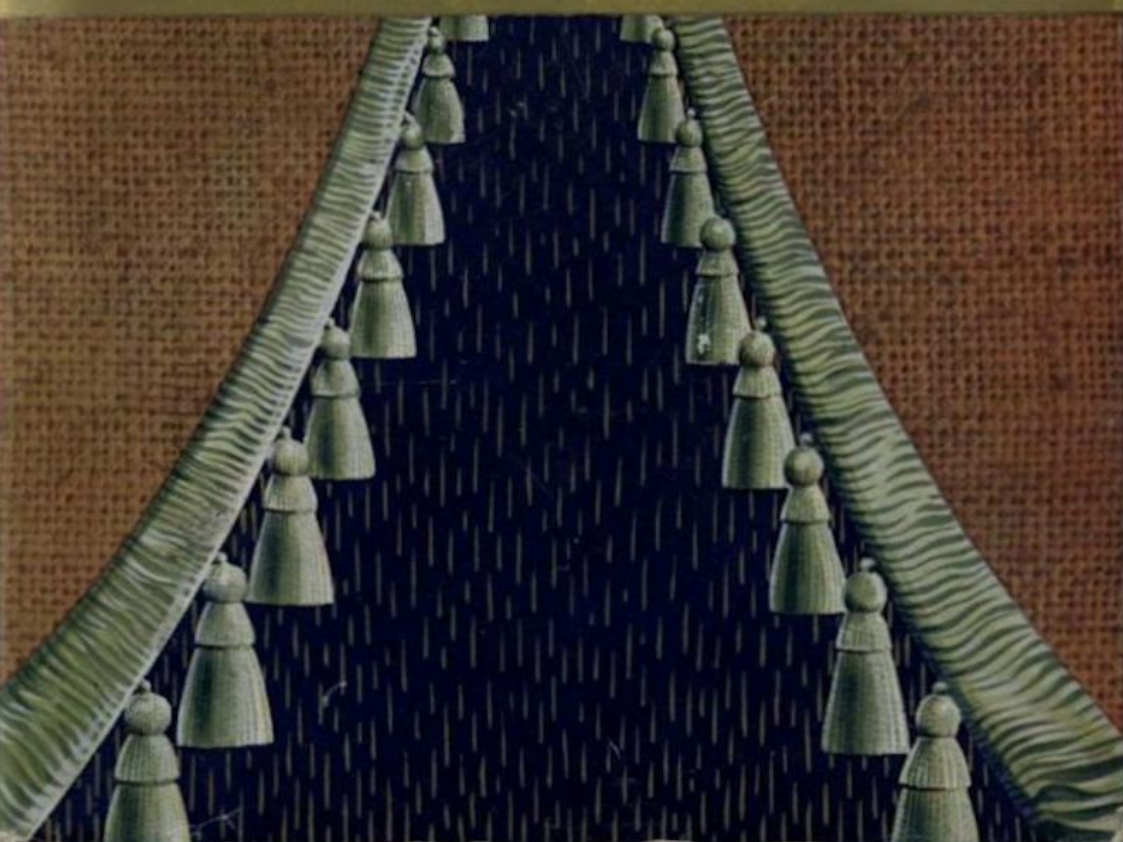


Sackcloth into Silk

WARWICK DEEPING



*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: Sackcloth into Silk

Date of first publication: 1935

Author: Warwick Deeping (1877-1950)

Date first posted: July 23, 2017

Date last updated: July 23, 2017

Faded Page eBook #20170720

This ebook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

BOOKS BY
WARWICK DEEPING

TWO IN A TRAIN
THE MAN ON THE WHITE HORSE
SEVEN MEN CAME BACK
TWO BLACK SHEEP
SMITH
OLD WINE AND NEW
THE ROAD
SHORT STORIES
EXILES
ROPER'S ROW
OLD PYBUS
KITTY
DOOMSDAY
SORREL AND SON
SUVLA JOHN
THREE ROOMS
THE SECRET SANCTUARY
ORCHARDS
LANTERN LANE
SECOND YOUTH
COUNTESS GLIKA
UNREST
THE PRIDE OF EVE
THE KING BEHIND THE KING
THE HOUSE OF SPIES
SINCERITY
FOX FARM
BESS OF THE WOODS
THE RED SAINT
THE SLANDERERS
THE RETURN OF THE PETTICOAT
A WOMAN'S WAR
VALOUR
BERTRAND OF BRITTANY

UTHER AND IGRAINE
THE HOUSE OF ADVENTURE
THE PROPHETIC MARRIAGE
APPLES OF GOLD
THE LAME ENGLISHMAN
MARRIAGE BY CONQUEST
JOAN OF THE TOWER
MARTIN VALLIANT
THE RUST OF ROME
THE WHITE GATE
THE SEVEN STREAMS
MAD BARBARA
LOVE AMONG THE RUINS

SACKCLOTH INTO SILK

By
WARWICK DEEPING

McCLELLAND & STEWART, LIMITED
Publishers Toronto

COPYRIGHT, CANADA, 1935
By
McCLELLAND & STEWART, LIMITED

PRINTED IN CANADA

T. H. BEST PRINTING CO., LIMITED
TORONTO, ONT.

TO

NEWMAN FLOWER

IN MEMORY OF A LONG AND
HAPPY FRIENDSHIP

CHAPTER I

Some of the child's memories of the house were strange and capricious. They might have been described as infantile memories, save that they remained with him like sinister studies in black and white. The house was narrow, and dark and starved. From the side door and passage beside the shop the stairs ascended, carrying with them a warm fug and a smell of old clothes. Shabby people climbed these stairs and went into his father's room.

Sometimes, he would listen to their voices.

Even as a child, obsessed with a sensitive child's fancies, these voices suggested strange angers. They made a kind of bitter buzzing in that back room. Almost they were like the voices of the cloaked, masked and murderous people in his tales of adventure, the voices of men huddling their heads about a lantern and murmuring of blood.

An imaginative child, a sensitive, dark, mercurial little creature, he had a fondness for the window on the first landing, and the strip of linoleum-covered floor. He used to pretend there. He was in his castle, or he was the captain of the ship, though the window showed him nothing but a back yard, and piles of old packing-cases, and the shed in which his father's bicycle lived, and the backs of other houses. They were dastardly in their ugliness. Possibly, it was their destiny to teach him that ugliness can be as provocative as beauty, and perhaps more potent in its inspiration. As an artist he was never to forget its significance.

He used to wonder about things. Even about his Christian names and surname: Karl Aloysius Slopp. How did a person come to be called Slopp?

