflected that she had plenty of good practical sense in her, and would not be likely to stress the importance of it. Good practical sense! The keynote of her, so it seemed to him. How strong and helpful it was, and yet, in another way, how deeply and passionately opposed to his spirit! Why, he could almost imagine Clare getting on well with his father. And when he reflected further, that, in all probability, his father would like Clare because she had "her wits about her," it seemed to him that the deepest level of disparagement had been reached. He smiled to himself a little cynically; then in a wild onrush came remorse at the injustice he had done to Helen. All the way back to Millstead he was grappling with it and making up his mind that he would be everlastingly kind to her in the future, and that, since she was as she was, he would not see Clare any more.

III

He found her, as he had more than half expected, sitting in the drawing-room at Lavery's, her feet bunched up in front of the fire and her hands clasping her knees. She was not reading or sewing or even crying; she was just sitting there in perfect stillness, thinking, thinking, thinking. He knew, as by instinct, that this was not a pose of hers; he knew that she had been sitting like that for a quarter, a half, perhaps a whole hour before his arrival; and that, if he had come later, she would probably have been waiting and thinking still. Something in her which he did not understand inclined her to brood, and to like brooding. As he entered the room and saw her thus, and as she gave one swift look behind her and then, seeing it was he, turned away again to resume her fireside brooding, a sudden excruciatingly sharp feeling of irritation rushed over him, swamping for the instant even his remorse: why *was* she so silent and aggrieved? If he had treated her badly, why did she mourn in such empty, terrible silence? Then remorse recovered its sway over him

and her attitude seemed the simple and tremendous condemnation of himself.

He did not know how to begin; he wanted her to know how contrite he was, yet he dared not tell her his suspicion. Oh, if she had only the tact to treat him as if it had never happened, so that he in return could treat her as if it had never happened, and the unhappy memory of it all be speedily swept away! But he knew from the look on her that she could never do that.

He walked up to the back of her chair, put his hand on her shoulder, and said: "Helen!"

She shrugged her shoulders with a sudden gesture that made him take his hand away. She made no answer.

He blundered after a pause: "Helen, I'm so sorry I've been rather hard on you lately—it's all been a mistake, and I promise—"

"You've been down to see Clare!" she interrupted him, with deadly quietness, still watching the fire.

He started. Then he knew that he must lie, because he could never explain to her the circumstances in a way that she would not think unsatisfactory.

"Helen, I haven't!" he exclaimed, and his indignation sounded sincere, perhaps because his motive in lying was a pure one.

She made no answer to that.

He went on, more fervently: "I didn't see Clare, Helen! Whatever made you think that?—I just went for a walk along the Deepersdale road—I wanted some exercise, that was all!"

She laughed—an awful little coughing laugh.

"You went to see Clare," she persisted, turning round and, for the first time, looking him in the eyes. "I followed you, and I saw you go in Clare's house."

"You did?" he exclaimed, turning suddenly pale.

"Yes. Now what have you got to say?"

He was, rather to his own surprise, quite furious with her for having followed him. "I've simply got this to say," he answered, hotly. "You've done no good by following me. You've made me feel I can't trust you, and you've made yourself feel that you can't trust me. You'll never believe the true explanation of why I went to Clare—you'll go on suspecting all sorts of impossible things—you'll worry yourself to death over nothing—and as for me—well, whenever I go out alone

I shall wonder if you're following a few hundred yards behind!"

Then she said, still with the same tragic brooding quietness: "You needn't fear, Kenneth. I'll never follow you. I didn't follow you to-night. I only said I did. I found out what I wanted to find out just as well by that, didn't I?"

He was dazed. He had never guessed that she could be so diabolically clever. He sank into a chair and shut his eyes, unable to speak. She went on, without the slightest inflexion in the maddening level of her voice: "I'm going to leave you, Kenneth. You want Clare, and I'm going to leave you to her. I won't have you when you want another woman."

He buried his head in his hands and muttered, in a voice husky with sobbing: "That's not true, Helen. I don't want Clare. I don't want any other woman. I only want you, Helen. Helen, you won't leave me, will you? Promise me you won't leave me, Helen. Helen, don't you—can't you believe me when I tell you I don't want Clare?"

Still she reiterated, like some curious, solemn litany: "I'm going to leave you, Kenneth. You don't really want me. It's Clare you want, not me. You'll be far happier with Clare. And I shall be far happier without you than with you when you're wanting Clare. I—I can't bear you to want Clare, Kenneth. I'd rather you—have her—than want her. So I've decided. I'm not angry with you. I'm just determined, that's all. I shall leave you and then you'll be free to do what you like."

Somehow, a feeling of overwhelming tiredness overspread him, so that for a short moment he felt almost inclined to acquiesce from mere lack of energy to do anything else. He felt sick as he stared at her. Then a curiously detached aloofness came into his attitude; he looked down on the situation a trifle cynically and thought: How dramatic! Something in him wanted to laugh, and something else in him wanted to cry; most of him wanted to kiss her and be comfortable and go to sleep; and nothing at all of him wanted to argue. He wondered just then if such a moment ever came to her as it came to him; a moment when he could have borne philosophically almost any blow, when all human issues seemed engulfed in the passionate desire to be let alone.

Yet some part of him that was automatic continued the argument. He pleaded with her, assured her of his deep and true love, poured infinite scorn on Clare and his relations with her, held up to view a rosy future at Lavery's in which

he would live with Helen as in one long, idyllic dream. And as he sketched out this beautiful picture, his mind was ironically invaded by another one, which he did not show her, but which he felt to be more true: Lavery's in deep wintertime, with the wind and rain howling round the walls of it, and the bleak shivering corridors, and the desolation of the afternoons, and the cramped hostility of the Masters' Common-Room, and the red-tinted drawing-room at night, all full of shadows and silence and tragic monotony. And all the time he was picturing that in his mind he was telling her of Lavery's with the sun on it, and the jessamine, and the classrooms all full of the sunlit air, and love, like a queen, reigning over it all. The vision forced itself out; Helen saw it, but Speed could not. As he went on pleading with her he became enthusiastic, but it was an artistic enthusiasm; he was captivated by his own skill in persuasion. And whenever, for a moment, this interest in his own artistry waned, there came on him afresh the feeling of deep weariness, and a desire only to rest and sleep and be friends with everybody.

At last he persuaded her. It had taken from nine o'clock until midnight. He was utterly tired out when he had finished. Yet there seemed to be no tiredness in her, only a happiness that she could now take and caress him as her own. She could not understand how, now that they had made their reconciliation, he should not be eager to cement it by endearments. Instead of which he lit a cigarette and said that he was hungry.

While she busied herself preparing a small meal he found himself watching her continually as she moved about the room, and wondering, in the calmest and most aloof manner, whether he was really glad that he had won. Eventually he decided that he was. She was his wife and he loved her. If they were careful to avoid misunderstandings no doubt they would get along tolerably well in the future. The future! The vision came to him again of the term that was in front of him; a vision that was somehow frightening.

Yet, above all else, he was tired—dead tired.

The last thing she said to him that night was a soft, half-whimpered: "Kenneth, I believe you *do* want Clare."

He said sleepily, and without any fervour: "My dear, I assure you I don't."

And he fell asleep wondering very vaguely what it would be like to want Clare, and whether it would ever be possible for him to do so.

CHAPTER TWO

I

Term began on the Wednesday in the third week in January.

Once again, the first few days were something of an ordeal. Constant anticipations had filled Speed's mind with apprehensions; he was full of carefully excogitated glooms. Would the hostility of the Masters be more venomous? Would the prefects of his own house attempt to undermine his discipline? Would the rank and file try to "rag" him when he took preparation in the Big Hall? Somehow, all his dreams of Millstead and of Lavery's had turned now to fears; he had slipped into the position when it would satisfy him merely to avoid danger and crush hostility. No dreams now about Lavery's being the finest House in Millstead, and he the glorious and resplendent captain of it; no vision now of scouring away the litter of mild corruptions and abuses that hedged in Lavery's on all sides; no hopes of a new world, made clean and wholesome by his own influence upon it. All his desire was that he should escape the pitfalls that were surrounding him, that he should, somehow, live through the future without disaster to himself. Enthusiasm was all gone. Those old days when he had plunged zestfully into all manner of new things, up to his neck in happiness as well as in mistakes—those days were over. His one aim now was not to make mistakes, and though he did not know it, he cared for little else in the world.

That first night of term he played the beginning-of-term hymn in the chapel.

"Lord, behold us with Thy blessing,
Once again assembled here . . ."

The words fell on his mind with a sense of heavy, unsurmountable gloom. He looked into the mirror above his head and saw the choir-stalls and the front rows of the pews; the curious gathering of Millsteadians in their not-yet-discarded vacation finery; Millsteadians unwontedly sober; some,

perhaps, a little heart-sick. He saw Ervine's back, as he read the lesson from the lectern, and as he afterwards stood to pronounce the Benediction. "The grace of God, which passeth—um—understanding, and the—um—fellowship of the—um—the Holy Spirit . . ."

He hated that man.

He thought of the dark study and Potter and the drawing-room where he and Helen had spent so many foolish hours during the summer term of the year before.

Foolish hours? Had he come to the point when he looked back with scorn upon his courtship days? No, no; he withdrew the word "foolish."

". . . rest upon—um—all our hearts—now and—um—for ever—um—Ah-men. . . . I would—um, yes—be glad—if the—um—the—the new boys this term—would stay behind to see me—um, yes—to see me for a moment. . . ."

Yes, he hated that man.

He gathered his gown round him and descended the ladder into the vestry. A little boy said "Good-evening, Mr. Speed," and shook hands with him. "Good-evening, Robinson," he said, rather quietly. The boy went on: "I hope you had a nice Christmas, sir." Speed started, checked himself, and replied: "Oh yes, very nice, thanks. And you too, I hope." "Oh yes, sir," answered the boy. When he had gone Speed wondered if the whole incident had been a subtle and ironical form of "ragging." Cogitation convinced him that it couldn't have been; yet fear, always watching and ready to pounce, would have made him think so. He felt really alarmed as he walked back across the quadrangle to Lavery's, alarmed, not about the Robinson incident, which he could see was perfectly innocent, but because he was so prone to these awful and ridiculous fears. If he went on suspecting where there was no cause, and imagining where there was no reality, some day Millstead would drive him mad. *Mad*—yes, *mad*. Two boys ran past him quickly and he could see that they stopped afterwards to stare at him and to hold some sort of a colloquy. What was that for? Was there anything peculiar about him? He felt to see if his gown was on wrong side out: no, that was all right. Then what did they stop for? Then he realised that he was actually speaking that sentence out aloud; he had said, as to some corporeal companion: *What did they stop for?* Had he been gibbering like that all the way across the quadrangle? Had the two boys heard him

talking about going mad? Good God, he hoped not! That would be terrible, terrible. He went in to Lavery's with the sweat standing out in globes on his forehead. And yet, underfoot, the ground was beginning to be hard with frost.

Well, anyway, one thing was comforting; he was getting along much better with Helen. They had not had any of those dreadful, pathetic scenes for over a fortnight. His dreams of happiness were gone; it was enough if he succeeded in staving off the misery. As he entered the drawing-room Helen ran forward to meet him and kissed him fervently. "The first night of our new term," she said, but the mention only gave a leap to his anxieties. But he returned her embrace, willing to extract what satisfaction he could from mere physical passion.

II

An hour later he was dining in the Masters' Common-Room. He would have avoided the ordeal but for the unwritten law which ordained that even the housemasters should be present on the first night of term. Not that there was anything ceremonial about the proceedings. Nothing happened that did not always happen, except the handshaking and the disposition to talk more volubly than usual. Potter arched his long mottled neck in between each pair of diners in exactly the same manner as heretofore; there was the same unchanged menu of vegetable soup, under-cooked meat, and a very small tart on a very large plate.

But to Speed it seemed indeed as if everything was changed. The room seemed different; seemed darker, gloomier, more chronically insufferable; Potter's sibilant, cat-like stealthiness took on a degree of sinisterness that made Speed long to fight him and knock him down, soup-plates and all; the food tasted reminiscently of all the vaguely uncomfortable things he had ever known. But it was in the faces of the men around him that he detected the greatest change of all. He thought they were all hating him. He caught their eyes glancing upon him malevolently; he thought that when they spoke to him it was with some subtle desire to insult him; he thought also, that when they were silent it was because they were ignoring him deliberately. The mild distaste he had had for some of them, right from the time of first meeting, now flamed up into the most virulent and venomous of hatreds.

And even Clanwell, whom he had always liked exceedingly, he suspected ever so slightly at first, though in a little while he liked him as much as ever, and more perhaps, because he liked the others so little.

Pritchard he detested. Pritchard enquired about his holiday, how and where he had spent it, and whether he had had a good time; also if Mrs. Speed were quite well, and how had she liked the visit to Beachings Over. Somehow, the news had spread that he had taken Helen to spend Christmas at his parents' house. He wondered in what way, but felt too angry to enquire. Pritchard's questions stung him to silent, bottled-up fury; he answered in monosyllables.

"Friend Speed has the air of a thoughtful man," remarked Ransome in his oblique, half-sarcastic way. And Speed smiled at this, not because it amused him at all, but because Ransome possessed personality which submerged to some extent his own.

Finally, when Clanwell asked him up to coffee he declined, courteously, but with a touch of unboyish reserve which he had never previously exhibited in his relations with Clanwell. "I've got such a lot of work at Lavery's," he pleaded. "Another night, Clanwell. . . ."

And as he walked across the quadrangle at half-past eight he heard again those curious sounds that had thrilled him so often before, those sounds that told him that Millstead had come to life again. The tall blocks of Milner's and Lavery's were cliffs of yellow brilliance, from which great slanting shafts of light fell away to form a patchwork on the quadrangle. He heard again the chorus of voices in the dormitories, the tinkle of crockery in the basement studies, the swish of water into the baths, the babel of miscellaneous busyness. He saw faces peering out of the high windows, and heard voices calling to one another across the dark gulf between the two houses. It did not thrill him now, or rather, it did not thrill him with the beauty of it; it was a thrill of terror, if a thrill at all, which came to him. And he climbed up the flight of steps that led to the main door of Lavery's and was almost afraid to ring the bell of his own house.

Burton came, shambling along with his unhappy feet and beaming—positively beaming—because it was the beginning of the term.

"Once again, sir," he said, mouthing, as he admitted Speed. He jangled his huge keys in his hand as if he were a

stage jailer in a stage prison. "I don't like the 'ockey term myself, sir, but I'd rather have any term than the 'olidays."

"Yes," said Speed, rather curtly.

There were several jobs he had to do. Some of them he could postpone for a day, or perhaps, even for a few days, if he liked, but there was no advantage in doing so, and besides, he would feel easier when they were all done. First, he had to deliver a little pastoral lecture to the new boys. Then he had to chat with the prefects, old and new—rather an ordeal, that. Then he had to patrol the dormitories and see that everything was in proper order. Then he had to take and give receipts for money which anybody might wish to "bank" with him. Then he had to give Burton orders about the morning. Then he had to muster a roll-call and enquire about those who had not arrived. Then, at ten-thirty, he had to see that all lights were out and the community settled in its beds for slumber. . . .

All of which he accomplished automatically. He told the new boys, in a little speech that was meant to be facetious, that the one unforgivable sin at Lavery's was to pour tea-leaves down the waste-pipes of the baths. He told the prefects, in a voice that was harsh because it was nervous, that he hoped they would all co-operate with him for the good of the House. He told Burton, quite tonelessly, to ring the bell in the dormitories at seven-thirty, and to have breakfast ready in his sitting-room at eight. And he went round the dormitories at half-past ten, turning out gases and delivering brusque good-nights.

Then he went downstairs into the drawing-room of his own house where Helen was. He went in smiling. Helen was silent, but he knew from experience that silence with her did not necessarily betoken unhappiness. Yet even so, he found such silences always unnerving. To-night he wanted, if she had been in the mood, to laugh, to be jolly, to bludgeon away his fears. He would not have minded getting slightly drunk. . . . But she was silent, brooding, no doubt, happily, but with a sadness that was part of her happiness.

As he passed by the table in the dimly-lit room he knocked over the large cash-box full of the monies that the boys had banked with him. It fell on to the floor with a crash which made all the wires in the piano vibrate.

"Aren't you careless?" said Helen, quietly, looking round at him.

He looked at her, then at the cash-box on the floor, and said finally: "Damn it all! A bit of noise won't harm us. This isn't a funeral."

He said it sharply, exasperated, as if he were just trivially enraged. After he had said it he stared at her, waiting for her to say something. But she made no answer, and after a long pause he solemnly picked up the cash-box.