He used to wonder at his father's face, white and still, like the face of death, but with eyes that were infinitely sullen, or smouldering with sudden fury. His father had a high, bald forehead, and a little black, woolly beard. There had been a time when his father had gone regularly to work from that previous house in Camomile Street. Karl had understood that his father had worked in a shop. Then, something had happened to his father's legs. His father's walk had become strange, a kind of careful and deliberate shuffle.

His father had ceased to go to work.

His father had sat about, sallow and silent and gloomy. Always he had been reading a book by a man named Marx.

His father could not walk now. He sat propped up in the bed in that back room,

with a black coat over his shoulders when the weather was cold. The window was never opened. The atmosphere was like a clammy hand that had been held in front of a fire.

Something was happening to his father's hands. They were becoming like his feet. They looked like claws,—but his father was always scribbling with a kind of venomous haste, holding the pencil pressed between forefinger and thumb. There were old exercise books on the bed.

At the bottom of the stairs lived his mother and the shop. Karl was too young to appreciate the appositeness of the name upon the fascia board. Rebecca Slopp. His mother sold second-hand clothes, clothes that had been bought in, mended and pressed. One of the most familiar smells associated itself with the pressing-board and the tailor's iron in the back room, and an odour of hot cloth. The shoddy stuff might have become impregnated with human secretions, and it surrendered them under the hot iron. His mother's shop was an improvisation, and yet as a Jewess who had married a Gentile she had reverted to a world that was characteristic and familiar in supporting a sick husband and three boys. Rebecca had been in the trade. She had ghetto generations behind her. There were Goldsteins in Warsaw, Prague, Heidelberg. A Goldstein had sold clothes to a tragic Heine.

The child was a little afraid of both his parents, but less afraid of his big, black-eyed and sometimes tempestuous mother than he was of that cold candle of a father, whose bitterness was burning itself out. His mother had bright, black eyes, a high colour, and splendid hair. She was a woman of large emotions and a deep voice. She used her voice on all and sundry. She was, in the vulgar parlance, bossy, which was strange when it is remembered that her husband had spent his life in raving against the privileged tyranny of the Boss. Rebecca could never close a door gently. She was active in the house and shop like some large and dominant animal. Karl had come to associate his mother with an increasingly corpulent figure in black, and a faint odour of perspiration.

His mother was a passionate woman who shouted up the stairs and would not suffer contradiction. In fact, as shopkeeper, cook, nurse, and domestic autocrat she had no time for argument.

“Karl——”

“Yes, mum.”

“Take up your father's supper.”

The child would leave his window and run down the stairs into the kitchen, and take from the table the old black tin tray with some savoury mess upon it. He would carry it slowly and solemnly upstairs, being careful not to spill the gravy. His father

was touchy about such details.

“Pah,—this fork’s greasy. Wash it.”

The man never thanked the child, or smiled at him.

Undoubtedly, Karl was his mother’s favourite. She never struck him, though her hands tingled the ears of Brother Augustus and Brother George. Augustus was growing like his father, long, lanky, sallow and farouche, a soapy and rather sly lad who presently would take to spectacles. George was of different quality, a red Jew-Gentile, Judas, stocky, arrogant, to be known by some of his later intimates as Bacon & Eggs. Augustus had left school, and his mother had contrived to insert him as a boy-clerk in the firm of Benskin & Brown, carters, haulage contractors and undertakers. Augustus, sheathed in black, might develop into an admirable furnisher of funerals. George was still at the Council school. Little Karl trotted off with him along the Essex Road each morning. George bullied his small brother.

“Come on, kid,—leg it.”

It cannot be said that Karl grew up in an atmosphere of brotherly love. Augustus was too much Esau. Karl was the beloved. Rebecca was not a woman who weighed out her passions and her prejudices. She was apt to be tumultuous and open-handed in her dispensations. Karl had his hair brushed by his mother; Karl was never given second-hand suits; Karl had a little attic bedroom of his own, whereas Gus and George shared secret physical antipathies in one room. Gus and George were always quarrelling, but since the truculent George had proved himself top dog in sundry roughs and tumbles, Augustus’s assaults took the form of sneering. But Karl was the dark and favoured flower in the stuffy house, and his brothers knew it.

Also, the boy carried in his hand the dark flower of beauty. Even as a small child he was very sensitive to beauty, strangely and impersonally so, and with the pure passion of the craftsman. The young animal may be piqued by some bright and highly-coloured object, and be moved to clutch and to possess, but Karl did not clutch. He could stand and stare.

His world began with the shops and pavements of the Essex Road. The Slopp shop stood compressed between a fruiterer’s and a baker’s, and to the eyes of the child both windows were wonderful. As neighbours, Mr. Smart of the fruit shop and Rebecca were not in sympathy. Brother George was greedy, and a thief. In summer time cases and boxes of fruit were spread under the awning on to the pavement, and the temptation was obvious. George would open the side door of his mother’s house, and with an old walking-stick tip an apple or a pomegranate on to the pavement and rake it in.

Mr. Smart caught him fishing. The Essex Road was in those days a world of

horses, and Mr. Smart believed in horse sense and the privileges of property. He dragged George out by the collar and cuffed him.

“I’ll teach you to be a sneak-thief.”

George’s bellowings brought out his mother.

“How dare you touch my child?”

Mr. Smart was a cockney and proud of it, and he had a tongue. What price the new Jerusalem? He wasn’t going to have any little Yid sighting Canaan next door. Mr. Smart was more of a prophet than he knew. The world was to grow Slopp-minded, and spy out the world of its neighbours as Canaan to be plundered.

George was dragged into the house, and from that day Slopp and Smart were not on speaking terms.

Karl was the exception. Those mounds and cascades of colour fascinated him, red apples, pale pomegranates, golden oranges, strawberries, cherries like polished stones, purple plums, grapes. He just stood and looked, and Mr. Smart came one day to look at the child.

“Well,—what do—you—want, my lad?”

“Nothing,” said Karl.

“Nuffin’!” said Mr. Smart humorously.

“No,—I just like to look.”

Mr. Smart guffawed.

“Bad business for me, my dear, if all bally old Islington was like you. Take your choice.”

Karl shook a small head.

“I only want to look.”

“’Ere, ’ave an apple.”

Mr. Smart chose a red one, polished it on his apron and gave it to the child.

“You put your teeth into that.”

But that is just what Karl did not do. He took his apple out with him for a walk, and looked at it, and held it against his cheek, and smelt it. He carried it back with him untouched to his dream window on the back landing. And there, George, stodging up the stairs, sighted the plunder and filched it from him. The beautiful thing was soon in George’s belly, but Karl did not bawl. He sat and watched the apple disappearing, and his brother’s large mouth masticating.

George held his red knuckles under the child’s nose.

“Don’t you go and sneak, kid.”

Karl said a strange thing for a child.

“I had the apple—before you bit it. I had all I wanted.”

“Sucks,” said George,—“Sucks!”