III

There came a January morning when he had a sudden and almost intolerable longing to see Clare. The temperature was below freezing-point, although the sun was shining out of a clear sky; and he was taking five *alpha* in art drawing in a room in which the temperature, by means of the steamiest of hot-water pipes, had been raised to sixty. His desk was at the side of a second-floor window, and as he looked out of it he could see the frost still white on the quadrangle and the housemaids pouring hot water and ashes on the slippery cloister-steps. He had, first of all, an urgent desire to be outside in the keen, crisp air, away from the fugginess of heated class-rooms; then faintly-heard trot of horses along the Millstead lane set up in him a restlessness that grew as the hands of his watch slid round to the hour of dismissal. It was a half-holiday in the afternoon, and he decided to walk up to Dinglay Fen, taking with him his skates, in case the ice should be thick enough. The thought of it, cramped up in a stuffy class-room, was a sufficiently disturbing one. And then, quite suddenly, there came into his longing for the fresh air and the freedom of the world a secondary longing—faint at first, and then afterwards stormily insurgent—a longing for Clare to be with him on his adventures. That was all. He just wanted her company, the tread of her feet alongside his on the fenland roads, her answers to his questions, and her questions for him to answer. It was a strange want, it seemed to him, but a harmless one; and he saw no danger in it.

Dismissal-hour arrived, and by that time he was in a curious ferment of desire. Moreover, his brain had sought out and discovered a piece of casuistry suitable for his purpose. Had not Clare, on the occasion of his last visit to her, told him plainly and perhaps significantly that she would never tell anyone of his visit? And if she would not tell of that one,

why should she of *any one*—any one he might care to make in the future? And as his only reason for not visiting her was a desire to please Helen, surely that end was served just as easily if he *did* visit her, provided that Helen did not know. There could be no moral iniquity in lying to Helen in order to save her from unhappiness, and anyway, a lie to her was at least as honest as her subterfuge had been in order to learn from him of his last visit. On all sides, therefore, he was able to fortify himself for the execution of his desire.

But, said Caution, it would be silly to see her in the daytime, and out-of-doors, for then they would run the risk of being seen together by some of the Millstead boys, or the masters, and the affair would pretty soon come to Helen's ears, along channels that would by no means minimise it in transmission. Hence again, the necessity to see Clare in the evenings, and at her house, as before. And at the thought of her cosy little upstairs sitting-room, with the books and the Persian rugs and the softly-shaded lamp, he kindled to a new and exquisite anticipation.

So, then, he would go up to Dinglay Fen alone that afternoon, wanting Clare's company, no doubt, but willing to wait for it happily now that it was to come to him so soon. Nor did he think that there was anything especially Machiavellian in the plans he had decided upon.

IV

But he saw her sooner than that evening.

Towards midday the clouds suddenly wrapped up the sky and there began a tremendous snowstorm that lasted most of the afternoon and prevented the hockey matches. All hope of skating was thus dispelled, and Speed spent the afternoon in the drawing-room at Lavery's, combining the marking of exercise-books with the joyous anticipation of the evening. Then, towards four o'clock, the sky cleared as suddenly as it had clouded over, and a red sun shone obliquely over the white and trackless quadrangle. There was a peculiar brightness that came into the room through the window that overlooked the snow; a strange unwonted brightness that kindled a tremulous desire in his heart, a desire delicate and exquisite, a desire without command in it, but with a fragile, haunting lure that was more irresistible than command. As he stood by the window and saw the ethereal radiance of the snow,

golden almost in the rays of the low-hanging sun, he felt that he would like to walk across the white meadows to Parminters. He wanted something—something that was not in Millstead, something that, perhaps, was not in the world.

He set out, walking briskly, facing the crisp wind till the tears came into his eyes and rolled down his cold cheeks. Far beyond old Millstead spire the sun was already sinking into the snow, and all the sky of the west was shot with streams of pendulous fire. The stalks of the tallest grasses were clotted with snow which the sun had tried hard to melt and was now leaving to freeze stiff and crystalline; as the twilight crept over the earth the wind blew colder and the film of snow lately fallen made the path over the meadows hard and slippery with ice.

Then it was that he met Clare; in the middle of the meadows between Millstead and Parminters, at twilight amidst a waste of untrod snow. Her face was wonderfully lit with the reflection of the fading whiteness, that his mind reacted to it as to the sudden brink was in her eyes.

He felt himself growing suddenly pale; he stopped, silent, without a smile, as if frozen stiff by the sight of her.

And she said, half laughing: "Hello, Mr. Speed! You look unusually grim. . . ." Then she paused, and added in a different voice: "No—on further observation I think you look ill. . . . Tell me, what's the matter?"

He knew then that he loved her.

The revelation came on him so sharply, so acidly, with such overwhelming and uncompromising directness, that his mind reacted to it as to the sudden brink of a chasm. He saw the vast danger of his position. He saw the stupendous fool he had been. He saw, as if some mighty veil had been pulled aside, the stream of tragedy sweeping him on to destruction. And he stopped short, all the manhood in him galvanised into instant determination.

He replied, smiling: "I'm *feeling* perfectly well, anyway. Beautiful after the snowstorm, isn't it?"

"Yes."

It was so clear, so ominously clear that she would stop to talk to him if he would let her.

Therefore he said, curtly: "I'm afraid it's spoilt all the chances of skating, though. . . . Pity, isn't it? Well, I won't keep you in the cold—one needs to walk briskly and keep on walking, doesn't one? Good night!"

"Good night," she said simply.

Through the fast gathering twilight they went their several ways. When he reached Parminters it was quite dark. He went to the *Green Man* and had tea in the cosy little firelit inn-parlour with a huge Airedale dog for company. Somehow, he felt happier, now that he knew the truth and was facing it. And by the time he reached Lavery's on the way home he was treating the affair almost jauntily. After all, there was a very simple and certain cure for even the most serious attack of the ailment which he had diagnosed himself as possessing. He must not see Clare again. Never again. No, not even once. How seriously he was taking himself, he thought. Then he laughed, and wondered how he had been so absurd. For it *was* absurd, incredibly absurd, to suppose himself even remotely in love with Clare! It was unthinkable, impossible, no more to be feared than the collapse of the top storey of Lavery's into the basement. He was a fool, a stupid, self-analysing, self-suspecting fool. He entered Lavery's scorning himself very thoroughly, as much for his cowardly decision not to see Clare again as for his baseless suspicion that he was growing fond of her.

CHAPTER THREE

I

Why was it that whenever he had had any painful scene with Helen the yearning came over him to go and visit Clare, not to complain or to confess or to ask advice, but merely to talk on the most ordinary topics in the world? It was as if Helen drew out of him all the strength and vitality he possessed, leaving him debilitated, and that he craved the renewal of himself that came from Clare and from Clare alone.

The painful scenes came oftener now. They were not quarrels; they were worse; they were strange, aching, devitalising dialogues in which Helen cried passionately and worked herself into a state of nervous emotion that dragged Speed against his will into the hopeless vortex. Often when he was tired after the day's work the mere fervour of her passion would kindle in him some poignant emotion, some wrung-out pity, that was, as it were, the last shred of his soul; when he had burned that to please her he was nothing but dry ashes, desiring only tranquillity. But her emotional resources seemed inexhaustible. And when she had scorched up the last combustible fragment of him there was nothing left for him to do but to act a part.

When he realised that he was acting he realised also that he had been acting for a long while; indeed, that he could not remember when he had begun to act. Somehow, she lured him to it; made insatiable demands upon him that could not be satisfied without it. His acting had become almost a real part of him; he caught himself saying and doing things which came quite spontaneously, even though they were false. The trait of artistry in him made him not merely an actor but an accomplished actor; but the strain of it was immense. And sometimes, when he was alone, he wished that he might some time break under it, so that she might find out the utmost truth.

Still, of course, it was Clare that was worrying her. She

kept insisting that he wanted Clare more than he wanted her, and he kept denying it, and she obviously liked to hear him denying it, although she kept refusing to believe him. And as a simple denial would never satisfy her, he had perforce to elaborate his denials, until they were not so much denials as elaborately protestant speeches in which energetically expressed affection for her was combined with subtle disparagement of Clare. As time went on her demands increased, and the kind of denial that would have satisfied her a fortnight before was no longer sufficient to pacify her for a moment. He would say, passionately: "My little darling Helen, all I want is you—why do you keep talking about Clare? I'm tired of hearing the name. It's Helen I want, my old darling Helen." He became eloquent in this kind of speech.

But sometimes, in the midst of his acting an awful, hollow moment of derision would come over him; a moment when he secretly addressed himself: You hypocrite. You don't mean a word of all this! Why do you say it? What good is it if it pleases her if it isn't true? Can you—are you prepared to endure these nightly exhibitions of extempore play-acting for ever? Mustn't the end come some day, and what is to be gained by the postponement of it?

Then the hollow, dreadful, moment would leave him, and he would reply in defence of himself: I love Helen, although the continual protestation of it is naturally wearisome. If she can only get rid of the obsession about Clare we shall live happily and without this emotional ferment. Therefore, it is best that I should help her to get rid of it as much as I can. And if I were to protest my love for her weakly I should hinder and not help her.

Sometimes, after he had been disparaging Clare, a touch of real vibrant emotion would make him feel ashamed of himself. And then, in a few sharp, anguished sentences he would undo all the good that hours of argument and protestation had achieved. He would suddenly defend Clare, wantonly, obtusely, stupidly aware all the time of the work he was undoing, yet, somehow, incapable of stopping the words that came into his mouth. And they were not eloquent words; they were halting, diffident, often rather silly. "Clare's all right," he would say sometimes, and refuse to amplify or qualify. "I don't know why we keep dragging her in so much. She's never done us any harm and I've nothing against her."

"So. You love her."

"Love her? Rubbish! I don't love her. But I don't *hate* her —surely you don't expect me to do that!"

"No, I don't expect you to do that. I expect you to marry her, though, some day."

"Marry her! Good God, what madness you talk, Helen! I don't want to marry her, and if I did she wouldn't want to marry me! And besides, it happens that I'm already married. That's an obstacle, isn't it?"

"There's such a thing as divorce."

"You can't get a divorce just because you want one."

"I know that."

"And besides, my dear Helen, who wants a divorce? Do you?"

"Do *you*?"

"Of course I don't."

"Kenneth, I know it seems to you that I'm terribly unreasonable. But it isn't any satisfaction to me that you just don't *see* Clare. What I want is that you shan't *want* to see her."

"Well, I don't want to see her."

"That's a lie."

"Well—well—what's the good of me telling you I don't want to see her if you can't believe me?"

"No good at all, Kenneth. That's why it's so awful."

He said then, genuinely: "Is it *very* awful, Helen?"

"Yes. You don't know what it's like to feel that all the time one's happiness in the world is hanging by a thread. Kenneth, all the time I'm watching you I can see Clare written in your mind. I *know* you want her. I know she can give you heaps that I can't give you. I know that our marriage was a tragic mistake. We're not suited to one another. We make each other frightfully, frightfully miserable. More miserable than there's any reason for, but still, that doesn't help. We're misfits, somehow, and though we try ever so hard we shall never be any better until we grow old and are too tired for love any more. Then we shall be too disinterested to worry. It was *my* fault, Kenneth—I oughtn't to have married you. Father wanted me to, because your people have a lot of money, but I only married you because I loved you, Kenneth. It was silly of me, Kenneth, but it's the truth!"

"Ah!" So the mystery was solved. He softened to her now that he heard her simple confession; he felt that he loved her, after all.

She went on, sadly: "I'm not going to stay with you,

Kenneth. I'm not going to ruin your life. You won't be able to keep me. I'd rather you be happy and not have anything to do with me."

Then he began one of his persuasive speeches. The beginning of it was sincere, but as he used up all the genuine emotion that was in him, he drew more and more on his merely histrionic capacities. He pleaded, he argued, he implored. Once the awful thought came to him: Supposing I cried? Doubt as to his capacity to cry impressively decided him against the suggestion. . . . And once the more awful thought came to him: Supposing one of these times I do not succeed in patching things up? Supposing we *do* agree to separate? Do I really want to win all the time I am wrestling so hard for victory?

And at the finish, when he had succeeded once again, and when she was ready for all the passionate endearments that he was too tired to take pleasure in giving, he felt: This cannot last. It is killing me. It *is* killing her too. God help us both. . . .

II

One day he realised that he was a failure. He had had some disciplinary trouble with the fifth form and had woefully lost his temper. There had followed a mild sort of scene; within an hour it had been noised all over the school, so that he knew what the boys and Masters were thinking of when they looked at him. It was then that the revelation of failure came upon him.

But, worst of all, there grew in him wild and ungovernable hates. He hated the Head, he hated Pritchard, he hated Smallwood, he hated, most intensely of all, perhaps, Burton. Burton was too familiar. Not that Speed disliked familiarity; it was rather that in Burton's familiarity he always diagnosed contempt. He wished Burton would leave. He was getting too old.

They had a stupid little row about some trivial affair of house discipline. Speed had found some Juniors playing hockey along the long basement corridor. True that they were using only tennis balls; nevertheless it seemed to Speed the sort of thing that had to be stopped. He was not aware that "basement hockey" was a time-honoured custom of Lavery's, and that occasional broken panes of glass were paid for

by means of a "whip round." If he had known that he would have made no interference, for he was anxious not to make enemies. But it seemed to him that this extempore hockey-playing was a mere breach of ordinary discipline; accordingly he forbade it and gave a slight punishment to the participators.

Back in his room there came to him within a little while, Burton, eagerly solicitous about something or other.

"Well, what is it, Burton?" The mere sight of the shambling old fellow enraged Speed now.

"If you'll excuse the libutty, sir, I've come on be'alf of a few of the Juniors you spoke to about the basement 'ockey, sir."

"I don't see what business it is of yours, Burton."

"No, sir, it ain't any business of mine, that's true, but I thought perhaps you'd listen to me. In fact, I thought maybe you didn't know that it was an old 'ouse custom, sir, durin' the 'ockey term. I bin at Millstead fifty-one year come next July, sir, an' I never remember an 'ockey term without it, sir. Old Mr. Hardacre used to allow it, an' so did Mr. Lavery 'imself. In fact, some evenings, sir, Mr. Lavery used to come down an' watch it, sir."

Speed went quite white with anger. He was furiously annoyed with himself for having again trod on one of these dangerous places; he was also furious with Burton for presuming to tell him his business. Also, a slight scuffle outside the door of the room suggested to him that Burton was a hired emissary of the Juniors, and that the latter were eavesdropping at that very moment. He could not give way.

"I don't know why you think I should be so interested in the habits of my predecessors, Burton," he said, with carefully controlled voice. "I'm sure it doesn't matter to me in the least what Hardacre and Lavery used to do. I'm housemaster at present, and if I say there must be no more basement hockey then there must be no more. That's plain, isn't it?"

"Well, sir, I was only warning you—"

"Thanks, I don't require warning. You take too much on yourself, Burton."

The old man went suddenly red. Speed was not prepared for the suddenness of it. Burton exclaimed, hardly coherent in the midst of his indignation: "That's the first time I've bin spoke to like that by a housemaster of Lavery's! Fifty years

I've bin 'ere an' neither Mr. Hardacre nor Mr. Lavery ever insulted me to my face! *They* were gentlemen, *they* were!"

"Get out!" said Speed, rising from his chair quickly. "Get out of here! You're damnably impertinent! Get out!"

He approached Burton and Burton did not move. He struck Burton very lightly on the shoulder. The old man stumbled against the side of the table and then fell heavily on to the floor. Speed was passionately frightened. He wondered for the moment if Burton were dead. Then Burton began to groan. Simultaneously the door opened and a party of Juniors entered, ostensibly to make some enquiry or other, but really, as Speed could see, to find out what was happening.

"What d'you want?" said Speed, turning on them. "I didn't tell you to come in. Why didn't you knock?"

They had the answer ready. "We did knock, sir, and then we heard a noise as if somebody had fallen down and we thought you might be ill, sir."

Burton by this time had picked himself up and was shambling out of the room, rather lame in one leg.

The days that followed were not easy ones for Speed. He knew he had been wrong. He ought never to have touched Burton. People were saying "Fancy hitting an old man over sixty!" Burton had told everybody about it. The Common-Room knew of it. The school doctor knew of it, because Burton had been up to the Sick-room to have a bruise on his leg attended. Helen knew of it, and Helen rather obviously sided with Burton.

"You shouldn't have hit an old man," she said.

"I know I shouldn't," replied Speed. "I lost my temper. But can't you see the provocation I had? Am I to put up with a man's impertinence merely because he's old?"

"You're getting hard, Kenneth. You used to be kind to people, but you're not kind now. You're *never* kind now."

In his own heart he had to admit that it was true. He had given up being kind. He was hard, ruthless, unmerciful, and God knew why, perhaps. Yet it was all outside, he hoped. Surely he was not hard through and through; surely the old Speed who was kind and gentle and whom everybody liked, surely this old self of his was still there, underneath the hardness that had come upon him lately!