Karl did not sneak. He remained silent upon another occasion when Augustus played the unheroic hero. Beyond Highbury Fields a great old house and its garden were going the way of all flesh. Death and the speculative builder were in possession. A great hole had been knocked in the high brick wall, and cart tracks led to piles of bricks and a builder’s shed. On the Saturday afternoon the place was a wilderness of rough grass and tangled shrubs. Karl rambled far for a small child. He had discovered this fascinating ruin, and being sent out with Augustus he whispered to his elder brother:

“I know a wonderful place.”

The workmen had gone. Karl had found a queer old straggling ilex tree up which you could swarm and sit on a perch. Augustus, long and lanky, swung to and fro like an ape. But this wilderness happened to be the resort of certain young savages from a back street near the Holloway Road. Half a dozen of them arrived and found the Slopp boys in possession.

An urchin of twelve with a brutal little face grabbed Karl by the leg.

“Come art of our tree.”

Karl, looking down at that hard and hideous little countenance with its depressed nose and cut-throat mouth, grew very white.

“It’s not your tree.”

“None of your bloody lip,” said the child.

There was one lad nearly of Augustus’s age, but Augustus was a craven. When that little slum crowd showed itself truculent, Augustus, after waving his long arms wildly, turned and fled. He abandoned his small brother. Karl, set upon by three of the little savages, fought like a small fury, and had he been older he would have known—as he came to know in later years—that there are occasions when the crowd can only be confronted with truncheons or machine guns. He was mauled. Collarless, and weeping with sensitive rage, he was driven out of his Eden.

A voice gloated.

“’E’s blubbin’. Give ’im another one on the mug with your knuckles, Alf.”

Karl made no confession. He did not even reproach Augustus. He ran home and crept into the house and up the stairs, and washed his face and found another tie and collar. When his mother asked him how he had come by a particular bruise, he said that he had fallen out of a tree. Augustus was mum. Gus was to develop into an eloquent liar, but on this occasion there was nothing to be said and Rebecca applied a pad of cold cotton-wool to her Karl’s face.

“Don’t you go climbing any more trees.”

“No, mum.”

The child had a fastidious pride. Those filthy little fists had filled him with disgust. Evil faces! He concealed these incidents, but he did not forget them. The elemental reactions of his two brothers were like knots in a white handkerchief. He remembered the greed of George, and the cowardice of Augustus, and those knots remained in the handkerchief, ineffaceable characteristics. Karl never saw his particular wilderness with the old ilex tree again. Rows of ugly red villas sprang up there. But the memory of that dark and mysterious tree remained. It seemed to suggest that one should climb higher, high above filthy fists and little brutal faces.

Karl was destined to climb higher.

CHAPTER II

Karl was playing at soldiers. The parade ground was the strip of floor under the landing window, and since the beds had been made, and his father's dinner carried up and down, the child could assume that he would not be disturbed. Moreover, Karl was setting out a new company, English grenadiers in red coats and busbies, with bayonets at the charge. Karl had been watching this particular box in the window of a toy and fancy shop six doors down the street. A month ago he had gone in and asked the price, and a pretty woman with tired blue eyes had served him. She had worn a bandage round her throat.

"One and sixpence."

Her voice was a sweet husky voice, and in spite of her bandage small Karl had fallen in love with her. She was so like a pale, tired flower, and he had wanted to kiss her. Four weeks' pocket money carefully hoarded and added to the sixpence in his money-box had given him the price of the soldiers. He had revisited the shop. The young woman still wore her bandage, and her eyes were like blue flowers set in white wax.

"Can I have the soldiers, please?"

He had put his one and sixpence on the counter, and the young woman had bent over and reached for the box in the window. Karl had seen the nape of her neck below the bandage, and it had looked yellow.

Her face had expressed nothing but weariness, a white apathy. Pale lips, tired eyes. Perhaps Karl was precocious, but he had wanted to kiss light into those eyes.

"Thank you."

He had waited a moment, but she had turned away towards the door at the back of the shop. She had a sick baby in there, and Karl's romance had not yet risen to babies. He had gone out with his white cardboard box, feeling vaguely disappointed.

But the grenadiers were splendid. He had arranged them in a charging line to attack a column of German infantry in spiked helmets and blue coats, when he heard the side door open and close. Someone was coming up the stairs just when the battle was to be joined.

One of these shabby, sinister figures in black! The treads of the stairs creaked under old, deliberate feet, and the thing rose like a ghost to frighten the child. Karl had seen the old gentleman many times, and had flinched from his starved,

parchment face with its creases, its bitter mouth and mocking eyes. The old gentleman was just like Satan in the picture books, and had a tail thumped the stairs after him as he ascended, Karl would not have been surprised. His name was Henom; he kept a small second-hand bookshop in the Pentonville Road. Mr. Henom had a couple of books under his arm, and his black hat and coat and little goatee beard were wet, for the November afternoon had turned to rain.

Karl put out his hands.

“Mind,—please.”

Mr. Henom looked at the kneeling child, and the array of soldiers. He had a tongue that should have been forked.

“Soldiers in red coats.”

“Yes,” said Karl, “grenadiers. Please mind where you step.”

Mr. Henom was a very bitter old man. Anything in a red coat roused him to frenzy. The thing was a symbol, suggestive of gold coaches, and flunkeydom and privilege. Many years ago a man in a red coat had caused Mr. Henom to be jilted.

“Soldiers!—Do they let you play with soldiers?”

“Yes,” said Karl.

“Slaves in red coats,—murderers,” and with a kind of maniacal smirk Mr. Henom put a foot deliberately on the row of lead grenadiers. The child uttered a little cry, and clutched Mr. Henom’s black trouser leg.

“Oh, don’t.—You’ve killed some of them.”

Mr. Henom put a hand on Karl’s head and pushed him to one side.

“Hired butchers—butchers in red coats.—I must speak to your father about it.”

And Old Henom creaked on up the stairs, leaving the child in tears.

Karl did not run to his mother. It was a Saturday afternoon, and on Saturday afternoon the shop was always busy. Karl counted eleven grenadiers who would never stand again unless their legs were inserted into holes in the linoleum. Horrid, cruel old man! And why should Mr. Henom object to his playing with soldiers? They were his soldiers; he had bought them. Karl looked out of the window and saw the rain coming down. Solemnly and sadly he put his army back into its boxes, and carried them up to his attic bedroom. In the future he would parade his men on the bedroom floor, where old he-goats could not trample. The house was very silent, but from somewhere came the sound of voices, the voices of Mr. Henom and his father in full cry. Karl crept to the door of his father’s bedroom and stood listening.

His father’s voice was harsh and petulant.

“The army. Yes,—we shall have to get hold of the army, teach them to turn their guns on their officers. The police don’t matter so much.—Get hold of the fools in red

coats.”