He said bitterly: "Yes, I'm getting hard, Helen. It's true. And I don't know the reason."

She supplied the answer instantly. "It's because of me," she said quietly. "I'm making you hard. I'm no good for you. You ought to have married somebody else."

"No, no!" he protested, vehemently. Then the old routine of argument, protest, persuasion, and reconciliation took place again.

III

He made up his mind that he would crush the hardness in him, that he would be the old Speed once more. All his troubles, so it seemed to him, were the result of being no longer the old Speed. If he could only bring to life again that old self, perhaps, after sufficient penance, he could start afresh. He could start afresh with Lavery's, he could start afresh with Helen; most of all perhaps, he could start afresh with himself. He *would* be kind. He would be the secret, inward man he wanted to be, and not the half-bullying, half-cowardly fellow that was the outside of him. He prayed, if he had ever prayed in his life, that he might accomplish the resuscitation.

It was a dark sombrely windy evening in February; a Sunday evening. He had gone into chapel with all his newly-made desires and determinations fresh upon him; he was longing for the quiet calm of the chapel service, that he might cement, so to say, his desires and resolutions into a sufficiently-welded programme of conduct that should be put into operation immediately. Raggs was playing the organ, so that he was able to sit undisturbed in the Masters' pew. The night was magnificently stormy; the wind shrieked continually around the chapel walls and roof; sometimes he could hear the big elm trees creaking in the Head's garden. The preacher was the Dean of some-where-or-other; but Speed did not listen to a word of his sermon, excellent though it might have been. He was too busy registering decisions.

The next day he apologized to Burton, rather curtly, because he knew not any other way. The old man was mollified. Speed did not know what to say to him after he had apologized; in the end half-a-sovereign passed between them.

Then he summoned the whole House and announced equally curtly that he wished to apologize for attempting to break a recognised House custom. "I've called you all together just to make a short announcement. When I stopped the basement hockey I was unaware that it had been a cus-

tom in Lavery's for a long while. In those circumstances I shall allow it to go on, and I apologize for the mistake. The punishments for those who took part are remitted. That's all. You may go now."

With Helen it was not so easy.

He said to her, on the same night, when the House had gone up to its dormitories: "Helen, I've been rather a brute lately. I'm sorry. I'm going to be different."

She said: "I wish I could be different too."

"Different? *You* different? What do you mean?"

"I wish I could make you fond of me again." He was about to protest with his usual eagerness and with more than his usual sincerity, but she held up her hand to stop him. "Don't say anything!" she cried, passionately. "We shall only argue. I don't want to argue any more. Don't say anything at all, please, Kenneth!"

"But—Helen—why not?"

"Because there's nothing more to be said. Because I don't believe anything that you tell me, and because I don't want to deceive myself into thinking I do, any more."

"Helen!"

She went on staring silently into the fire, as usual, but when he came near to her she put her arms round his neck and kissed him. "I don't believe you love me, Kenneth. Goodness knows why I kiss you. I suppose it's just because I like doing it, that's all. Now don't say anything to me. Kiss me if you like, but don't speak. I hate you when you begin to talk to me."

He laughed.

She turned on him angrily, suddenly like a tiger. "What are you laughing at? I don't see any joke."

"Neither do I. But I wanted to laugh—for some reason. Oh, if I mustn't talk to you, mayn't I even laugh? Is there nothing to be done except kiss and be kissed?"

"You've started to talk. I hate you now."

"I shouldn't have begun to talk if you'd let me laugh."

"You're hateful."

"What—because I laughed? Don't you think it's rather funny that a man may kiss his wife and yet not be allowed to talk to her?"

"I think it's tragic."

"Tragic things are usually funny if you're in the mood that I'm in."

"It's your own fault that you're in such a hateful mood."

"Is it my fault? I wasn't in the mood when I came into this room."

"Then it's my fault, I presume?"

"I didn't say so. God knows whose fault it is. But does it matter very much?"

"Yes, I think it does."

He couldn't think of anything to say. He felt all the strength and eagerness and determination and hope for the future go out of him and leave him aching and empty. And into the void—not against his will, for his will did not exist at the time—came Clare.

IV

Once again he knew that he loved her. A storm came over him, furious as the storm outside! he knew that he loved and wanted her, passionately this time, because his soul was aching. To him she meant the easing of all the strain within him; he could not think how it had been possible for him to go on so long without knowing it. Helen and he were like currents of different voltages; but with Clare he would be miraculously matched. For the first time in his life he recognised definitely and simply that his marriage with Helen had been a mistake.

But what could he do? For with the realisation of his love for Clare came the sudden, blinding onrush of pity for Helen, pity more terrible than he had ever felt before; pity that made him sick with the keenness of it. If he could only be ruthless and leave her with as few words and as little explanation as many men left their wives! But he could not. Somehow, in some secret and subtle way, he was tied to her. He knew that he could never leave her. Something in their intimate relationship had forged bonds that would always hold him to her, even though the spirit of him longed to be free. He would go on living with her and pitying her and making her and himself miserable.

He went out into the storm of wind for a few moments before going to bed. Never, till then, had Lavery's seemed so desolate, so mightily cruel. He walked in sheer morbidness of spirit to the pavilion steps where he and Helen, less than a year ago, had thought themselves the happiest couple in the world. There was no moonlight now, and the pavilion was a huge dark shadow. Poor Helen—*poor* Helen! He wished he had never met her.

CHAPTER FOUR

I

The torture of his soul went on. He lost grip of his House; he was unpopular now, and he knew it. Smallwood and other influential members of the school openly cut him in the street. A great silence (so he often imagined, but it could not have been really so) fell upon the Masters' Common-Room whenever he entered it. Pritchard, so he heard, was in the habit of making cheap jokes against him with his class. Even Clanwell took him aside one evening and asked him why he had dropped the habit of coming up to coffee. "Why don't you come up for a chat sometime?" he asked, and from the queer look in his eyes Speed knew well enough what the chat was likely to be about. "Oh, I'm busy," he excused himself. He added: "Perhaps I'll drop in sometime, though." "Yes, do," said Clanwell encouragingly. But Speed never did.

Then one morning Speed was summoned into the dark study. The Head smiled and invited him to sit down. He even said, with ominous hospitality: "Have a cigarette—um, no?" and pushed the cigarette-box an inch or so away from him. Then he went on, unbuttoning the top button of his clerical coat: "I hope—um—you will not think me—um—impertinent—if I mention a matter which has—um—which has not reached my ears—um—through an official channel. You had, I—um—I believe,—an—um—altercation with one of the house-porters the other day. Am I—am I right?"

"Yes, quite right."

"Well, now, Mr. Speed—such—um—affairs are rather undignified, don't you think? I'm not—um—apportioning blame—oh, no, not in any way, but I do—um, yes—I most certainly *do* think that a housemaster should avoid such incidents if he can possibly do so. No—um—no personal reflection on you at all, Mr. Speed—merely my advice to you, as a somewhat elderly man to an—um, yes—to a friend. Yes, a friend. Perhaps I might add more—um—significantly—to an—um—son-in-law."

He smiled a wide, sly smile. Speed clenched his hands on his knees. The dark study grew almost intolerable. He felt he would like to take Ervine's mottled neck in his hands and wring it—carefully and calculatingly. . . .

When he was outside the room, in the darkness between the inner and the outer doors, his resentment rose to fever-pitch. He stopped, battling with it, half inclined to re-enter the study and make a scene, yet realising with the sane part of him that he could not better his position by so doing. Merely as an outlet for tempestuous indignation, however, the idea of returning to the fray attracted him, and he paused in the darkness, arguing with himself. Then all at once his attention was rivetted by the sound, sharp and clear, of Mrs. Ervine's voice. She had entered the study from the other door, and he heard soft steps treading across the carpet. "Did you tell him?" he heard her say. And the Head's voice boomed back: "Yes, my dear. Um yes—I told him."

A grim, cautious smile crept over Speed's mouth. He put his ear to the hinge of the inner door and listened desperately.

He heard again the voice of Mrs. Ervine. "Did you tell him he might have to quit Lavery's at the end of the term?"

"I—um—well—I didn't exactly put it to him—so—um—so definitely. It seemed to me there was no—um—no necessity. He *may* be all right, even yet, you know."

"He won't. He's too young. And he's lost too much ground already."

"I always thought he was too—um—too youthful, my dear. But you overruled my——"

"Well, and you know why I did, don't you? Oh, I've no patience with you. Nothing's done unless *I* do it."

"My dear, I—um—I assure you——"

He heard footsteps approaching along the outside corridor and feared that it might be people coming to see the Head. In that case they would pull open the outer door and find him eavesdropping. That would never do. He quietly pushed the outer door and emerged into the corridor. A small boy, seeing him, asked timidly: "Is the Head in, sir?" Speed replied grimly: "Yes, he's in, but he's busy at present."

After all, he had heard enough. Behind the Head, ponderous and archaic, stood now the sinister figure of Mrs. Ervine, mistress of malevolent intrigue. In a curious half-

humorous, half-contemptuous sense, he felt sorry for the Head. Poor devil!—everlastingly chained to Millstead, always working the solemn, rhythmic treadmill, with a wife beside him as sharp as a knife-edge. . . . Speed walked across to Lavery's, pale-faced and smiling.

II

The Annual Athletic Sports.

It was raining hard. He stood by the tape, stop-watch in hand, distributing measured encouragement and congratulation, and fulfilling his allotted rôle of timekeeper. "Well run, Herbert," he managed to say, with a show of interest. "Not bad, indeed, sir . . . eleven and two-fifths seconds." . . . "Well done, Roberts. . . . Hard luck, Hearnshaw—pity you didn't sprint harder at the finish, eh? . . . Herbert first, Roberts second, Hearnshaw third."

The grass oozed with water and the cinder-track with blackish slime; he shivered as he stood, and whenever he stooped the water fell over the brim of his hat and blurred the print on his sports-programme. It was hard to distinguish rain from perspiration on the faces of the runners. The bicycles used in the slow-bicycle race lay in a dripping and rusting pile against a tree-trunk; crystal raindrops hung despairingly from the out-stretched tape. There seemed something unnecessarily, gratuitously, even fatuously dismal about the entire procedure; the weight of dismalness pressed heavily on him—heavily—heavily—and more heavily as the afternoon crawled by. Yet he gave a ghastly smile as he marked a wet note-book with a wet copying pencil and exclaimed: "Well run, Lister *Secundus*. Four minutes and forty-two and a fifth seconds. . . . Next race, please. All candidates for the Quarter-Mile Handicap. First Heat. . . . Answer please. . . . Arnold, Asplin, Brooks, Carmichael, Cavendish, Cawstone, *Primus*, Felling, Fyfield. . . ."

But at last there came the end of the dreary afternoon, when grey dusk began to fall somberly upon a grey world, when the last race had been mournfully held, and his outdoor work was over. Mechanically he was collecting into a pile the various impedimenta of the obstacle race; he was alone, for the small, dripping crowd of sight-seers had gone over to the other side of the pavilion to witness the putting

of the weight. Pritchard's job, he reflected. Pritchard's staccato tenor voice rose above the murmur: "Thirty-eight feet four inches. . . . Excellent, Robbins. . . ." And then the scrape of the spade smoothing over the soft, displaced mud, a sound that seemed to Speed to strike the note of utter and inextinguishable misery.

Old Millstead bells began to chime the hour of five o'clock.

And then a voice quite near him said: "Well, Mr. Speed?"

He knew that voice. He turned round sharply. Clare!

Never did he forget the look of her at that moment. He thought afterwards (though it could not have been more than imagination) that as she spoke the down-falling rain increased to a torrent; he saw her cheeks, pink and shining, and the water glistening on the edges of her hair. She wore a long mackintosh that reached almost to her heels, and a sou'wester pulled over her ears and forehead. But the poise of her as she stood, so exquisitely serene with the rain beating down upon her, struck some secret chord in his being which till that moment had been dumb.

He dropped the sacks into a pool of water and stared at her in wistful astonishment.

"You've dropped your things," she said.

He was staring at her so intently that he seemed hardly to comprehend her words. The chord in him that had been struck hurt curiously, like a muscle long unused. When at last his eyes fell to the sopping bundle at his feet he just shrugged his shoulders and muttered: "Oh, *they* don't matter. I'll leave them." Then, recollecting that he had not yet given her any greeting, he made some conventional remark about the weather.

Then she made another conventional remark about the weather.

Then he said, curiously: "We don't see so much of each other nowadays, do we?"

To which she replied: "No. I wonder why? Are they overworking you?"

"Not that," he answered.

"Then I won't guess any other reasons."

He said jokingly: "I shall come down to the town and give you another of those surprise visits one of these evenings."

The crowd were returning from watching the putting of the weight. She made to leave him, saying as she did so: "*Yes*, do. You like a talk, don't you?"

"Rather!" he exclaimed, almost boyishly, as she went away.

Almost boyishly! Even a moment of her made a difference in him.

III

That evening, for the first time in his life, he was "ragged." He was taking preparation in the Big Hall. As soon as the School began to enter he could see that some mischief was on foot. Nor was it long in beginning to show itself. Hardly had the last-comer taken his seat when a significant rustle of laughter at the rear of the Hall warned him that danger was near. He left his seat on the rostrum and plunged down the aisle to the place whence the laughter had come. More laughter. . . . He saw something scamper swiftly across the floor, amidst exclamations of feigned alarm. Someone had let loose a mouse.

He was furious with anger. Nothing angered him more than any breach of discipline, and this breach of discipline was obviously an insult to him personally. They had never "ragged" him before; they were "ragging" him now because they disliked him. He saw the faces of all around him grinning maliciously.

"Anyone who laughs has a hundred lines."

A sharp brave laugh from somewhere—insolently defiant.

"Who was it that laughed then?"

No answer.

Then, amidst the silence, another laugh, a comic, lugubriously pitched laugh that echoed weirdly up to the vaulted roof.

He was white now—quite white with passion.

"Was that you, Slingsby?"

A smart spot! It *was* Slingsby, and Slingsby, recognising the rules of civilised warfare even against Speed, replied, rather sheepishly: "Yes, sir."

"A thousand lines and detention for a week!"

The school gasped a little, for the punishment was sufficiently enormous. Evidently Speed was not to be trifled with. There followed a strained silence for over ten minutes, and at last Speed went back to his official desk feeling that the worst was over and that he had successfully quelled the rebellion.

Then, quite suddenly, the whole building was plunged into darkness.

He rose instantly shouting: "Who tampered with those switches?"

He had hardly finished his query when pandemonium began. Desk-lids fell; electric torches prodded their rays upon scenes of wild confusion; a splash of ink fell on his neck as he stood; voices shrieked at him on all sides. "Who had a fight with Burton?" "Hit one your own size." "Oh, Kenneth, meet me at the pavilion steps!" "Three cheers for the housemaster who knocked the porter down!" He heard them all. Somebody called, sincerely and without irony: "Three cheers for old Burton!"—and these were lustily given. Somebody grabbed hold of him by the leg; he kicked out vigorously, careless in his fury what harm he did. The sickly odour of sulphuretted hydrogen began to pervade the atmosphere.

He heard somebody shriek out: "Not so much noise, boys —the Head'll come in!" And an answer came: "Well, he won't mind much."

He stood there in the darkness for what seemed an age. He was petrified, not with fear, but with a strange mingling of fury and loathing. He tried to speak, and found he had no voice; nor, anyhow, could he have made himself heard above the din.

Something hit him a terrific blow on the forehead. He was dazed. He staggered back, feeling for his senses. He wondered vaguely who had hit him and what he had been hit with. Probably a heavy book. . . . The pain seemed momentarily to quench his anger, so that he thought: This is not ordinary "ragging." They hate me. They detest me. They want to hurt me if they can. . . . He felt no anger for them now, only the dreadfulness of being hated so much by so many people at once.

He must escape somehow. They might kill him in the dark there if they found him. He suddenly made his decision and plunged headlong down the centre aisle towards the door. How many boys he knocked down or trampled on or struck with his swinging arms as he rushed past he never knew, but in another moment he was outside, with the cool air of the cloisters tingling across his bruised head and the pandemonium in the Hall sounding suddenly distant in his ears.

In the cloisters he met the Head, walking quickly along with gown flying in the wind.

In front of Speed he stopped, breathless and panting. "Um —um—what is the matter, Mr. Speed? Such an—um—terrible noise—I could—um—hear it at my dinner-table—and —um—yourself—what has happened to you? Are you ill? Your head is covered with—um—blood. . . . What is all the commotion about?"

Speed said, with crisp clearness: "Go up into the Hall and find out."