Karl was puzzled. Soldiers shooting their officers! His men never behaved so treacherously, but gallantly followed the hero with the upraised sword. He squatted down to listen. Mr. Henom was inveighing against the sin of allowing a child to play with soldiers and Karl heard his father say that he would have the toys taken away. No child of his should grow up in an atmosphere of organized butchery and capitalistic oppression. And then his father and Mr. Henom fell to speaking of other matters, his father in short, fierce gasps, Mr. Henom with a voice like acid trickling out of a jar. There appeared to be a strange thing in the world called Surplus Value. It seemed to associate itself with insult and robbery, and to cause his father great indignation. Karl heard the bed creaking. His father was describing to old Henom how a suit of clothes was sweated together in a back room by a wretch who worked fourteen hours a day. And how much was the wretch paid? The wholesaler bled the worker, and passed the clothes on to the retailer, who bled the public.

“Surplus value,” shouted his father,—“surplus value is—the—world’s great swindle.”

Karl heard a chair moved, and fearing discovery, he fled. He ran downstairs to his mother, and found her alone for a moment in the shop. She was putting bundles of underclothing back on a shelf.

“Mum,—what is surplus value?”

His mother looked fondly at her beloved. Who had been putting ideas into the child’s head? Had Karl been listening outside his father’s door? He had. Mr. Henom was upstairs with his father. His mother did not like Mr. Henom.

“He trod on some of my new soldiers, mum.”

“Not on purpose, my dear?”

“Yes, mum. He said I shouldn’t play at soldiers. And I heard father say that he is going to take my soldiers away.”

“Oh, is he!” said his mother, who for years had heard her husband preparing to abolish everything;—“your father can’t get out of bed, my dear. Go and listen in the passage and tell me when you hear old Henom coming down.”

The shop bell rang, and Rebecca turned to attend to a sheepish-looking man who was accompanied by a brisk and suspicious little wife. A second-hand overcoat was required, one with a velvet collar. The wife did the talking; her man stood there like an overgrown and flabby child. On the pavement his wife had said—“The old Yid will sell you a pup, Bert,—somethin’ with the moth in it. You leave it to me.” Karl, sitting at the bottom of the stairs, listened to the voices of the two women in the shop, his mother’s bland, round and persuasive, the other woman’s dry and thin.

Rebecca's reputation was somewhat Oriental. The wife carried the coat to the doorway and held it up to the light before she would allow her man to try it on. Did not the old Yid try things on?

A part of Rebecca was proposing to dispose of an overcoat, while another and more intimate part of her was concerned with her small son and her husband. Take the child's toys away, would he? Not bloody likely. Sam was the sort of man who would discover even in the world's toyshop the scandal of private property. A woman might have to suffer many things, such as husbands who attended to any business but their own, and ladies who suspected moth and corruption, but Rebecca was not going to allow a dying demagogue to bully a live son.

She had no illusions about the man upstairs. Sam had always jawed and scribbled about the woes of the worker, the fellow who laboured with his hands, and yet—beyond passing gloves and stockings and ladies' underlinen over a counter, Samuel had never used his hands. Manually he was a fumbler, a botcher. Set him to hang a picture, and he would hit the plaster or his fingers, and even were the picture hung, it would be crooked. But such activities belonged to the past, though Rebecca did tell herself that a bed-ridden man might have made himself useful with a needle in helping to recondition his wife's purchases in the way of stock. He could have taught himself to patch, turn, and rebutton coats and trousers, but S.S. did nothing but scribble and talk. The Class War, Economic Materialism, the Tool Age, Wage Slavery,—Rebecca had had them all *ad nauseam*. Not that Karl's mother, with generations of the ghetto behind her, had a love for Occidental society—as such. She was an ambitious woman, a strong animal, who, while struggling in her slop-world, remembered the deprivations and humiliations of the scuffle. She might be in revolt while persuading shabby people to buy her shoddy, but as a passionate realist she despised her husband. He was both bitter and futile, a fellow born with a grievance and an inefficient alimentary apparatus, avidly vain, and bitter against life because it had not flattered him. Sam was always frothing about serving humanity, but the understanding was that humanity should also serve Sam.

Rebecca sold her overcoat, and the careful housewife and the hobbledehoy husband departed with a brown-paper parcel. Both paper and string had seen service before. Then Karl fluttered in. Mr. Henom was coming downstairs. Rebecca appeared to inflate her large bosom; she had something to say to Mr. Henom.

She filled the passage, with Karl behind her petticoats. Mr. Henom had his hat on, a hard, high bowler hat. He was that sort of man.

“Did you tread on my boy's soldiers?”

Mr. Henom, showing his teeth like a rat in a corner, accepted the challenge.

“I—did. Bringing up your husband’s son to like butchers in red coats.—Disgraceful.”

“Flatfish,” said Rebecca—“you’ll apologize to the child.”

Mr. Henom was always ready to argue. Did the sage who kept a bookshop apologize to babes? But Rebecca had a fiery temper and a quick tongue.

“Then—you’ll buy the child a new box of soldiers.”

“Better let me give him a book.”

“Some of your old rubbish! Not likely. And if you were a gentleman you’d take your hat off in my house.”

Mr. Henom made the grave mistake of using irony.

“I have always understood, ma’am, that in synagogues——”

Rebecca quashed both his sarcasm and his hat. She brought a large and solid hand down upon it so decisively that it did not merely crumple. It was a spoilt and split hat, and old Henom, being miserly in spite of social ideals, was careful about such things as hats.

“That’s an assault, Mrs. Slopp.”

“Get out,” said she; “don’t you wag your billy-goat at me.”

Mr. Henom got to the door and opened it, and to Karl he looked just like Satan.

“What an example for the child.—Disgraceful.”

Rebecca laughed. She could come out of her blazes like a sun through a thunder-cloud.

“So’s your hat, Mr. Henom. Better leave it with me. I might get tuppence for it, or give it to some kids for their guy.”

She quaked. Karl, close to her skirts, felt his mother’s tremors. When his mother laughed—everything seemed to shake with her. Meanwhile, Mr. Henom closed the door, and reopened it to squirt a few last words from his half-moon mouth.

“How do you expect a child to learn from such a mother?”

Said small Karl suddenly—“I don’t believe you ever had a mother.”

“That’s right,” laughed Rebecca; “he was got by Clothes Horse out of Soapsuds, and he never ran.”