And he rushed away from the Head, through the echoing cloisters, and into Lavery's. He washed here, in the public basins, and tied a handkerchief round the cut on his forehead. He did not disturb Helen, but left his gown on one of the hooks in the cloak-room and went out again into the dark and sheltering night, hatless and coatless, and with fever in his heart. The night was bitterly cold, but he did not feel it; he went into the town by devious ways, anxious to avoid being seen; when he was about half-way the parish clock chimed eight. He felt his head; his handkerchief was already damp on the outside; it must have been a deep cut.

IV

"Mr. Speed!" she said, full of compassion. A tiny lamp in the corridor illumined his bandaged head as he walked in. "What on earth has happened to you? Can you walk up all right?"

"Yes," he answered, with even a slight laugh. The very presence of her gave him reassurance. He strode up the steps into the sitting-room and stood in front of the fire. She followed him and stared at him for a moment without speaking. Then she said, almost unconcernedly: "Now you mustn't tell me anything till you've been examined. That looks rather a deep cut. Now sit down in that chair and let me attend to you. Don't talk."

He obeyed her, with a feeling in his heart of ridiculously childish happiness. He remembered when Helen had once bade him not talk, and how the demand had then irritated him. Curious that Clare could even copy Helen exactly and yet be tremendously, vitally different!

She unwound the bandage, washed the cut, and bandaged it up again in a clean and workmanlike manner. The deftness

of her fingers fascinated him; he gazed on them as they moved about over his face; he luxuriated amongst them, as it were.

At the finish of the operation she gave that sharp instant laugh which, even after hearing it only a few times, he had somehow thought characteristic of her. "You needn't worry," she said quietly, and in the half-mocking tone that was even more characteristic of her than her laugh. "You're not going to die. Did you think you were? Now tell me how it happened."

"You'll smile when I tell you. I was taking prep, and they ragged me. Somebody switched off the lights and somebody else must have thrown a book at me. That's all."

"That's all? It's enough, isn't it? And what made you think I should smile at such an affair?"

"I don't know. In a certain sense it's, perhaps, a little funny. . . . D'you know, lately I've had a perfectly overwhelming desire to laugh at things that other people wouldn't see anything funny in. The other night Helen told me not to talk to her because she couldn't believe a word I said, but she didn't mind if I kissed her. I laughed at that—I couldn't help it. And now, when I think of an hour ago with all the noise and commotion and flash-lights and stink-bombs and showers of ink—oh, God, it was damned funny!"

He burst into gusts of tempestuous, half-hysterical laughter.

"Stop laughing!" she ordered. She added quietly: "Yes, you look as if you've been in an ink-storm—it's all over your coat and collar. What made them rag you?"

"They hate me."

"Why?"

He pondered, made suddenly serious, and then said: "God knows."

She did not answer for some time. Then she suddenly went over to the china cupboard and began taking out crockery. Once again his eyes had something to rivet themselves upon; this time her small, immensely capable hands as she busied herself with the coffee-pot. "And you thought I should find it amusing?" she said, moving about the whole time. As she continued with the preparations she kept up a running conversation. "Well, I *don't* find it amusing. I think it's very serious. You came here last summer term and at first you were well liked, fairly successful, and happy. Now, two terms later,

you're apparently detested, unsuccessful, and—well, not so happy as you were, eh? What's been the cause of it all? You say God knows. Well, if He does know, He won't tell you, so you may as well try to find out for yourself."

And she went on: "I don't want to rub it in. Forgive me if I am doing so."

Something in the calm kindliness of her voice made him suddenly bury his head in his hands and begin to sob. He gasped, brokenly: "All right. . . . Clare. . . . But the future. . . . Oh, God—is it *all* black? . . . What—*what* can I do, Clare?"

She replied, immensely practical: "You must control yourself. You're hysterical—laughing one minute and crying the next. Coffee will be ready in a while—it'll quiet your nerves. And the future will be all right if only you won't be as big a fool as you have been."

Then he smiled. "You *do* tell me off, don't you?" he said.

"No more than you need. . . . But we're talking too much. I don't want you to talk a lot—not just yet. Sit still while I play the piano to you."

She played some not very well-known composition of Bach, and though when she began he was all impatience to talk to her, he found himself later on becoming tranquil, perfectly content to listen to her as long as she cared to go on. She played quite well, and with just that robust unsentimentality which Bach required. He wondered if she had been clever enough to know that her playing would tranquillise him.

When she had finished, the coffee was ready and they had a cosy little armchair snack intermingled with conversation that reminded him of his Cambridge days. He would have been perfectly happy if he had not been burdened with such secrets. He wanted to tell her everything—to show her all his life. And yet whenever he strove to begin the confession she twisted the conversation very deftly out of his reach.

At last he said: "I've got whole heaps to tell you, Clare. Why don't you let me begin?"

She looked ever so slightly uncomfortable.

"Do you *really* want to begin?"

"Yes."

"Begin then."

But it was not so easy for him to begin after her straightforward order to do so. She kept her brown eyes fixed un-

swervingly on him the whole time, as if defying him to tell anything but the utterest truth. He paused, stammered, and then laughed uncomfortably.

"There's a lot to tell you, and it's not easy."

"Then don't trouble. I'm not asking you to."

"But I want to."

She said, averting her eyes from him for a moment: "It's not really that you want to begin yourself, it's that you want *me* to begin, isn't it?"

Then he said: "Yes, I wanted you to begin if you would. I wanted you to ask me a question you used to ask me?"

"What's that?"

"Whether I'm happy . . . or not. I always used to say yes, and since that answer has become untrue you've never asked me the question."

"Perhaps because I knew the answer had become untrue."

"You knew? You *knew!* Tell me, what did you know? What do you know now?"

She said, with a curious change in the quality of her voice: "My dear man, I *know.* I understand you. Haven't you found out that? I know, I've known for a long time that you haven't been happy."

Suddenly he was in the thick of confession to her. He was saying, almost wildly, in his eagerness: "Helen and I—we don't get on well together." Then he stopped, and a wild, ecstatic fear of what he was doing rose suddenly to panic-point and then was lulled away by Clare's eternally calm eyes. "She doesn't understand me—in fact—I don't really think we either of us understand the other."

"No?" she said, interrogatively, and he shook his head slowly and replied: "I think that perhaps explains—chiefly—why I am unhappy. We—Helen and I—we don't know quite what—what to do with each other. Do you know what I mean? We don't exactly quarrel. It's more that we try so hard to be kind that—that it hurts us. We are cruel to each other. . . . Oh, not actually, you know, but in a sort of secret inside way. . . . Oh, Clare, Clare, the truth of it is, I can't bear her, and she can't bear me!"

"Perhaps I know what you mean. But she loves you?"

"Oh, yes, she loves me."

"And you love her?"

He looked her straight in the eyes and slowly shook his head.

"I used to. But I don't now. It's awful—awful—but it's the honest truth."

It seemed to him that his confession had reached the vital crest and that all else would be easy and natural now that he had achieved thus far. He went on: "Clare, I've tried to make myself think I love her. I've tried all methods to be happy with her. I've given in to her in little matters and big matters to try to make her happy, I've isolated myself from other people just to please her, I've offered anything—*everything* to give her the chance of making me love her as I used to! But it's not been a bit of use."

"Of course it hasn't."

"Why of course?"

"Because you can't love anybody by trying. Any more than you can stop loving anybody by trying . . . Do you know, I've never met anybody who's enraged me as much as you have."

"Enraged you?"

"Yes. What right have I to be enraged with you, you'll say, but never mind that. I've been enraged with you because you've been such a continual disappointment ever since I've known you. This is a time for straight talking, isn't it? So don't be offended. When you first came to Millstead you were just a jolly schoolboy—nothing more, though you probably thought you were—you were brimful of schoolboyish ideals and schoolboyish enthusiasms. Weren't you? Nobody could help liking you—you were so—so *nice—nice* is the word, isn't it?"

"You're mocking me."

"Not at all. I mean it. You *were* nice, and I liked you very much. Compared with the average fussily jaded Master at a public-school you were all that was clean and hopeful and energetic. I wondered what would become of you. I wondered whether you'd become a sarcastic devil like Ransome, a vulgar little counter-jumper like Pritchard, or a beefy, fighting parson like Clanwell. I knew that whatever happened you wouldn't stay long as you were. But I never thought that you'd become what you are. Good God, man, you *are* a failure, aren't you?"

"What's the good of rubbing it in?"

"This much good—that I want you to be quite certain of the depth you've fallen to. A man of your sort soon forgets

his mistakes. That's why he makes so many of them twice over."

"Well—admitting that I am a failure, what then? What advice have you to offer me?"

"I advise you to leave Millstead."

"When?"

"At the end of the term."

"And where shall I go?"

"Anywhere except to another school."

"What shall I do?"

"Anything except repeat your mistakes."

"And Helen?"

"Take her with you."

"But she *is* one of my mistakes."

"I know that. But you've got to put up with it."

"And if I can't?"

"Then I don't know."

He suddenly plunged his head into his hands and was silent. Her ruthless summing-up of the situation calmed him, made him ready for the future, but filled that future with a dreariness that was awful to contemplate.

After a while he rose, saying: "Well, I suppose you're right. I'll go back now. God knows what'll happen to me between now and the end of term. But I guess I'll manage somehow. Anyway, I'm much obliged for your first-aid. Goodbye—don't trouble to let me out—I know how the door works."

"I want to lock up after you're gone," she said.

In the dark lobby the sudden terror of what he had done fell on him like a crushing weight. He had told Clare that he did not love Helen. And then, following upon that, came a new and more urgent terror—he had not told Clare that it was she whom he loved. What was the use of telling her the one secret without the other?—Perhaps he would never see Clare again. This might be his last chance. If he did not take it or make it the torture of his self-reproaching would be unendurable.

"You came without any coat and hat," she observed. "Let me lend you my raincoat—it's no different from a man's."

He perceived instantly that if he borrowed it he would have an excuse for visiting her again in order to return it. And perhaps then, more easily than now, he could tell her the secret that was almost bursting his heart.

"Thanks," he said, gratefully, and as she helped him into the coat she said: "Ask the boy to bring it back here when he calls for the orders in the morning."

He could have cried at her saying that. The terror came on him feverishly, intolerably, the terror of leaving her, of living the rest of life without a sight or a knowledge of her. He could not bear it; the longing was too great—he could not put it away from him. And she was near him for the last time, her hands upon his arms as she helped him into the coat. She did not want him to call again. It was quite plain.

He had to speak.

He said, almost at the front door: "Clare, do you know the real reason why I don't love Helen any more?"

He thought he heard her catch her breath sharply. Then, after a pause, she said rather curtly: "Yes, of course I do. Don't tell me."

"What!" In the darkness he was suddenly alive. "*What!* You know! You know the real reason! You *don't!* You think you do, but you don't! I'll warrant you don't! You don't know everything!"

And the calm voice answered: "I know everything about you."

"You don't know that I love you!" (*There!* It was spoken now; a great weight was taken off his heart, no matter whether she should be annoyed or not! His heart beat wildly in exultation at having thrown off its secret at long last.)

She answered: "Yes, I know that. But I didn't want you to tell me."

And he was amazed. His mind, half stupefied, accepted her knowledge of his love for her almost as if it were a confession of her returned love for him. It was as if the door were suddenly opened to everything he had not dared to think of hitherto. He knew then that his mind was full of dreaming of her, wild, passionate, tumultuous dreaming, dreaming that lured him to the edge of wonderland and precarious adventure. But this dreaming was unique in his experience; no slothful half-pathetic basking in the fluency of his imagination, no easy inclination to people a world with his own fancies rather than bridge the gulf that separated himself from the true objectiveness of others; this was something new and immense, a hungering of his soul for reality, a stirring of the depths in him, a monstrous leaping renewal of his youth. No longer was his imagination content to describe

futile, sensual curves within the abyss of his own self, returning cloyingly to its starting-point; it soared now, embarked on a new quest, took leave of self entirely, drew him, invisibly and incalculably, he knew not where. He knew not where, but he knew with whom. . . . This strange, magnetic power that she possessed over him drew him not merely to herself, but to the very fountain of life; she *was* life, and he had never known life before. The reach of his soul to hers was the kindling touch of two immensities, something at once frantic and serene, simple and subtle, solemn and yet deep with immeasurable heart-stirring laughter.

He said, half inarticulate: "What, Clare! You know that I love you?"

"Of course I do."

(Great God, what *was* this thrill that was coming over him, this tremendous, invincible longing, this molten restlessness, this yearning for zest in life, for action, starry enthusiasm, resistless plunging movement!)

"And you don't mind?"

"I *do* mind. That's why I didn't want you to tell me."

"But what difference has telling you made, if you knew already?"

"No difference to me. But it will to you. You'll love me more now that you know I know."

"Shall I?" His query was like a child's.

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"I *know*. That's all."

They were standing there together in the dark lobby. His heart was wildly beating, and hers—he wondered if it were as calm as her voice. And then all suddenly he felt her arms upon him, and she, Clare—Clare!—the reticent, always controlled Clare!—was crying, actually crying in his arms that stupidly, clumsily held her. And Clare's voice, unlike anything that it had ever been in his hearing before, was talking—talking and crying at once—accomplishing the most curious and un-Clare-like feats.

"Oh, my dear, *dear* man—*why* did you tell me? Why did you make everything so hard for me and yourself?—Oh, God—let me be weak for just one little minute—only one little minute!—I love you, Kenneth Speed, just as you love me—we fit, don't we, as if the world had been made for us as well as we for ourselves! Oh, what a man *I* could have made of

you, and what a woman *you* could have made of me! Dearest, I'm so sorry. . . . When you've gone I shall curse myself for all this. . . . Oh, my dear, my dear. . . ." She sobbed passionately against his breast, and then, suddenly escaping from his arms, began to speak in a voice more like her usual one. "You must go now. There's nothing we can do. Please, *please* go now. No, no—don't kiss me. . . . Just go. . . . And let's forgive each other for this scene. . . . Go, please go. . . . Good night. . . . No, I won't listen to you. . . . I want you to go. . . . Good night. . . . You haven't said a word, I know, and I don't want you to. There's nothing to say at all. Good night. . . . Good night. . . ."

He found himself outside in High Street as in some strange incomprehensible dream. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

I

All the way back to Millstead joy was raging in his heart, trampling down all his woes and defying him to be miserable. Nothing in the world—not his unhappiness with Helen, or the hatred that Millstead had for him, or the perfidy of his own soul—could drive out that crowning, overmastering triumph—the knowledge that Clare loved him. For the moment he saw no difficulties, no dangers, no future that he could not easily bear. Even if he were never to see Clare again, he felt that the knowledge that she loved him would be an adequate solace to his mind for ever. He was happy—deliriously, eternally happy. Helen's silences, the school's ragging, the Head's sinister coldness, were bereft of all their powers to hurt him; he had a secret armour, proof against all assault. It seemed to him that he could understand how the early Christians, fortified by some such inward armour, had walked calm-eyed and happy into the arena of lions.

He did not go straight back to the school, but took a detour along the Deepersdale road; he wanted to think, and hug his happiness, and eventually calm it before seeing Helen. Then he wondered what sort of an explanation he should give her of his absence; for, of course, she would have received by this time full accounts of the ragging. In the end he decided that he had better pretend to have been knocked a little silly by the blow on his head and to have taken a walk into the country without any proper consciousness of what he was doing.

He returned to Lavery's about eleven o'clock, admitting himself by his own private key. In the corridor leading to his own rooms, Helen suddenly ran into his arms imploring him to tell her if he was hurt, where he had been, what had happened, and so on.

He said, speaking as though he had hardly recovered full possession of his senses: "I—I don't know. . . . Something

hit me. . . . I think I've been walking about for a long time. . . . I'm all right now, though."

Her hands were feeling the bandages round his head.

"Who bandaged you?"

"I—I don't—I don't know." (After all, 'I don't know' was always a safe answer.)

She led him into the red-tinted drawing-room. As he entered it he suddenly felt the onrush of depression, as if, once within these four walls, half the strength of his armour would be gone.

"We must have Howard to see you to-morrow morning," she said, her voice trembling. "It was absolutely disgraceful! I could hear them from here—I wondered whatever was happening." And she added, with just the suspicion of tartness: "I'd no idea you'd ever let them rag you like that."

"*Let* them rag me?" he exclaimed. Then, remembering his part, he stammered: "I—I don't know what—what happened. Something—somebody perhaps—hit me, I think—that was all. It wasn't—it wasn't the ragging. I could have—managed that."

Suddenly she said: "Whose mackintosh is that you're wearing?"

The tone of her voice was sharp, acrid, almost venomous.

He started, felt himself blushing, but hoped that in the reddish glow it would not be observed. "I—I don't know," he stammered, still playing for safety.

"You don't know?—Then we'll find out if we can. Perhaps there's a name inside it."

She helped him off with it, and he, hoping devoutly that there might not be a name inside it, watched her fascinatedly. He saw her examine the inside of the collar and then throw the coat on the floor.