It sounded a wonderful saying to Karl, and though its esoteric meaning was beyond him, it appeared to put Mr. Henom out into the street, and after all—that was what mattered.

the corner. Even a street had its fascination, and the mysterious way it glided beyond your ken to disappear like a river between tall trees. The City Road was like that. Then there was the place where the Canonbury Road crossed the New River. When Karl put his face to the railings at one particular point and looked west he could see the water, green banks, gardens, a thorn, two or three ash trees, houses, and a stretch of green grass rising like a little hill. The water disappeared, and so did that stretch of grass, winding upwards to the right, to be cut off suddenly by the wall of a house. But Karl was sure that the river and the green slope went on and on. They were just the beginnings of some wonderful other world, and his child's fancy followed them. Bricks and mortar became a dark forest in which strange things happened. Karl had read about forests, but he had never seen one.

"I want to see a forest, mum."

His mother, caught in one of those moments when a woman recoils from drudgery and disillusionment, looked into the child's eyes, and saw her own dead youth in them.

"A forest, my dear."

"Yes, mum."

Rebecca could think of nothing but Epping. It was the spring of the year, and Rebecca packed a basket, left old Mrs. Mutter in charge and went with the child to where the white thorns were in flower. Karl, holding his mother's hand, or sometimes running on ahead as though to discover where this illimitable green world ended, was like a child entranced. Birds sang, and his knowledge of birds was confined to sparrows and canaries. And what was it that smelled so sweet? He asked his mother, but Rebecca was no wiser than her Karl, until she happened to brush against a may bough.

"It's the white flower, Karl."

Karl had to be lifted so that he could put his nose to it.

"What's it called, mum?"

His mother did not know. She had a wonderful eye for summing up a suit of clothes or a piece of fur, but she did not know one tree from another. To her city eyes, all of them looked alike.

They sat on the grass by a thorn and unpacked the basket. Sausage-rolls, and jam tarts, and two bottles of stone ginger. Karl ate his sausage-roll like a child in a dream, but his dark eyes were bright. They saw much more than his mother saw. He gazed and gazed into an infinitude of greenness and blue sky. Why didn't men make houses green?—The day was warm and still, and Rebecca took off her hat, and reclined. The toes of her boots stuck up; her body line swelled into two curves of

cushiony fat. Karl looked at his mother. Her eyes were closed, and he stole away and wandered. Here were old thorn trees whose interiors were like caves. And then, suddenly, he felt lost; a delicious, terrifying feeling. Indians were after him. He ran this way, and he ran that, and then stumbled on the place where his mother lay.

“Asleep, mum?”

“No,—my pretty.”

She lay looking at the sky, and Karl, prone on his tummy beside her, bit at the grass.

“What are you thinking about, mum?”

“Oh, nothing,” said his mother.

Yet, how was Karl to know that even a fat woman of five and forty can be a child, and dream impossible dreams of love and adventure, or that there is a secret world in every woman in which she sometimes plays princess. Rebecca was in a Cinderella mood. But her prince had been a poor thing, a fellow who had sneered at all princeliness, and would have pulled down all beanstalks instead of climbing them. What—in the name of Jehovah—had made her marry Sam? Sex was a strange thing,—yet sex had given her Karl.

She stole a look at the boy.

Would some she-Sam get hold of her Karl? Not if she could help it.

3

But Karl was still the white flower.

His brothers agreed that their mother spoilt the kid. Gus and George were subject to domestic discipline: they made their own beds, emptied their slops, and cleaned their shoes. Karl was a child apart, allowed to wander out of school hours and to play as he pleased. The whole neighbourhood was his, Canonbury Square, and Highbury Terrace, and the Fields, and the solemnity of Aberdeen Park. He liked to wander back along the high pavement of Upper Street and look in the many windows of Mr. Roberts' shop. He noticed the names over shops, and on one fascia board he saw one day the name of Silver Flowerdew.

Silver Flowerdew! He went along the street repeating the name to himself. It was so musical, so rhythmic. He contrasted it with his own name,—Karl Slopp, and wondered at the ugliness of the one and the beauty of the other. Why was one man Flowerdew, another Slopp? And, if one so desired it, could not one substitute Flowerdew for Slopp?

At home it was washing day, and Mrs. Mutter had come in to deal with the

household linen. Hung out to dry in the back-yard it was not exactly country linen, and smuts descended on it. Karl, inspired by the name of Silver Flowerdew, was moved to reflect upon the name of Mutter, for that was what she did. The help was a rather grim old woman with a Roman nose and a bob of grey hair at the back of her head. Morose in her dealings with her fellows, she was much more conversational toward inanimate things and in the frankness with which she addressed them.

“You would—would you?”—as the soap eluded her, slid along the table and prepared to leap for the floor. Mrs. Mutter grabbed it just as it reached the edge.—“You would, would you,—you slippery bit o’ mischief.” She muttered all the time, so much so that Karl, standing in the scullery doorway, was convinced that he had made a great discovery. Mutter was Mutter because she mumbled all the time; Slopp was Slopp—because it had once slopped about in slippers like his father. He watched the old lady sousing some garment before wringing it. Her forearms were like brown sticks.

“Are you Mrs. Mutter because you do it?”

Bless the child! Do what? Like the rest of her sex she was kind to Karl.

“Mutter.”

“Don’t you be rude, my lad.”

Karl had no intention of being rude. He was just pushing his researches.

“But, you do,—Mrs. Mutter.”

“Oh, do I!”

She went out to hang a garment on the line, one of Rebecca’s large pink petticoats.

“Drat them smuts.”

Karl had followed her.

“Have you ever heard anyone called Smut?”

The old lady looked hard at him. Had that young beast of a George been debauching the child?

“No, my dear, excepting a black cat.—I had a black cat called Smut.”

She did not know that Master George’s synonym at school was Smutty, and Karl was white linen. It was George who inveigled the child one Sunday into the shed at the end of the yard.—“Come on, kid. I’ve got something to tell you.” George sat on an old sugar-box, and proceeded to explain to Karl how he—Karl—had come into the world. The child stood quite still, his small face looking very white in the dark shed. He was shocked, and incredulous.

“Please, George, it’s not true.—I came in the doctor’s bag.”

George guffawed.

“I’ll show you something——”

But from the dark cave of initiation the child fled into the house and up the stairs to his attic.—It wasn’t true. His brother’s grinning face seemed to follow him into his sanctuary. And there his mother found him prone upon the bed, and hiding a shocked face. He had been in tears.

“What’s the matter, little one?”

“Nothing,” said Karl, almost sullenly.

But Rebecca had her suspicions.

“What’s George been doing to you?”

“Telling me things,—beastly things.”

For a hard-bitten seller of old clothes his mother behaved with strange sensitiveness. Her large face looked flushed, its eyes suffused. She just bent over the child, and let her hand rest for a moment on his head.

“I couldn’t help it, Karl.—You were not like the others.”

She slipped quietly out of the attic, and closing the door gently, she took her large self down the creaking stairs. She caught her second son in the passage preparing to slip out. The guilty George had forefelt trouble. His mother neither questioned nor accused. Holding Master George by the collar she locked the street door, and then she smote him mercilessly on mouth and ears until the lout was blubbering. She did not utter a word, and when the business was over she thrust him from her with a kind of loathing.

CHAPTER III

In fine weather Rebecca's shop spread itself under an awning across the pavement in an ordered confusion of underclothing, shirts, socks, boots, and trousers. A gangway led through to the shop door, and here Rebecca sat rather like a black spider in the centre of her web, watching the world and her property. Business was prospering, so much so that she was thinking of joining the new to the old, and of engaging an assistant. Saturday afternoons were becoming too crowded.

“'Ow much for the pants, mother?”

The Essex Road needed watching when you had the shop to attend to, and those bargain counters on the pavement were being explored by ladies with light fingers and capacious shopping-bags. When his mother had suggested to Augustus that he should sacrifice his Saturday afternoon and play the part of casual assistant, Augustus had demurred. He was following in the footsteps of his father—he had a creed and an urge. Augustus could be superior and facetious. He was not going to waste his time in helping an old woman to plant cheap pants upon the proletariat when the world's problem was to put an unbreeched democracy into the seats of the mighty. Augustus wore a red tie. As the son of his father he should have been seen more often in the sick room up above, but though Augustus and his father were full of the same windiness, they were not in sympathy. Both of them wanted to talk, and neither to listen.

George—of course—was impossible. George had discovered girls, and for the moment nothing else interested him.

Moreover, a paternal society refused Rebecca the services of her third son. He was of tender years. He was not yet of age for the market. But the Law could not deny Rebecca the quickness of a child's eyes.

“Do you want to help your mother, Karl?”

Karl was more than willing.

“Yes, mum.”

She gave him a stool in the doorway. He was allowed his book, but his business was to observe the hands of the loiterers. His mother explained that honesty was only the best policy when it was watched. If Karl had any cause for suspicion, and his mother happened to be within, he was to shout—“Shop.”

So, on Saturday afternoons and evenings the child sat patiently on his stool and watched his mother's property. By nature an observant child, this attention to

business made him more so. He became very quick, in his studying and summing up of faces. Almost, he was like a sensitive plant placed in the doorway. Even as a child he had a flair for faces and for the quality of the human stuff behind them, the mean, the surreptitious, the sly, the brazen. The business became a game with him, in which his wits were pitted against those of the plunderer.

“Shop, mum.”

One Saturday he did accuse a large and alcoholic lady of having slipped a vest into her bag. The woman blustered. Shop-lifting?—Not she!

Rebecca looked at Karl, and Karl nodded.

“I’ll take a look inside your bag, ma’am.”

The woman tossed a frowsy head.

“Ho,—will you?—I don’t think.—If your bloody little kid——”

Rebecca was vastly calm. A Policeman was patrolling the opposite pavement.

“Two and six, please, or I’ll call the copper across.”

The woman paid.

“Thought I was a sneak-thief, did you? Can’t one ’ave a bloody joke with a Yid?”

She blustered off, and Rebecca, smiling and looking at her son, dropped the half-crown into his hand. She said nothing, but her smile was sufficient. Her beloved had bright eyes.

They were the bright eyes of the little separatist who watched life go by, and who was learning to see things for himself. Karl was not a bookish child, and so was to be saved from the dreadful fate of being stuffed with information that was second-hand. London was to be his book, and what he knew he knew, and it was like the knowledge of the shepherd or the ploughman, personal and pure. Sitting there on his stool and watching faces he learnt, even as a child, to differentiate them into types: the fox, bull, pig, lion, snake. His standard of values was very simple. “It pleases me.—It does not please.”

His mother, in her dark shop like some sybil in a cave, would watch the little figure. The Essex Road might accuse her of being a wilful obscurantist, but gas cost money, and Rebecca’s margin was small.

Karl’s future? When he left school, what then? Her beloved had for her a tender glamour; he was the only glamorous thing in her life. Augustus—George? Her maternal spirit did not vex itself unduly about those two. She saw Augustus as a clerk and was content. George was the sort of creature who would get his trotters into some trough.

But Karl, little Karl? Would he join her in the shop? Solemnly she would caress

with a slow rotatory movement the bulge of her black skirt as though Karl's future still lay in her womb. A shop-assistant, or even a shopkeeper? The vision did not satisfy her.

Did she want him to do what he pleased, or that which would please her?

Rebecca was more honest with herself than are most mothers. If there is such a thing as inherited memory, then she had not long escaped from the walls and gates of the ghetto. The crowd was to be feared, and propitiated to a point. It might get you down in the shambles. Rebecca was both realist and mystic, and though in a sense she had been cast out by her people, she retained an arcana of her own. A woman may worship her own god in secret, and behold from some individual peak the promised Canaan. Like her people she may have been moved to be revenged upon an alien civilization by using it, and using it so cunningly that the money-changer became master. She did not set up the Golden Calf in her sanctuary, but like all women her imagination and her emotions were warmed by success. To transcend the crowd. Her husband had talked all his life of making the crowd god and master, but Rebecca had not been deceived. Someone would take care to plant his feet on the shoulders of the crowd. Samuel, starved of power, and bitter behind his counter, had dreamed of himself as colossus. Rebecca was shrewd. She was never fooled by the sentimental humbug of socialism. Little Karl—as man—was to put the pith of it in one of his mischievous phrases—“Yes, you want to delete all Shakespeares while retaining an adequate supply of Bernard Shaws.”

Success? Escape in the winged chariot of victory? To soar above the million pin-point heads? That was what she wished for her Karl. And by what sorcery could it be contrived? Rebecca, had she been able, would have used black magic to assist her son, but the only magic that she knew was yellow.

Sitting alone with the child in front of the fire one January night, she asked him that question.

“What would you like to be, Karl?”

Karl, with his knees drawn up, stared at the fire.

“I don't know yet, mum.”

“Rich and famous?”

He was a most unmercenary child.

“I don't know yet, mum. I just like watching things.”

Meanwhile, the ringing of a bell was to associate itself in his mind with the long,

meagre figure of his father pottering along on stove-pipe legs, or rather with that same figure propped up in bed and snarling at the person who opened the door.

“I’m forgotten—I suppose.”

His father had a handbell on the table beside his bed, and he was for ever ringing it and bringing someone up the stairs. His petulant exactions suggested a last effort to impress himself upon people, but the urge was more simple, for Karl’s father was dreadfully afraid. The dark waters were near his chin. He would not confess to this fear, but the horror and the inevitableness of it were in his eyes.

“Yes,—I expect I’m a nuisance.”