"So you've been there again," was all that she said.

Once again he replied, maddeningly: "I—I don't know."

She almost screamed at him: "Don't keep telling me you don't know! You're not ill—there's nothing the matter with you at all—you're just pretending! You couldn't keep order in the Big Hall, so you ran away like a great coward and went to *that* woman! Did you or didn't you? Answer me!"

Never before, he reflected, had she quarrelled so shrilly and rancorously; hitherto she had been restrained and rather pathetic, but now she was shouting at him like a fishwife. It was a common domestic bicker; the sort of thing that gets a

good laugh on the music-hall stage. No dignity in it—just sordid heaped-up abuse. "Great coward"—"*That* woman"—!

He dropped his lost-memory pose, careless, now, whether she found out or not.

"I *did* go to Clare," he said, curtly. "And that's Clare's raincoat. Also Clare bandaged me—rather well, you must admit. Also, I've drunk Clare's coffee and warmed myself at Clare's fire. Is there any other confession you'd like to wring out of me?"

"Is there indeed? You know that best yourself."

"Perhaps you think I've been flirting with Clare?"

(As he said it he thought: Good God, why am I saying such things? It's only making the position worse for us both.)

"I've no doubt she would if you'd given her half a chance."

The bitterness of her increased his own.

"Or is it that *I* would if she'd given me half a chance? Are you *quite* sure which?"

"I'm sure of nothing where either of you are concerned. As for Clare, she's been a traitor. Right from the time of first meeting you she's played a double game, deceiving me and yourself as well. She's ruined our lives together, she's spoilt our happiness and she won't be satisfied till she's wrecked us both completely. I detest her—I loathe her—I loathe her more than I've ever loathed anybody in the world. Thank God I know her *now*—at least *I* shall never trust her any more. And if *you* do, perhaps some day you'll pay as I've paid. Do you think she's playing straight with you any more than she has with me? Do you think *you* can trust her? Are you taken in?"

The note of savage scorn in her voice made him reply coldly: "You've no cause to talk about taking people in. If ever I've been taken in, as you call it, it was by you, not by Clare!"

He saw her go suddenly white. He was half-sorry he had dealt her the blow, but as she went on to speak, her words, fiercer than ever now, stung him into gladness.

"All right! Trust her and pay for it! *I* could tell you things if I wished—but I'm not such a traitor to her as she's been to me. I could tell you things that would make you gasp, you wretched little fool!"

"They wouldn't make me gasp; they'd make me call you a damned liar. Helen, I can understand you hating Clare; I

can understand, in a sense, the charge of traitor that you bring against her; but when you hint all sorts of awful secrets about her I just think what a petty, spiteful heart you must have! You ruin your own case by actions like that. They sicken me."

"Very well, let them sicken you. You'll not be more sickened than I am. But perhaps you think I can't do more than hint. I can and I will, since you drive me to it. Next time you pay your evening visits to Clare ask her what she thinks of Pritchard!"

"Pritchard! Pritchard!—What's he got to do with it?"

"Ask Clare."

"Why should I ask her?"

"Because, maybe, on the spur of the moment she wouldn't be able to think of any satisfactory lie to tell you."

He felt anger rising up within him. He detested Pritchard, and the mention of his name in connection with Clare infuriated him. Moreover, his mind, always quick to entertain suspicion, pictured all manner of disturbing fancies, even though his reason rejected them absolutely. He trusted Clare; he would believe no evil of her. And yet, the mere thought of it was a disturbing one.

"I wouldn't insult her by letting her think I listened to such gossip," he said, rather weakly.

There followed a longish pause; he thinking of what she had said and trying to rid himself of the discomfort of associating Pritchard with Clare, and she watching him, mockingly, as if conscious that her words had taken root in his mind.

Then she went on: "So now you can suspect somebody else instead of me. And while we're on the subject of Pritchard let me tell you something else."

"*Tell me!*" The mere thought that there was anything else to tell in which Pritchard was concerned was sufficient to give his voice a note of peremptory harshness.

"I'm going to leave you."

"So you've said before."

"This time I mean it."

"Well?"

"And you can divorce me."

He stamped his foot with irritation. "Don't be ridiculous, Helen. A divorce is absolutely out of the question."

"Why? Do you think we can go on like this any longer?"

"That's not the point. The point is that nothing in the circumstances provides any grounds for a divorce."

"So that we've got to go on like this then, eh?"

"Not like this, I hope. I *still* hope—that some day—"

She interrupted him angrily. "You *still* hope! How many more secret visits to Clare do you think you'll make,—how many more damnable lies do you think you'll need to tell me —before you leave off still hoping? You hateful little hypocrite! Why don't you be frank with me and yourself and acknowledge that you love Clare? Why don't you run off with her like a man?"

He said: "So you think that's what a man would do, eh?"

"Yes."

"One sort of a man, perhaps. Only I'm not that sort."

"I wish you were."

"Possibly. I also wish that you were another sort of woman, but it's rather pointless wishing, isn't it?"

"Everything is rather pointless that has to do with you and me."

Suddenly he said: "Look here, Helen. Let's stop this talk. Just listen a minute while I try to tell you how I'm situated. You and I are married—"

"Really?"

"Oh, for God's sake, don't be stupid about it! We're married, and we've got to put up with it for better, for worse. I visit Clare in an entirely friendly way, though you mayn't believe it, and your suspicions of me are altogether unfounded. All the same, I'm prepared to give up her friendship, if that helps you at all. I'm prepared to leave Millstead with you, get a job somewhere else, and start life afresh. We *have* been happy together, and I daresay in time we shall manage to be happy again. We'd emigrate, if you liked. And the baby—*our* baby—our baby that is to be—"

She suddenly rushed up to him with her arms raised and struck him with both fists on his mouth. "Oh, for Christ's sake, stop that sort of talk! I could kill you when you try to lull me into happiness with those sticky, little sentimental words! *Our* baby! Good God, am I to be made to submit to you because of that? And all the time you talk of it you're thinking of another woman! You're not livable with! Something's happened to you that's made you cruel and hateful—you're not the man that I married or that I ever would have married. I

loathe and detest you—you're rotten—rotten to the very root!"

He said, icily: "Do you think so?"

She replied, more restrainedly: "I've never met anybody who's altered so much as you have in the last six months. You've sunk lower and lower—in every way, until now—everybody hates you. You're simply a ruin."

Still quietly he said: "Yes, that's true." And then watching to see the effect that his words had upon her, he added: "Clare said so."

"What!" she screamed, frenzied again. "Yes, *she* knows! *She* knows how she's ruined you! She knows better than anybody! And she taunted you with it! How I loathe her!"

"And me too, eh?"

She made no answer.

Then, more quietly than ever, he said: "Yes, Clare knows what a failure I've been and how low I've sunk. But she doesn't think it's due to her, and neither do I."

He would not say more than that. He wondered if she would perceive the subtle innuendo which he half-meant and half did not mean; which he would not absolutely deny, and yet would not positively affirm; which he was prepared to hint, but only vaguely, because he was not perfectly sure himself.

Whether or not she did perceive it he was not able to discover. She was silent for some while and then said: "Well, I repeat what I said—I'm going to leave you so that you can get a divorce."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"You can leave me if you wish, but I shall not get a divorce."

"Why not?"

"Because for one thing I shan't be able to."

"And why do you think you won't?"

"Because," he replied, coldly, "the law will not give me my freedom merely because we have lived a cat-and-dog life together. The law requires that you should not only leave me, but that you should run away with another man and commit misconduct with him."

She nodded. "Yes, and that is what I propose to do."

"*What!*"

A curious silence ensued. He was utterly astounded, hor-

rified, by her announcement; she was smiling at him, mocking his astonishment. He shouted at her, fiercely: "What's that!"

She said: "I intend to do what you said."

"What's that! You *what?*"

"I intend to do what you said. I shall run away with another man and commit misconduct with him!"

"God!" he exclaimed, clenching his teeth, and stamping the floor. "It's absurd. You can't. You wouldn't dare. Oh, it's impossible. Besides—good God, think of the scandals! Surely I haven't driven you to *that!* Who would you run away with?" His anger began to conquer his astonishment. "You little fool, Helen, you can't do it! I forbid you! Oh, Lord, what a mess we're in! Tell me, who's the man you're thinking of! I demand to know. Who is he? Give me his name!"

And she said, cuttingly: "Pritchard."

On top of his boiling fury she added: "We've talked it over and he's quite agreed to—to oblige me in the matter, so you see I really do mean things this time, darling Kenneth!"

And she laughed at him.

II

Out of Lavery's he plunged and into the cold, frosty night of Milner's. He had not stayed to hear the last echoes of her laughter dying away; he was mad with fury; he was going to kill Pritchard. He ran up the steps of Milner's and gave the bell a ferocious tug. At last the porter came, half undressed, and by no means too affable to such a late visitor. "I want to see Mr. Pritchard on very important business," said Speed. "Will it take long, sir?" asked the porter, and Speed answered: "I can't say how long it will take."—"Then," said the porter, "perhaps you wouldn't mind letting yourself out when you've finished. I'll give you this key till to-morrow morning—I've got a duplicate of my own." Speed took the key, hardly comprehending the instructions, and rushed along the corridor to the flight of steps along the wall of which was printed the name: "Mr. H. Pritchard."

Arrived on Pritchard's landing he groped his way to the sitting-room door and entered stealthily. All was perfectly still, except for one or two detached snores proceeding from the adjoining dormitory. In the starshine that came through the window he could see, just faintly, the outline of

Pritchard's desk, and Pritchard's armchair, and Pritchard's bookshelves, and Pritchard's cap and gown hung upon the hook on the door of Pritchard's bedroom. *His* bedroom! He crept towards it, turned the handle softly, and entered. At first he thought the bed was empty, but as he listened he could hear breathing—steady, though faint. He began to be ever so slightly frightened. Being in the room alone with Pritchard asleep was somehow an unnerving experience; like being alone in a room with a dead body. For, perhaps, Pritchard would be a dead body before the dawn rose. And again he felt frightened because somebody might hear him and come up and think he was in there to steal something—Pritchard's silver wrist-watch or his rolled gold sleeve links, for instance. Somehow Speed was unwilling to be apprehended for theft when his real object was only murder.

He struck a match to see if it really was Pritchard in bed; it would be a joke if he murdered somebody else by mistake, wouldn't it? . . .

Yes, it was Pritchard.

Then Speed, looking down at him, realised that he did not hate him so much for his disgraceful overtures to Helen as for the suspicion of some sinister connection with Clare.

Suddenly Pritchard opened his eyes.

"Good God, Speed!" he cried, blinking and sitting up in bed. "Whatever's the matter! What's—what's happened? Anything wrong?"

And Speed, startled out of his wits by the sudden awakening, fell forward across Pritchard's bed and fainted.

So that he did not murder Pritchard after all. . . .

III

Vague years seemed to pass by, and then out of the abyss came the voice of the Head booming: "Um, yes, Mr. Speed . . . I think, in the circumstances, you had better—um, yes, take a holiday at the seaside. . . . You are very clearly in a highly dangerous—um—nervous state . . . and I will gladly release you from the rest of your term's duties. . . . No doubt a rest will effect a great and rapid improvement. . . . My wife recommends Seacliffe—a pleasant little watering-place—um, yes, extremely so. . . . As for the incidents during preparation last evening, I think we need not —um—discuss them at present. . . . Oh yes, most certainly

—as soon as convenient—in fact, an early train to-morrow morning would not incommode us. . . . I—um, yes—I hope the rest will benefit you . . . oh yes, I hope so extremely. . . ."

And he added: "Helen is—um—a good nurse."

Then something else of no particular importance, and then: "I shall put Mr.—um—Pritchard in charge of—um—Lavery's while you are absent, so you need not—um—worry about your House. . . ."

Speed said, conquering himself enough to smile: "Oh, no, I shan't worry. I shan't worry about anything."

"Um—no, I hope not. I—I hope not. . . . My wife and I—um—we both hope that you will not—um—worry. . . ."

Then Speed noticed, with childish curiosity, that the Head was attired in a sky-blue dressing-gown and pink-striped pyjamas. . . .

Where was he, by the way? He looked round and saw a tiny gas-jet burning on a wall bracket; near him was a bed . . . Pritchard's bed, of course. But why was the Head in Pritchard's bedroom, and why was Clanwell there as well?

Clanwell said sepulchrally: "Take things easy, old man. I thought something like this would happen. You've been overdoing it."

"Overdoing what?" said Speed.

"Everything," replied Clanwell.

The clock on the dressing-table showed exactly midnight.

"Good-bye," said Speed.

Clanwell said: "I'm coming over with you to Lavery's."

The Head departed, booming his farewell. "Good night. . . . My—um—my best wishes, Speed . . . um, yes—most certainly. . . . Good night."

Then Pritchard said: "Perhaps I can sleep again now. Enough to give *me* a breakdown, I should think. Good-night, Speed. And good luck. I wish they'd give *me* a holiday at Seacliffe. . . . Good night, Clanwell."

As they trod over the soft turf of the quadrangle they heard old Millstead bells calling the hour of midnight.

Speed said: "Clanwell, do you remember I once told you I could write a novel about Millstead?"

"Yes, I remember it."

"Well, I might have done it then. But I couldn't now. When I first came here Millstead was so big and enveloping

—it nearly swallowed me up. But now—it's all gone. I might be living in a slum tenement for all it means to me. Where's it all gone to?"

"You're ill, Speed. It'll come back when you're better."

"Yes, but when shall I be better?"

"When you've been away and had a rest."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. You don't suppose you're dying, do you?"

"No. But there are times when I could suppose I'm dead."

"Nonsense, man. You're too morbid. Why don't you go for a sea voyage? Pull yourself together, man, and don't brood."

Clanwell added: "I'm damned sorry for you—what can I do? Would you like me to come in Lavery's with you for a while? You're not nervous of being alone, are you?"

"Oh no. And besides, I shan't be alone. My wife's there."

"Of course, of course. Stupid of me. I was for the moment forgetting—forgetting—"

"That I was married, eh?"

"No, no, not exactly—I had just forgotten—well, you know how even the most obvious things sometimes slip the memory. . . . Well, here you are. Have you the key? And you'll be all right, eh? Sure? Well, now, take a long rest and get better, won't you? Good night—Good night—sure you're all right? Good night!"

Clanwell raced back across the turf to his own House and Speed admitted himself to Lavery's and sauntered slowly down the corridor to his room.

Helen was sitting in front of the fire, perfectly still and quiet.

He said: "Helen!"

"Well!" She spoke without the slightest movement of her head or body.

"We've got to go away from Millstead."

He wondered how she would take it. It never occurred to him that she was prepared. She answered: "Yes. Mother's been over here to tell me all about it. We're going to Seacliffe in the morning. Catching the 9.5. What were you doing in Pritchard's bedroom?"

"Didn't they tell you?" he enquired sarcastically.

"How could they? They didn't know. They found you fainting across the bed, and Pritchard said he woke up and found you staring at him."

"And you can't guess why I went there?"

"I suppose you wanted to ask him if it were true that he and I were going away together."

"No, not quite. I wanted to murder him so that it could never be true."

"What!"

"Yes. What I said."

She made no answer, and after a long pause he said: "You're not in love with Pritchard, are you?"

She replied sorrowfully: "Not a little bit. In fact, I rather dislike him. You're the only person I love."

"When you're not hating me, eh?"

"Yes, that's right. When I'm not hating you."

Then after a second long pause he suddenly decided to make one last effort for the tranquillising of the future.

"Helen," he began pleadingly, "Can't you stop hating me? Is it too late to begin everything afresh? Can't we——"

Then he stopped. All the eloquence went out of him suddenly, like the air out of a suddenly pricked balloon. His brain refused to frame the sentences of promise and supplication that he had intended. His brain was tired—utterly tired. He felt he did not care whether Helen stayed with him or not, whether she ran away with Pritchard or not, whether his own relationship with her improved, worsened, or ceased altogether, whether anything in the world happened or did not happen. All he wanted was peace—peace from the eternal torment of his mind.

She suddenly put her arms round him and kissed him passionately. "We *will* begin again, Kenneth," she said eagerly. "We *will* be happy again, won't we? Oh yes, I know *we* will. When we get to Seacliffe we'll have a second honeymoon together, what do you think, darling?"

"Rather," he replied, with stimulated enthusiasm. In reality he felt sick—physically sick. Something in the word "honeymoon" set his nerves on edge. Poor little darling Helen—why on earth had he ever married such a creature? They would never be happy together, he was quite certain of that. And yet . . . well, anyway, they had to make the best of it. He smiled at her and returned her kisses, and then suggested packing the trunk in readiness for the morning.