Rebecca was bulky, and Mrs. Mutter had no legs, or rather she had varicose veins in them, and Karl was sent to answer that petulant bell. The cold fug of his father’s room hung on the child’s lips. His father, propped up in bed with an old black coat over his shoulders, seemed to lie with head retracted as though keeping his mouth above the death palsy that was rising like dark water. There was the usual litter of paper on the grey bed-cover, but his father’s hands lay inert amid all those fallen leaves. He was ceasing to scribble, but he could still talk.

That little woolly black beard moved.

“What’s your mother doing?”

“She’s in the shop, dad.”

“Tell her I want her.”

“She’s busy, dad. Can I fetch you anything?”

His father’s eyes showed the red of their retinae.

“I—will—be—obeyed.—Tell your mother I want her.”

Karl, frightened, closed the door and ran down to his mother.

“Father’s upset, mum, about something.”

Rebecca climbed the stairs. She showed to that poor, frightened, scolding creature a quiet patience, for he was so weak, so pathetically weak. She was a woman of quick temper, and often he had exasperated her. Talk, talk, talk! He was one of the world’s talkers who had never managed to get on the platform. His eyes reproached her directly she entered the room. She was out of breath, but Samuel had never noticed when people were out of breath, or when he bored them.

He said with a kind of icy bitterness—“I suppose the kid is good enough for me?”

His petulance appeared to have no effect upon her. She went to the bed, shook up his pillows, and felt his hands.

“You do make it hard for yourself, Sam.”

“Hard?”

“Yes, you always did.—Put your hands inside; they’re cold.”

And suddenly he became emotional.

“I suppose you tell everybody I’ve made it hard for you?—Yes, that’s right.—I’m a miserable failure. The swine never let me have a chance.—And all you think about——”

She said sharply yet kindly—“Sam!”

But the flood was not to be stayed. There had been occasions when he had let loose the same emotional squealing at street corners.

“Don’t you Sam me.—All you care about is money and that kid. You’re just like the rest of them. I’m a bloody incubus.—It will be easier when I’m gone.—I shan’t be here long.”

He screamed at her, and then he burst into tears. They ran down his weak little beard.

“Left to rot.—I wanted to help people, and what do they care? Fools.—I could have shown them the way——”

She bent over him, her large figure pressing against the bed. She was maternal, and if she had any love left for this thing that was her husband, it was for the whimpering child in him.

“There there, my dear; don’t make it so hard for yourself. What’s the use of tearing up yesterday’s paper?”

His head rolled to one side. It fell against her shoulder.

“You’ve been a good wife to me, Becky. If I’d had my rights——”

“We never do, dear, do we?”

“Fools—who won’t listen. Fools who ask you where you bought your hat. But when I’m dead——”

She found a handkerchief—it was not a very clean one and wiped his face.

“You’ve always wasted yourself on other people, Sam.—There, put your head back.—I’ll send Karl up with a cup of tea.”

He lay back with empty eyes.

“Oh,—I’m tired. The child——”

“Why don’t you look at him, Sam, and try and feel——”

His head twisted on the pillow.

“Feel? That’s the silly sin, feeling. I’ve always felt too much.—I’d bring him up hard, Becky; teach him not to feel; then—fools don’t matter.”

She gave his face a final dab with the handkerchief, and then put it away.

“No, they shouldn’t matter, Sam. I’ll try and teach the boy that.”

Sam Slopp’s spasms of self-pity ceased to be capable of raising storms. The

cadaverous, raucous idealist was very near his end, and Karl noticed that those sinister and shabby figures no longer ascended to the seer's chamber. His father's face was like white wax, his eyes glassy and strange, his breathing scarcely perceptible. Sometimes his head would loll back on the pillow and he would make strange noises in his throat, or fall asleep and wake with a sudden groan. His father had expressed a wish that his small son should sit with him sometimes by the fire that was now kept burning, but Karl was afraid of that grim room. He crept in and sat between the bed and the fire, because his mother had asked him to do so. He listened to his father's mutterings, and the rustling of those skeleton hands among the papers on the bed.

His father talked to himself.

"Finished—deserted.—And I was a friend of the people."

In years to come, when Karl was moved to explore the scribbings of this dreamer and demagogue, he could understand how bitter waters had submerged the dying man.—One cold and frosty evening he heard his father's voice whispering behind him.

"Karl!"

"Yes, father."

"Come here."

The child stood by the bed. One of those skeleton hands groped their way towards him and fastened like a bony claw on the boy's arm. His father's eyes stared.

"Have you heard of God, child?"

Karl looked frightened.

"Yes, father."

"What is God?"

Karl hesitated, as though searching his small soul for an answer.

"God is love."

He felt his father's fingers grip his arm.

"There is no God.—And if there were a god he would be the God of Hate. Do you know what hate is?"

"Yes, father."

The pressure of those fingers seemed to increase.

"Hate,—hate,—hate the rich, hate the tyrants, hate—even the poor fools. Hate—lasts,—hate is not—not fooled.—Hate, my son."

Then, suddenly, his father's bony grip relaxed. His head fell back, and he lay with closed eyes, muttering.

Karl heard noises in the night. He got out of bed because he thought he had heard his mother's voice, and going out on to the landing he looked over the banisters and saw a gas-jet burning. The door of his father's room opened, and his mother came out, a large, white, voluminous figure in a pink bed-jacket. His mother was weeping.

Karl ran down the stairs.

"O, mum,—what is it?"

The child's hands went out to her. Rebecca, looking down into that little, upturned face, caught him to her. He was pressed firmly to that warm, fat, beloved body, and, thanks to one of those human mysteries, Rebecca was never to be old and fat and ugly to her son.

"Your father's gone, Karl."

"Father's dead?"

"Yes, dear."

She gathered him up and took him with her to her bed, and Karl lay close to his mother, and because she wept, he wept with her. He put his arms round her neck, and his cheek against hers, and was part of the tumult of her grief and her remorse. She fondled him, she kissed him. No words passed between them, only those clingings and caresses in the warm darkness.

But Rebecca did breathe a strange confessional.

"I've been a bad woman,—little Karl.—I haven't done all that I ought to have done.—But he'll never know, poor thing, and now—there's nothing between you and me."

Karl was quite sure that his mother was not a bad woman. He hugged her hard.

"Mum's never bad.—I'm mum's——"

He wondered why her grief became suddenly so passionate. Almost, her embraces hurt.

"My little Karl, my love child."

Smothered between her two breasts he could feel and hear his mother's heart beating. What happened when you died? Did that thing inside you cease going lub-dup? Would his mother die some day? He clung to the warm, large body.

There followed three days of strange silence and of gloom. The shop was shut up. Seedy and solemn looking men carried a long, narrow box up the stairs. His mother sat and sewed. Everything was black. Blinds were down. Karl was kept at home; but Augustus went to his work and George to school. Both of them had an air

of smug but suppressed curiosity.