CHAPTER SIX

I

In the morning there arrived a letter from Clare. He guessed it from the postmark, and was glad that she had the tact to type the address on the envelope. When he tore it open he saw that the letter was also typewritten, and signed merely "C. H.", so that he was able to read it at the breakfast-table without any fears of Helen guessing. It was a curious sensation, that of reading a letter from Clare with Helen so near to him, and so unsuspecting.

It ran:—

"DEAR KENNETH SPEED—As I told you last night I feel thoroughly disgusted with myself—I *knew* I should. I'm very sorry I acted as I did, though of course everything I said was true. If you take my advice you'll take Helen right away and never come near Millstead any more. Begin life with her afresh, and don't expect it to be too easy. As for me—you'd better forget if you *can*. We mustn't ever see each other again, and I think we had better not write, either. I really mean that and I hope you won't send me an awfully pathetic reply as it will only make things more awkward than they are. There was a time when you thought I was hard-hearted; you must try and think so again, because I really don't want to have anything more to do with you. It sounds brutal, but it isn't, really. You have still time to make your life a success, and the only way to do it in the present circumstances is to keep away from my evil influence. So good-bye and good luck. Yours—C.H."—"P.S. If you ever *do* return to Millstead you won't find me there."

He was so furious that he tore the letter up and flung it into the fire.

"What is it?" enquired Helen.

He forced himself to reply: "Oh, only a tradesman's letter."

She answered, with vague sympathy: "Everybody's being perfectly horrid, aren't they?"

"Oh, I don't care," he replied, shrugging his shoulders and eating vigorously. "I don't care a damn for the lot of them."

She looked at him in thoughtful silence.

Towards the end of the meal he had begun to wonder if it had been Clare's object to put him in just that mood of fierce aggressiveness and truculence. He wished he had not thrown the letter into the fire. He would like to have re-read it, and to have studied the phrasing with a view to more accurate interpretation.

That was about seven-thirty in the morning. The bells were just beginning to ring in the dormitories and the floors above to creak with the beginnings of movement. It was a dull morning in early March, cold, but not freezing; the sky was full of mist and clouds, and very likely it would rain later. As he looked out of the window, for what might be the last time in his life, he realised that he was leaving Millstead without a pang. It astonished him a little. There was nothing in the place that he still cared for. All his dreams were in ruins, all his hopes shattered, all his enthusiasms burned away; he could look out upon Millstead, that had once contained them all, without love and without malice. It was nothing to him now; a mere box of bricks teeming with strangers. Even the terror of it had vanished; it stirred him to no emotion at all. He could leave it as casually as he could a railway station at which he had stopped *en route*.

And when he tried, just by way of experiment, to resuscitate for a moment some of the feelings he had once had, he was conscious only of immense mental strain, for something inside him that was sterile and that ached intolerably. He remembered how, on the moonlight nights of his first term, his eyes would fill with tears as he saw the great window-lit blocks of Milner's and Lavery's rising into the pale night. He remembered it without passion and without understanding. He was so different now from what he had been then. He was older now; he was tired; his emotions had been wrung dry; some of him was a little withered.

An hour later he left Millstead quite undramatically by the 9.5. The taxi came to the door of Lavery's at ten minutes to nine, while the school was in morning chapel; as he rode away and out of the main gates he could hear, faintly above the purr of the motor, the drone of two hundred voices making the responses in the psalms. It did not bring to his heart a single pang or to his eye a single tear. Helen sat beside him

and she, too, was unmoved; but she had never cared for Millstead. She was telling him about Seacliffe.

As the taxi bounded into the station yard she said: "Oh, Kenneth, did you leave anything for Burton?"

"No," he answered, curtly.

"You ought to have done," she said.

That ended their conversation till they were in the train.

As he looked out of the window at the dull, bleak fen country he wondered how he could ever have thought it beautiful. Mile after mile of bare, grey-green fields, ditches of tangled reeds, forlorn villages, trees that stood solitary in the midst of great plains. He saw every now and then the long, flat road along which he had cycled many times to Pangbourne. And in a little while Pangbourne itself came into view, with its huge dominating cathedral round which he had been wont formerly to conduct little enthusiastic parties of Millsteadians; Pangbourne had seemed to him so pretty and sunlit in those days, but now all was dull and dreary, and the mist was creeping up in swathes from the fenlands. Pangbourne station. . .

Again he wished that he had not burnt Clare's letter.

At noon he was at Seacliffe, booking accommodation at the Beach Hotel.

II

"Heaven knows what we are going to do with ourselves here," he remarked to Helen during lunch.

"You've got to rest," replied Helen.

He went on to a melancholy mastication of bread. "So far as I can see, we're the only visitors in the entire hotel."

"Well, Kenneth, March is hardly the season, is it?"

"Then why did we come here? I'd much rather have gone to town, where there's always something happening. But a seaside-place in winter!—is there anything in the world more depressing?"

"There's nobody in the world more depressing than you are yourself," she answered tartly. "It isn't my fault we've come here in March. It isn't my fault we've come here at all. And what good would London have done for you? It's rest you want, and you'll get it here."

"Heavens, yes—I'll get it all right."

After a silence he smiled and said: "I'm sorry, Helen, for

being such a wet blanket. And you're quite right, it isn't your fault—not any of it. What can we do this afternoon?"

"We can have a walk along the cliffs," she answered.

He nodded and took up a week-old copy of the *Seacliffe Gazette*. "That's what we'll do," he said, beginning to read.

So that afternoon they had a walk along the cliffs.

In fact there was really nothing at all to do in Seacliffe during the winter season except to take a walk along the cliffs. Everything wore an air of depression—the dingy rain-sodden refreshment kiosks, the shuttered bandstand, the rusting tram rails on the promenade, along which no trams had run since the preceding October, the melancholy pier pavilion, forlornly decorated with the tattered advertisements of last season's festivities. Nothing remained of the town's social amenities but the cindered walk along the cliff edges, and this, except for patches of mud and an absence of strollers, was much the same as usual. Speed and Helen walked vigorously, as people do on the first day of their holidays—grimly determined to extract every atom of nourishment out of the much-advertised air. They climbed the slope of the Beach hill, past the gaunt five-storied basemented boarding-houses, past the yachting club-house, past the marine gardens, past the rows of glass shelters, and then on to the winding cinder-path that rose steeply to the edge of the cliffs. Meanwhile the mist turned to rain and the sea and the sky merged together into one vast grey blur without a horizon.

Then they went back to the Beach Hotel for tea.

Then they read the magazines until dinner-time, and after dinner, more magazines until bedtime.

The next day came the same routine again; walk along the cliffs in the morning; walk along the cliffs in the afternoon; tea; magazines; dinner; magazines; bed. Speed discovered in the hotel a bookcase entirely filled with cheap novels that had been left behind by previous visitors. He read some of them until their small print gave him a headache. Helen revelled in them. In the mornings, by way of a variant from the cliff walk, they took to sitting on the windless side of the municipal shelters, absorbed in the novels. It was melancholy, and yet Speed felt with some satisfaction that he was undoubtedly resting, and that, on the whole, he was enduring it better than he had expected.

III

Then slowly there grew in him again the thought of Clare. It was as if, as soon as he gained strength at all, that strength should bring with it turmoil and desire, so that the only peace that he could ever hope for was the joyless peace of exhaustion. The sharp sea-salt winds that brought him health and vigour brought him also passion, passion that racked and tortured him into weakness again.

He wished a thousand times that he had not burned Clare's letter. He felt sure that somewhere in it there must have been a touch of verbal ambiguity or subtlety that would have given him some message of hope; he could not believe that she had sent him merely a letter of dismissal. In one sense, he was glad that he had burned the letter, for the impossibility of recovering it made it easier for him to suppose whatever he wished about it. And whatever he wished was really only one wish in the world, a wish of one word: Clare. He wanted her, her company, her voice, her movements around him, the sight of her, her quaint perplexing soul that so fitted in with his own, her baffling mysterious understandings of him that nobody else had ever had at all. He wanted her as a sick man longs for health; as if he had a divine right to her, and as if the withholding of her from him gave him a surging grudge against the world.

One dreary interval between tea at the hotel and dinner he wrote to her. He wrote in a mood in which he cared not if his writing angered her or not; her silence, if she did not reply, would be his answer. And if she did not reply, he vowed solemnly to himself that he would never write to her again, that he would put her out of his life and spend his energies in forgetting her.

He wrote:—

"Dear Clare—I destroyed your letter, and I can't quite remember whether it forbade me to reply or not. Anyhow, that's only my excuse for it. I'm having a dreadfully dull time at Seacliffe—we're the only visitors at the hotel and, so far as I can see, the only visitors in Seacliffe at all. I'm not exactly enjoying it, but I daresay it's doing me good. Thanks ever so much for your advice—I mean to profit by it—most of it, at any rate. But mayn't I write to you—even if you don't

write to me? I *do* want to, especially now. May I?—Yours, KENNETH SPEED."

No answer to that. For nearly a week he scanned the rack in the entrance-hall, hoping to see his own name typewritten on an envelope, for he guessed that even if she did reply she would take that precaution. But in vain his hurried and anxious returns from the cliff-walks; no letter was there. And at last, tortured to despair, he wrote again.

"DEAR CLARE—You haven't answered my letter. I *did* think you would, and now I'm a prey to all sorts of awful and, no doubt, quite ridiculous fears. And I'm going to ask you again, half-believing that you didn't receive my last letter —may I write to you? May I write to you whenever I want? I can't have your company, I know—surely you haven't the heart to deny me the friendship I can get by writing to you? You needn't answer: I promise I will never ask for an answer. I don't care if the letters I write offend you or not; there is only one case in which I should like you to be good enough to reply to me and tell me not to write again. And that is if you were beginning to forget me—if letters from me were beginning to be a bore to you. *Please*, therefore, let me write. —Yours, KENNETH SPEED."

To that there came a reply by return of post:

"MY DEAR KENNETH SPEED,—I think correspondence between us is both unwise and unnecessary, but I don't see how I can prevent you from writing if you wish to. And you need not fear that I shall forget you.—CLARE."

He replied, immediately, and with his soul tingling with the renewal of happiness:

"DEAR CLARE,—Thank God you can't stop me from writing, and thank God you know you can't. I don't feel unhappy now that I can write to you, now that I know you will read what I write. I feel so unreticent where you are concerned— I want you to *understand*, and I don't really care, when you have understood, whether you condemn or not. This is going (perhaps) to be a longish letter; I'm alone in the lounge of

this entirely God-forsaken hotel—Helen is putting on a frock for dinner, and I've got a quarter-of-an-hour for you.

"This is what I've found out since I've come to Seacliffe. I've found out the true position of you and me. You've sunk far deeper into my soul than I have ever guessed, and I don't honestly know how on earth I'm to get rid of you! For the last ten days I've been fighting hard to drive you away, but I'm afraid I've been defeated. You're there still, securely entrenched as ever, and you simply won't budge. The only times I don't think of you are the times when I'm too utterly tired out to think of anything or anybody. Worse still, the stronger I get the more I want you. Why can't I stop it? You yourself said during our memorable interview after the 'rag' that it wasn't a bit of good trying to stop loving somebody. So *you* know, as well as me—am I to conclude that, you Hound of Heaven?

"But you can't get rid of me, I hope, any more than I can of you. You may go to the uttermost ends of the earth, but it won't matter. I shall still have you, I shall always bore you—in fact, I've got you now, haven't I? Don't we belong to each other in spite of ourselves?

"I tell you, I've tried to drive you out of my mind. And I really think I might succeed better if I didn't try. Therefore, I shan't try any more. How can you deliberately try to forget anybody? The mere deliberation of the effort rivets them more eternally on your memory!

"Helen and I are getting on moderately well. We don't quarrel. We exchange remarks about the weather, and we discuss trashy novels which we both have read, and we take long and uninteresting walks along the cliffs and admire the same views, over and over again. Helen thinks the rest must be doing me a lot of good. Oh my dear, *dear* Clare, am I wicked because I sit down here and write to you these pleading, treacherous letters, while my wife dresses herself upstairs without a thought that I am so engaged? Am I really full of sin? I know if I put my case before ninety-nine out of a hundred men and women what answer I should receive. But are you the hundredth? I don't care if you are or not; if this is wickedness, I clasp it as dearly as if it were not. I just can't help it. I lie awake at nights trying to think nice, husbandly things about Helen, and just when I think I've got really interested in her I find it's you I've really been thinking about and not Helen at all.

"There must be some wonderful and curious bond between us, some sort of invisible elastic. It wouldn't ever break, no matter how far apart we went, but when it's stretched it hurts, hurts us both, I hope, equally. Is it really courage to go on hurting ourselves like this? What is the good of it? Supposing —I only say supposing—supposing we let go, let the elastic slacken, followed our heart's desire, what then? Who would suffer? Helen, I suppose. Poor Helen!—I mustn't let her suffer like that, must I?

"It wasn't real love that I ever had for her; it was just mere physical infatuation. And now that's gone, all that's left is just dreadful pity—oh, pity that will not let me go! And yet what good is pity—the sort of pity that I have for her?

"Ever since I first knew you, you have been creeping into my heart ever so slowly and steadily, and I, because I never guessed what was happening, have yielded myself to you utterly. In fact, I am a man possessed by a devil—a good little devil—yet—"

He looked round and saw Helen standing by the side of him. He had not heard her approach. She might have been there some while, he reflected. Had she been looking over his shoulder? Did she know to whom was the letter he was writing?

He started, and instinctively covered as much of the writing as he could with the sleeve of his jacket.

"I didn't know you still wrote to Clare," she said, quietly.

"Who said I did?" he parried, with instant truculence.

"You're writing to her now."

"How do you know?"

"Never mind how I know. Answer me: you are, aren't you?"

"I refuse to answer such a question. Surely I haven't to tell you of every letter I write. If you've been spying over my shoulder it's your own fault. How would you like me to read all the letters *you* write?"

"I wouldn't mind in the least, Kenneth, if I thought you didn't trust me."

"Well, I do trust you, you see, and even if I didn't I shouldn't attempt such an unheard-of liberty. And if you can't trust me without censoring my correspondence, I'm afraid you'll have to go on mistrusting me."

"I don't want to censor your correspondence. I only want

you to answer me a straight question: is that a letter to Clare that you're writing?"

"It's a most improper question, and I refuse to answer it."

"Very well. . . . I think it's time for dinner; hadn't you better finish the letter afterwards? Unless, of course, it's very important."

During dinner she said: "I don't feel like staying in from now until bedtime. You'll want to finish your letter, of course, so I think, if you don't mind, I'll go to the local kinema."

"You can't go alone, can you?"

"There's nobody can very easily stop me, is there? You don't want to come with me, I suppose?"

"I'm afraid I don't care for kinemas much. Isn't there a theatre somewhere?"

"No. Only a kinema. I looked in the *Seacliffe Gazette*. In the summer there are Pierrots on the sands, of course."

"So you want to go alone to the kinema?"

"Yes."

"All right. But I'll meet you when it's over. Half-past ten, I suppose?"

"Probably about then. You don't mind me leaving you for a few hours, do you?"

"Oh, not at all. I hope you have a good time. I'm sure I can quite understand you being bored with Seacliffe. It's the deadest hole I've ever struck."

"But it's doing you good, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes, I daresay it is in *that* way."

She added, after a pause: "When you get back to the lounge you'll wonder where you put your half-written letter."

"What do you mean?" He suddenly felt in his inside coat-pocket. "Why—where is it? I thought I put it in my pocket. Who's got it? Have *you*?"

"Yes. You thought you put it in your pocket, I know. But you didn't. You left it on the writing table and I picked it up when you weren't looking."

"Then you *have* got it?"

"Yes, I have got it."

He went red with rage. "Helen, I don't want to make a scene in front of the servants, but I insist on you giving up to me that letter. You've absolutely no right to it, and I demand that you give it me immediately."

"You shall have it after I've read it."

"Good God, Helen, don't play the fool with me! I want it

now, this minute! Understand, I mean it! I want it now!"

"And I shan't give it to you."

He suddenly looked round the room. There was nobody there; the waitress was away; the two of them were quite alone. He rose out of his chair and with a second cautious glance round him went over to her and seized her by the neck with one hand while with the other he felt in her corsage for the letter. He knew that was where she would have put it. The very surprise of his movement made it successful. In another moment he had the letter in his hand. He stood above her, grim and angry, flaunting the letter high above her head. She made an upward spring for his hand, and he, startled by her quick retaliation, crumpled the letter into a heap and flung it into the fire at the side of the room. Then they both stared at each other in silence.

"So it's come to that," she said, her face very white. She placed her hand to her breast and said: "By the way, you've hurt me."

He replied: "I'm sorry if I hurt you. I didn't intend to. I simply wanted to get the letter, that's all."

"All right," she answered. "I'll excuse you for hurting me."

Then the waitress entered with the sweet and their conversation was abruptly interrupted.

After dinner he went back into the lounge and took up an illustrated paper. Somehow, he did not feel inclined to try to rewrite the letter to Clare. And in any case, he could not have remembered more than bits of it; it would have to be a fresh letter if he wrote at all.

Helen came downstairs to him with hat and coat on ready for outdoors.

"Good-bye," she said, "I'm going."

He said: "Hadn't I better take you down to the place? I don't mind a bit of a walk, you know."

She answered: "Oh, no, don't bother. It's not far. You get on with your letter-writing."

Then she paused almost at the door of the lounge, and said, coming back to him suddenly: "Kiss me before I go, Kenneth."

He kissed her. Then she smiled and went out.

An hour later he started another letter to Clare.

"My dear, *dear* Clare,—I'm so pleased it has not all come to an end! . . . All those hours we spent together, all the

work we have shared, all our joy and laughter and sympathy together—it could not have counted for nothing, could it? We dare not have put an end to it; we should fear being haunted all our lives. We . . ."

Then the tired feeling came on him, and he no longer wanted to write, not even to Clare. He put the hardly-begun letter in his pocket—carefully, this time—and took up the illustrated paper again. He half wished he had gone with Helen to the kinema. . . . A quarter to ten. . . . It would soon be time for him to stroll out and meet her.

IV

Walking along the promenade to the beach kinema he solemnly reviewed his life. He saw kaleidoscopically his childhood days at Beachings Over, then the interludes at Harrow and Cambridge, and then the sudden tremendous plunge—Millstead! It seemed to him that ever since that glowering April afternoon when he had first stepped into Ervine's dark study, events had been shaping themselves relentlessly to his ruin. He could see himself as a mere automaton, moved upon by the calm accurate fingers of fate. His meeting with Helen, his love of her and hers for him, their marriage, their slow infinitely wearisome estrangement—all seemed as if it had been planned with sinister deliberation. Only one section of his life had been dominated by his own free will, and that was the part of it that had to do with Clare. He pondered over the subtle differentiation, and decided at last that it was invalid, and that fate had operated at least as much with Clare as with Helen. And yet, for all that, the distinction remained in his mind. His life with Helen seemed to press him down, to cramp him in a narrow groove, to deprive him of all self-determination; it was only when he came to Clare that he was free again and could do as he liked. Surely it was he himself, and not fate, that drew him joyously to Clare.

The mist that had hovered over Seacliffe all day was now magically lifted, and out of a clear sky there shone a moon with the slightest of yellow haloes encircling it. The promenade was nearly deserted, and in all the tall cliff of boarding-houses along the Marine Parade there was hardly a window with a light in it. The solitary redness of the lamp on the end of the pier sent a soft shimmer over the intervening water;

the sea, at almost high tide, was quite calm. Hardly a murmur of the waves reached his ears as he strolled briskly along, but that was because they were right up against the stone wall of the promenade and had no beach of pebbles to be noisy with. He leaned over the railings and saw the water immediately beneath him, silvered in moonlight. Seacliffe was beautiful now. . . . Then he looked ahead and saw the garish illuminations of the solitary picture-palace that Seacliffe possessed, and he wondered how Helen or anybody could prefer a kinema entertainment to the glory of the night outside. And yet, he reflected, the glory of the night was a subjective business; it required a certain mood; whereas the kinema created its own mood, asking and requiring nothing. Poor Helen!

Why should pity for her have overwhelmed him suddenly at that moment? He did not love her, not the least fraction; yet he would have died for her if such had need to be. If she were in danger he would not stay to think; he would risk life or limb for her sake without a premonitory thought. He almost longed for the opportunity to sacrifice himself for her in some such way. He felt he owed it to her. But there was one sacrifice that was *too* hard—he could not live with her in contentment, giving up Clare. He knew he couldn't. He saw quite clearly in the future the day when he would leave Helen and go to Clare. Not fate this time, but the hungering desire of his heart, that would not let him rest.

And yet, was not this same desire fate itself, his own fate, leading him on and further to some inevitable end? Only that he did not fear it. He opened wide his arms, welcoming it, longing for and therefore unconscious of its domination.

He stood in front of the gilded dinginess of the picture-place, pondering on his destiny, when there came up to him a shabby little man in a long tattered overcoat, who asked him for a light. Speed, who was so anxious not to be a snob that he usually gave to strangers the impression of being one, proffered a box of matches and smiled. But for the life of him he could not think of anything to say. He felt he ought to say something, lest the other fellow might think him surly; he racked his brain for some appropriate remark and eventually said: "Nice night." The other lit the stump of a cigarette contemplatively and replied: "Yes. Nice night. . . . Thanks. . . . Waiting for somebody?"

"Yes," replied Speed, rather curtly. He had no desire to

continue the conversation, still less to discuss his own affairs.

"Rotten hole, Seacliffe, in winter," resumed the stranger, showing no sign of moving on.

"Yes," agreed Speed.

"Nothing to do—nowhere to go—absolutely the deadest place on God's earth. I live here and I know. Every night I take a stroll about this time and to-night's bin the first night this year I've ever seen anything happen at all."

"Indeed?"

The stranger ignored the obvious boredness of Speed's voice, and continued: "Yes. That's the truth. But it happened all right to-night. Quite exciting, in fact."

He looked at Speed to see if his interest was in any way aroused. Such being not yet so he remarked again: "Yes, quite exciting." He paused and added: "Bit gruesome perhaps—to some folks."

Speed said, forcing himself to be interested:

"Why, what was it?"

And the other, triumphant that he had secured an attentive audience at last, replied: "Body found. Pulled up off the breakwater. . . . Drowned, of course."

Even now Speed was only casually interested.

"Really? And who was it?"

"Don't know the name. . . . A woman's body."

"Nobody identified her yet?"

"Not yet. They say she's not a Seacliffe woman. . . . See *there!*" He pointed back along the promenade towards a spot where, not half an hour ago, Speed had leaned over the railings to see the moonlight on the sea. "Can you see the crowd standing about? That's where they dragged her in. Only about ten minutes ago as I was passin'. Very high tide, you know, washes all sorts of things up. . . . I didn't stay long —bit too gruesome for me."

"Yes," agreed Speed. "And for me too. . . . By the way d'you happen to know when this picture house shuts up?"

"About half-past ten, mostly."

"Thanks."

"Well—I'll be gettin' along. . . . Much obliged for the light. . . . Good-night. . . ."

"Good-night," said Speed.

A few minutes later the crowd began to tumble out of the kinema. He stood in the darkness against a blank wall, where he could see without being seen. He wondered whether he

had not better take Helen home through the town instead of along the promenade. It was a longer way, of course, but it would avoid the unpleasant affair that the stranger had mentioned to him. He neither wished to see himself nor wished Helen to see anything of the sort.

Curious that she was so late? The kinema must be almost empty now; the stream of people had stopped. He saw the manager going to the box-office to lock up. "Have they all come out?" he asked, emerging into the rays of the electric lights. "Yes, everybody," answered the other. He even glanced at Speed suspiciously, as if he wondered why he should be waiting for somebody who obviously hadn't been to the kinema at all.

Well. . . . Speed stood in a sheltered alcove and lit a cigarette. He had better get back to the Beach Hotel, anyway. Perhaps Helen hadn't gone to the picture-show after all. Or, perhaps, she had come out before the end and they had missed each other. Perhaps anything. . . . Anything! . . .

Then suddenly the awful thought occurred to him. At first it was fantastic; he walked along, sampling it in a horrified fashion, yet refusing to be in the least perturbed by it. Then it gained ground upon him, made him hasten his steps, throw away his cigarette, and finally run madly along the echoing promenade to the curious little silent crowd that had gathered there, about halfway to the pier entrance. He scampered along the smooth asphalt just like a boisterous youngster, yet in his eyes was wild brain-maddening fear.

V

Ten minutes later he knew. They pointed to a gap in the railings close by, made some while before by a lorry that had run out of control along the Marine Parade. The Urban District Council ought to have repaired the railings immediately after the accident, and he (somebody in the crowd) would not be surprised if the coroner censured the Council pretty severely at the inquest. The gap was a positive death-trap for anybody walking along at night and not looking carefully ahead. And *he* (somebody else in the crowd) suggested the possibility of making the Seacliffe Urban District Council pay heavy damages. . . . Of course, it was an accident. . . . There was a bad bruise on the head: that was where she must have struck the stones as she fell. . . . And in one of

the pockets was a torn kinema ticket; clearly she had been on her way home from the Beach kinema. . . . Once again, it was the Council's fault for not promptly repairing the dangerous gap in the railings.

They led him back to the Beach Hotel and gave him brandy. He kept saying: "Now please go—I'm quite all right. . . . There's really nothing that anybody can do for me. . . . Please go now. . . ."

When at last he was alone in the cheerless hotel bedroom he sat down on the side of the bed and cried. Not for sorrow or pity or terror, but merely to relieve some fearful strain of emotion that was in him. Helen dead! He could hardly force himself to believe it, but when he did he felt sorry, achingly sorry, because there had been so many bonds between them, so many bonds that only death could have snapped. He saw her now, poor little woman, as he had never seen her before; the love in her still living, and all that had made them unhappy together vanished away. He loved her, those minutes in the empty, cheerless bedroom, more calmly than he had ever loved her when she had been near to him. And—strange miracle!—she had given him peace at last. Pity for her no longer overwhelmed him with its sickly torture; he was calm, calm with sorrow, but calm.

VI

Then, slowly, grimly, as to some fixed and inevitable thing, his torture returned. He tried to persuade himself that the worst was over, that tragedy had spent its terrible utmost; but even the sad calm of desperation was nowhere to be found. He paced up and down the bedroom long and wearisomely; shortly after midnight the solitary gas-jet faltered and flickered and finally abandoned itself with a forlorn pop. "*Curse* the place!" he muttered, acutely nervous in the sudden gloom; then for some moments he meditated a sarcastic protest to the hotel-proprietress in the morning. "I am aware," he would begin, tartly, "that the attractions of Seacliffe in the evenings are not such as would often tempt the visitor to keep up until the small hours; but don't you think that is an argument *against* rather than *for* turning off the gas-supply at midnight?" Rather ponderous, though; probably the woman wouldn't know what he meant. He might write a letter to the *Seacliffe Gazette* about it, anyway. "Oh, *damn*

them!" he exclaimed, with sudden fervour, as he searched for the candle on the dressing-table. Unfortunately he possessed no matches, and the candlestick, when at last his groping had discovered it, contained none, either. It was so infernally dark and silent; everybody in the place was in bed except himself. He pictured the maids, sleeping cosily in the top attics, or perhaps chattering together in whispers about clothes or their love-affairs or Seacliffe gossip or—why, of course!—about *him*. They would surely be talking about *him*. Such a tit-bit of gossip! Everyone in Seacliffe would be full of the tragedy of the young fellow whose wife, less than a year married, had fallen accidentally into the sea off the promenade! He, not she, would be the figure of high tragedy in their minds, and on the morrow they would all stare at him morbidly, curiously. . . . Good God in Heaven! Could he endure it? . . . Lightly the moonlight filtered through the Venetian blinds on to the garish linoleum pattern; and when the blinds were stirred by the breeze the light skipped along the floor like moving swords; he could not endure that, anyway. He went to the windows and drew up the blinds, one after the other. They would hear that, he reflected, if they were awake; they would know he was not asleep.

Then he remembered her as he had seen her less than a twelvemonth before; standing knee-deep in the grasses by the river-bank at Parminters. Everywhere that he had loved her was so clear now in his mind, and everywhere else was so unreal and dim. He heard the tinkle of the Head's piano and saw her puzzling intently over some easy Chopin mazurka, her golden hair flame-like in the sunlight of the afternoon. He saw the paths and fields of Millstead, all radiant where she and he had been, and the moonlight lapping the pavilion steps, where, first of all, he had touched her lips with his. And then—only with an effort could he picture this—he saw the grim room downstairs, where she lay all wet and bedraggled, those cheeks that he had kissed ice-cold and salt with the sea. The moon, emerging fully from behind a mist, plunged him suddenly in white light; at that moment it seemed to him that he was living in some ugly nightmare, and that shortly he would wake from it and find all the tragedy untrue. Helen was alive and well: he could only have imagined her dead. And downstairs, in that sitting-room—it had been no more than a dream, fearful and—thank God—false. Helen was away, somewhere, perfectly well and happy

—*somewhere.* And downstairs, in that sitting-room . . . Anyhow, he would go down and see, to convince himself. He unlocked the bedroom door and tiptoed out on to the landing. He saw the moon's rays caught phosphorescently on a fish in a glass case. Down the two flights of stairs he descended with caution, and then, at the foot, strove to recollect which was the room. He saw two doors, with something written on them. One was the bar-parlour, he thought, where the worthies of Seacliffe congregated nightly. He turned the handle and saw the glistening brass of the beer-engines. Then the other door, might be? He tried the handle, but the door was locked. Somehow this infuriated him. "They lock the doors and turn off the gas!" he cried, vehemently, uniting his complaints. Then suddenly he caught sight of another door in the wall opposite, a door on which there was no writing at all. He had an instant conviction that this must be *the* door. He strode to it, menacingly, took hold of its handle in a firm grasp, and pushed. Locked again! This time he could not endure the fury that raged within him. "Good God!" he cried, shouting at the top of his voice, "I'll burst every door in the place in!" He beat on the panels with his fists, shouting and screaming the whole while. . . .

Ten minutes later the hotel-porter and the bar man, clad in trousers and shirt only, were holding his arms on either side, and the proprietress, swathed in a pink dressing-gown, was standing a little way off, staring at him curiously. And he was complaining to her about the turning off of the gas at midnight. "One really has a right to expect something more generous from the best hotel in Seacliffe," he was saying, with an argumentative mildness that surprised himself. "It is not as though this were a sixpenny doss-house. It is an A.A. listed hotel, and I consider it absolutely scandalous that . . ."

VII

Strangely, when he was back again and alone in his own bedroom, he felt different. His gas-jet was burning again, evidently as a result of his protest; the victory gave him a curious, childish pleasure. Nor did his burdens weigh so heavily on him; indeed, he felt even peaceful enough to try to sleep. He undressed and got into bed.

And then, slowly, secretly, dreadfully, he discovered that he was thinking about Clare! It frightened him—this way

she crept into his thoughts as pain comes after the numbness of a blow. He knew he ought not to think of her. He ought to put her out of his mind, at any rate, for the present. Helen dead this little while, and already Clare in his thoughts! The realisation appalled him, terrified him by affording him a glimpse into the depths of his own dark soul. And yet—*he could not help it.* Was he to be blamed for the thoughts that he could not drive out of his mind? He prayed urgently and passionately for sleep, that he might rid himself of the lurking, lurking image of her. But even in sleep he feared he might dream of her.

Oh, Clare, Clare, would she ever come to him now, now that he was alone and Helen was dead? God, the awfulness of the question! Yet he could not put it away from him; he could but deceive himself, might be, into thinking he was not asking it. He wanted Clare. Not more than ever—only as much as he had always wanted her.

He wondered solemnly if the stuff in him were rotten; if he were proven vile and debased because he wanted her; if he were cancelling his soul by thinking of her so soon. And yet—God help him; even if all that were so, *he could not help it.* If he were to be damned eternally for thinking about Clare, then let him be damned eternally. Actions he might control, but never the strains and cravings of his own mind. If he were wrong, therefore, let him be wrong.

He wondered whether, when he fell asleep, he would dream about Helen or about Clare. And yet, when at last his very tiredness made him close his eyes, he dreamed of neither of them, but slept in perfect calm, as a child that has been forgiven.

In the morning they brought his breakfast up to him in bed, and with it a letter and a telegram. The chambermaid asked him dubiously if he were feeling better and he replied: "Oh yes, much better, thanks." Only vaguely could he remember what had taken place during the night.

When the girl had gone and he had glanced at the handwriting on the envelope, he had a sudden paralysing shock, for it was Helen's!

The postmark was: "Seacliffe, 10.10 p.m."

He tore open the envelope with slow and awful dread, and took out a single sheet of Beach Hotel notepaper. Scribbled on it in pencil was just:

"DEAR KENNETH" ("Dear" underlined),—Good-bye, darling. I can't bear you not to be happy. Forget me and don't worry. They will think it has been an accident, and you mustn't tell them anything else. Leave Millstead and take Clare away. Be happy with her.—Yours, HELEN."—

"P.S.—There's one thing I'm sorry for. On the last night before we left Millstead I said something about Clare and Pritchard. Darling, it was a lie—I made it up because I couldn't bear you to love Clare so much. I don't mind now. Forgive me."

A moment later he was opening the telegram and reading: "Shall arrive Seacliffe Station one fifteen meet me Clare."

It had been despatched from Millstead at nine-five that morning, evidently as soon as the post office opened.

He ate no breakfast. It was a quarter past eleven and the sun was streaming in through the window—the first spring day of the year. He re-read the letter.

Strange that until then the thought that the catastrophe could have been anything at all but accidental had never even remotely occurred to him! Now it came as a terrible revelation, hardly to be believed, even with proof; a revelation of that utmost misery that had driven her to the sea. He had known that she was not happy, but he had never guessed that she might be miserable to death.

And what escape was there now from his own overwhelming guilt? She had killed herself because he had not made her happy. Or else because she had not been able to make him happy. Whichever it was, he was fearfully to blame. She had killed herself to make room for that other woman who had taken all the joy out of her life.

And at one-fifteen that other woman would arrive in Seacliffe.

In the darkest depths of his remorse he vowed that he would not meet her, see her, or hold any communication with her ever again, so long as his life lasted. He would hate her eternally, for Helen's sake. He would dedicate his life to the annihilation of her in his mind. Why was she coming? Did she know? How *could* she know? He raved at her mentally, trying to involve her in some share of his own deep treachery, for even the companionship of guilt was at least companionship. The two of them—Clare and himself—had murdered

Helen. The two of them—together. *Together.* There was black magic in the intimacy that that word implied—magic in the guilty secret that was between them, in the passionate iniquity that was alluring even in its baseness!

He dressed hurriedly, and with his mind in a ferment, forgot his breakfast till it was cold and then found it too unpalatable to eat. As he descended the stairs and came into the hotel lobby he remarked to the proprietress: "Oh, by the way, I must apologise for making a row last night. Fact is, my nerves, you know. . . . Rather upset. . . ."

"Quite all right, Mr. Speed. I'm sure we all understand and sympathise with you. If there's any way we can help you, you know. . . . Shall you be in to lunch?"

"Lunch? Oh yes—er—I mean, no. No, I don't think I shall —not to-day. You see there are—er—arrangements to make —er—arrangements, you know . . ."

He smiled, and with carefully simulated nonchalance, commenced to light a cigarette! When he got outside the hotel he decided that it was absolutely the wrong thing to have done. He flung the cigarette into the gutter. What was the matter with him? Something,—something that made him, out of very fear, do ridiculous and inappropriate things. The same instinct, no doubt, that always made him talk loudly when he was nervous. And then he remembered that April morning of the year before, when he had first of all entered the Headmaster's study at Millstead; for then, through nervousness, he had spoken loudly, almost aggressively, to disguise his embarrassment. What a curious creature he was, and how curious people must think him.

He strolled round the town, bought a morning paper at the news agent's, and pretended to be interested in the contents. Over him like a sultry shadow lay the disagreeable paraphernalia of the immediate future: doctors, coroner, inquest, lawyers, interviews with Doctor and Mrs. Ervine, and so on. It had all to be gone through, but for the present he would try to forget it. The turmoil of his own mind, that battle which was being waged within his inmost self, that strife which no coroner would guess, those secrets which no inquest would or could elicit; these were the things of greater import. In the High Street, leading up from the Pierhead, he saw half a dozen stalwart navvies swinging sledge-hammers into the concrete road-bed. He stopped, ostensibly to wait for a tram,

but really to watch them. He envied them, passionately; envied their strength and animal simplicity; envied above all their lack of education and ignorance of themselves, their happy blindness along the path of life. He wished he could forget such things as Art and Culture and Education, and could become as they, or as he imagined them to be. Their lives were brimful of *real* things, things to be held and touched—hammers and levers and slabs of concrete. With all their crude joy and all their pain, simple and physical, their souls grew strong and stark. He envied them with a passion that made him desist at last from the sight of them, because it hurt.

The town-hall clock began the hour of noon, and that reminded him of Clare, and of the overwhelming fact that she was at that moment in the train hastening to Seacliffe. Was he thinking of her again? He went into a café and ordered in desperation a pot of China tea and some bread and butter, as if the mere routine of a meal would rid his mind of her. For desire was with him still, nor could he stave it off. Nothing that he could ever discover, however ugly or terrible, could stop the craving of him for Clare. The things that they had begun together, he and she, had no ending in this world. And suddenly all sense of free-will left him, and he felt himself propelled at a mighty rate towards her, wherever she might be; fate, surely, guiding him to her, but this time, a fate that was urging him from within, not pressing him from without. And he knew, secretly, whatever indignant protests he might make to himself about it, that when the 1:15 train entered Seacliffe station he would be waiting there on the platform for her. The thing was inevitable, like death.

But inevitability did not spare him torment. And at last his remorse insisted upon a compromise. He would meet Clare, he decided, but when he had met her, he would proceed to torture her, subtly, shrewdly—seeking vengeance for the tragedy that she had brought to his life, and the spell that she had cast upon his soul. He would be the Grand Inquisitor.

He was very white and haggard when the time came. He had reached the station as early as one o'clock, and for a quarter of an hour had lounged about the deserted platforms. Meanwhile the sun shone gloriously, and the train as it ran into the station caught the sunlight on its windows. The sight

of the long line of coaches, curving into the station like a flaming sword into its scabbard, gave him a mighty heart-rending thrill. Yes, yes—he would torture her. . . . His eyes glinted with diabolical exhilaration, and a touch of hectic colour crept into his wan cheeks. He watched her alight from a third-class compartment near the rear of the train. Then he lost her momentarily amidst the emptying crowd. He walked briskly against the stream of the throng, with a heart that beat fast with unutterable expectations.

But how he loved her as he saw her coming towards him! —though he tried with all his might to kindle hate in his heart. She smiled and held out her tiny hand. He took it with a limpness that was to begin his torture of her. She was to notice that limpness.

"How is Helen?" was her first remark.

Amidst the bustle of the luggage round the guard's van he replied quietly: "Helen? Oh, she's all right. I didn't tell her you were coming."

"You were wise," she answered.

A faint thrill of anticipation crept over him; this diabolical game was interesting, fascinating, in its way; and would lead her very securely into a number of traps. And why, he thought, did she think it was wise of him not to have told Helen?

In the station-yard she suddenly stopped to consult a time-table hoarding.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm looking for the next train back to Millstead."

"Not the *next*, surely?"

"Why not? What do you think I've come for?"

"I don't know in the least. What *have* you come for?"

She looked at him appealingly. He saw, with keen and instant relish, that she had already noticed something of hostility in his attitude towards her. The torture had begun. For the first time, she was subject to his power and not he to hers.

"I've come for a few minutes' conversation," she answered, quietly. "And the next train back is at 3:18."

"You mean to travel by that?"

"Yes."

"Then we needn't stay in the station till then, need we? Let's walk somewhere. We've two whole hours—time enough to get right out of the town and back again. I hate conversations in railway-stations."

But his chief reason was a desire to secure the right scenic background for his torture of her.

"All right," she answered, and looked at him again appealingly. The tears almost welled into his own eyes because of the deep sadness that was in hers. How quick she was to feel his harshness!—he thought. How marvellously sensitive was that little soul of hers to the subtlest gradations of his own mood! What fiendish torture he could put her to, by no more, might be, than the merest upraising of an eyebrow, the faintest change of the voice, the slightest tightening of the lips! She was of mercury, like himself; responsive to every touch of the emotional atmosphere. And was not that the reason why she understood him with such wonderful instinctive intimacy,—was not that the reason why the two of them, out of the whole world, would have sought each other like twin magnets?

He led her, in silence, through the litter of mean streets near the station, and thence, beyond the edge of the town, towards the meadows that sloped to the sea. So far it had been a perfect day, but now the sun was half-quenching itself in a fringe of mist that lay along the horizon; and with the change there came a sudden pink light that lit both their faces and shone behind them on the tawdry newness of the town, giving it for once a touch of pitiful loveliness. He took her into a rolling meadow that tapered down into a coppice, and as they reached the trees the last shaft of sunlight died from the sky. Then they plunged into the grey depths, with all the freshly-budded leaves brushing against their faces, and the very earth, so it seemed, murmuring at their approach. Already there was the hint of rain in the air.

"It's a long way to come for a few minutes' conversation," he began.

She answered, ignoring his remark: "I had a letter from Helen this morning."

"What!" he exclaimed in sharp fear. He went suddenly white.

"A letter," she went on, broodingly. "Would you like to see it?"

He stared at her and replied: "I would rather hear from you what it was about."

He saw her brown eyes looking up curiously into his, and he had the instant feeling that she would cry if he persisted in his torture of her. The silence of that walk from the station

had unnerved her, had made her frightened of him. That was what he had intended. And she did not know yet—did not know what he knew. Poor girl—what a blow was in waiting for her! But he must not let it fall for a little while.

She bit her lip and said: "Very well. It was about you. She was unhappy about you. Dreadfully unhappy. She said she was going to leave you. She also said—that she was going to leave you—to—to me."

Her voice trembled on that final word.

"Well?"

She recovered herself to continue with more energy: "And I've come here to tell you this—that if she does leave you, I shan't have you. That's all."

"You are making large assumptions."

"I know. And I don't mind your sarcasm, though I don't think any more of you for using it. . . . I repeat what I said —if Helen leaves you or if you leave Helen, I shall have nothing more to do with you."

"It is certainly kind of you to warn me in time."

"You've never given Helen a fair trial. I know you and she are ill-matched. I know you oughtn't to have married her at all, but that doesn't matter—you've done it, and you've got to be fair to her. And if you think that because I've confessed that I love you I'm in your power for you to be cruel to, you're mistaken!" Her voice rose passionately.

He stared at her, admiring the warm flush that came into her cheeks, and all the time pitying her, loving her, agonisingly!

"Understand," she went on, "You've got to look after Helen —you've got to take care of her—watch her—do you know what I mean?"

"No. What do you mean?"

"I mean you must try to make her happy. She's sick and miserable, and, somehow, you must cure her. I came here to see you because I thought I could persuade you to be kind to her. I thought if you loved me at all, you might do it for my sake. Remember I love Helen as well as you. Do you still think I'm hard-hearted and cold? If you knew what goes on inside me, the racking, raging longing—the— No, no—what's the good of talking of that to you? You either understand or else you don't, and if you don't, no words of mine will make you. . . . But I warn you again, you must cure Helen of her unhappiness. Otherwise, she might try to cure herself—in

any way, drastic or not, that occurred to her. Do you know now what I mean?"

"I'm afraid I don't, even yet."

"Well"—her voice became harder—"it's this, if you want plain speaking. Watch her in case she kills herself. She's thinking of it."

He went ashen pale again and said quietly, after a long pause: "How do you know that?"

"Her letter."

"She mentioned it?"

"Yes."

"And that's what you've come to warn me about?"

"Yes. And to persuade you, if I could——"

"Why did you decide that a personal visit was necessary?"

"I shouldn't have cared to tell you all this by letter. And besides, a letter wouldn't have been nearly as quick, would it? You see I only received her letter this morning. After all, the matter's urgent enough. One can easily be too late."

He said, with eyes fixed steadily upon her: "Clare, you *are* too late. She drowned herself last night."

He expected she would cry or break down or do something dramatic that he could at any rate endure. But instead of that, she stared vacantly into the fast-deepening gloom of the coppice, stared infinitely, terribly, without movement or sound. Horror tore nakedly through her eyes like pain, though not a muscle of her face stirred from that fearful, statuesque immobility. Moments passed. Far over the intervening spaces came the faint chiming of the half-hour on the town-hall clock, and fainter still, but ominous-sounding, the swirl of the waves on the distant beach as the wind rose and freshened.

He could not bear that silence and that stillness of hers. It seemed as though it would be eternal. And suddenly he saw that she was really suffering, excruciatingly; and he could not bear it, because he loved her. And then all his plans for torturing her, all his desires for vengeance, all his schemes to make her suffer as he had suffered, all the hate of her that he had manufactured in his heart—all was suddenly gone, like worthless dust scoured by the gale. He perceived that they were one in suffering as in guilt—fate's pathetic flotsam, aching to cling together even in the last despairing drift.

He cried, agonisingly: "Clare! Clare! Oh, for God's sake, don't stare at me like that, Clare! Oh, my darling, my dear

darling, I'm sorry—sorry—I'm dead with sorrow! Clare—Clare—be kind to me, Clare—kinder than I have been to you or to Helen! . . ."

VIII

She said, quietly: "I must get back in time for my train."

"No, no—not yet. Don't go. Don't leave me."

"I must."

"No—no——"

"You know I must. Don't you?"

He became calmer. It was as if she had willed him to become calmer, as if some of the calmness of her was passing over to him. "Clare," he said, eagerly, "Do you think I'm *bad*—am I—*rotten-souled*—because of what's happened? Am I *damned*, do you think?"

She answered softly: "No. You're not. And you mustn't think you are. Don't I love you? Would I love you if you were rotten? Would you love me if *I* was?"

He replied, gritting his teeth: "I would love you if you were filth itself."

"Ah, would you?" she answered, with wistful pathos in her voice. "But I'm not like that. I love you for what I know you are, for what I know you could be!"

"Could be? Could have been! But Clare, Clare—who's to blame?"

"So many things happen dreadfully in this world and nobody knows who's to blame."

"But not this, Clare. *We're* to blame."

"We can be to blame without being—all that you said."

"Can we? Can we? There's another thing. If Helen had—had lived—she would have had a baby in a few months' time. . . ."

He paused, waiting for her reply, but none came. She went very pale. At last she said, with strange unrestfulness: "What can I say? What *is* there to say? . . . Oh, don't let us go mad through thinking of it! We *have* been wrong, but have we been as wrong as that? Hasn't there been fate in it? Fate can do the awfullest things. . . . My dear, dear man, we should go mad if we took all that load of guilt on ourselves! It is too heavy for repentance. . . . Oh, you're not *bad*, not inwardly. And neither am I. We've been instruments—puppets——"

"It's good to think so. But is it true?"

"Before God, I think it is. . . . Think of it all right from the beginning. . . . Right from the night you met us both at Millstead. . . . It's easy to blame fate for what we've done, but isn't it just as easy to blame ourselves for the workings of fate?"

She added, uneasily: "I *must* go back. My train. Don't forget the time."

"Can't you wait for the next?"

"*Dear*, you *know* I mustn't. How could I stay? Fate's finished with us now. We've free-will. . . . Didn't I tell you we weren't *bad*? All that's why I can't stay."

They began to walk back to the railway-station. A mist-like rain was beginning to fall, and everything was swathed in grey dampness. They talked together like two age-long friends, partners in distress and suffering; he told her, carefully and undramatically, the story of the night before.

She said to him, from the carriage-window just before the 3:18 steamed out: "I shan't see you again for ever such a long while. I wish—I wish I could stay with you and help you. But I can't. . . . You know why I can't, don't you?"

"Yes, I know why. We must be brave alone. We must learn, if we can, to call ourselves good again."

"Yes. . . . Yes. . . . We must start life anew. No more mistakes. And you must grow back again to what you used to be. . . . The next few months will be terrible—maddening—for both of us. But *I* can bear them. Do you think *you* can—without me? If I thought you couldn't"—her voice took on a sudden wild passion—"if I thought you would break down under the strain, if I thought the fight would crush and kill you, I would stay with you from this moment and never, never leave you alone! I would—I would—if I thought there was no other way!"

He said, calmly and earnestly: "I can fight it, Clare. I shall not break down. Trust me. And then—some day——"

She interrupted him hurriedly. "I am going abroad very soon. I don't know for how long, but for a long while, certainly. And while I am away I shall not write to you, and you must not write to me, either. Then, when I come back . . ."

He looked up into her eyes and smiled.

The guard was blowing his whistle.

"Be brave these next few months," she said again.

"I will," he answered. He added: "I shall go home."

"What? Home Home to the millionaire soap-boiler?" (A touch of the old half-mocking Clare.)

"Yes. It's my home. They've always been very good to me."

"Of course they have. I'm glad you've realised it."

Then the train began to move. "Good-bye!" she said, holding out her hand.

"Good-bye!" he cried, taking it and clasping it quickly as he walked along the platform with the train. "See you again," he added, almost in a whisper.

She gave him such a smile, with tears streaming down her cheeks, as he would never, never forget.

When he went out again into the station-yard the fine rain was falling mercilessly. He felt miserable, sick with a new as well as an old misery, but stirred by a hope that would never let him go.

Back then to the Beach Hotel, vowing and determining for the future, facing in anticipation the ordeals of the dark days ahead, summoning up courage and fortitude, bracing himself for terror and conflict and desire. . . . And with it all hoping, hoping . . . hoping everlastingly.

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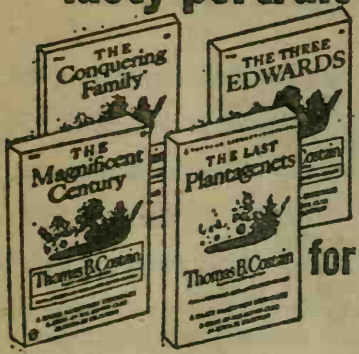

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