Mrs. Mutter was always in black, and she needed no transfiguration. She sniffed and produced savoury smells in the kitchen. Then came that last morning when his mother took Karl by the hand and went with him up the stairs into that silent room. Karl saw his father lying in a narrow box supported on trestles. His father's face looked strange, eyes closed, forehead somehow serene. His hands were folded over his chest. Karl held his mother's hand and looked. His mother was weeping.

He saw his mother bend down and put her lips to the white, round forehead.

"Forgive me, Sam."

Karl was moved to say something.

"Father looks happy,—now, mum."

Rebecca caught her breath as though some spasm of pain had clutched her heart.

Later in the day men went upstairs into his father's room. Rebecca was in the shop, dressed as though to go out. His brothers were in the sitting-room, self-consciously mum on shiny chairs. His mother called Karl. She had a jacket in her hands, and she held it and slipped his arms into the sleeves, and put a round sailor's cap with black ribbons on his head. She was very white and silent, and in the silence Karl heard something being carried down the stairs. He saw his mother glance suddenly at the door. Her eyes were large and strange. She gave a kind of shudder.

They were out on the pavement. A small crowd had gathered. Karl, holding his mother's hand, saw the yellow box in a kind of glass carriage. A cab was waiting behind it. Rebecca and her three sons got into the cab. The wheels began to go round.

Of that atrocious ceremony in the cemetery he brought away impressions of a grey sky, and of the yellow box being carried on men's shoulders up a sticky gravel path between hundreds of gravestones. They came to a place where there were no stones, only sodden mounds, some of them with rotting flowers on them. On the edge of this waste was a slit in the ground, with a mass of yellow clay beside it, and a few planks laid down. The men placed the yellow box on the planks. A clergyman with a red nose began to declaim in a high, unreal voice. Karl saw the priest's surpliced figure against the red bulk of a distant gasometer. Augustus was sniffing. George stood and stared like a young ox.

The yellow box and his father were lowered into the hole in the ground. One of the men threw a handful of soil on the coffin. Karl looked up at his mother. She was weeping, and as he edged close to her he found that his feet were stuck in a sudge of clay. He was wearing new boots, and they made a wet, squeaking sound.

The clergyman blew his red nose, and came to say a few words to Rebecca. She too blew her nose.

“Had your husband been ill long?”

“Five years, sir.”

“Dear, dear.—He is at rest with God—now. Your boys?”

His glance passed perfunctorily over the faces of Augustus and George, but he smiled at Karl.

“I hope they’ll be a comfort to you.”

They drove home, Karl sitting beside his mother and holding her hand. George’s bulging blue eyes looked out of the window. Augustus sat with his bony knees together with an air of secret smugness. But Karl was thinking that if his father was at rest with God, how strange it was to leave him in that horrid slimy hole. And did all that yellow clay go back on the top of the yellow box?

That night Rebecca took him to bed with her, and in the darkness she was aware of his fingers feeling her face.

“What is it,—Karl?”

“I wanted to feel you, mum.”

She understood. She clasped him. He, too, was warm and alive and real.

“Mum, when we die—does all of us die?”

“No, dear. They say something goes on living.”

“Then—why do they put dead people in horrid holes in the ground?”

His mother could not answer that question completely.

“It isn’t the body, Karl, that matters. The something else stays outside.”

“Can you see the something else?”

“No, dear.”

“Then how do they know?”

“Wise men tell us it is so.”

The boy lay close to his mother.

“I don’t want you put—ever—in a hole like that, mum.”

His mother held his head against her bosom.

“We won’t think of that, Karl. You and I are going to have years and years together.”

Just a week later Rebecca was sewing by the fire when she heard some sound in the house that made her lay her work aside and climb the stairs in her slippers. It

was nine o'clock. She had put Karl to bed, and George was supposed to be in bed. Augustus had come in half an hour ago and, after drinking a cup of cocoa and eating some bread and cheese, had gone upstairs.

Rebecca climbed noiselessly. The treads creaked occasionally under her weight, but that was all. Her eyes, coming level with the landing, saw a line of light under the door of her dead husband's room.

She opened the door suddenly and saw a candle on the chest of drawers, and Augustus with his hands in one of the drawers. A pile of old note-books lay beside the candle, and Augustus had selected two or three from the collection and laid them aside.

“What are you doing?”

Augustus looked white,—but he played the man of the world.

“Found one or two—he hadn't scribbled in.—Besides,—I want to read——”

His mother strode into the room. She would never be fooled by Augustus. She put the note-books back into the drawer and closed it.

“Sneaking—ideas—or paper,—I don't care which, but I think I know. Can't you afford to buy a note-book for yourself?”

Even at the age of seventeen Augustus could be pompous.

“I thought it a pity to waste them.”

“O, you did!—If I catch you in this room again—I'll put you out into lodgings. That will cost you more than five bob a week, my lad.”

Augustus blinked his eyes.

“Haven't I got a right to read what my father wrote?”

Rebecca pointed to the candle.

“Take that and get out. Everything in here belongs to me.”

She locked the door after her, and put the key in her pocket.

CHAPTER IV

Neither Rebecca nor her son could be expected to foresee the future, or to hail as the master of Karl's destiny a little old man in a bowler hat.

It was a monstrous hat, hard and high, and covering its owner's head like a felt morion. It arrived on one drenching day under Rebecca's awning, and proceeded to empty its brim over a pair of second-hand trousers. Rebecca was in the shop, serving customers, and Karl, posted on his stool, observed the stranger.

The little man was shaking his hat.

"Cats and dogs. Damn it,—why cats and dogs?—Shakespeare would have said haddocks and bloaters."

He discovered Karl and nodded at him.

"Hallo, young fellah! Want to sell me a pup?"

Karl stood up. He liked Mr. Bowler Hat, though he could not say just why. The stranger's nose stuck out like a sparrow's beak; he had a little grey moustache and side whiskers, and between them showed a polished chin. In fact, he was not unlike a cock-sparrow—and a London one at that.

"We don't sell dogs," said Karl.

Mr. Bowler Hat twinkled at him.

"Ha, don't you!—And why are you looking at my chin?"

"Because—it's—naked," said Karl, "and you've got hair——"

Mr. Bowler Hat stuck his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat.

"Observation,—what!—Now, what do I want? Got any idea?"

Karl looked him over.

"An umbrella."

"Did you ever see Macbeth with an umbrella?—Try again, my lad."

"A mackintosh."

"Ex-actly. Something nice and shiny."

Rebecca's customers emerging at this moment, Karl's mother came to the doorway, and saw Karl reaching with a pole for a black mackintosh that hung on a hook below the fascia board. Mr. Bowler Hat raised his monstrous headgear to her. The drama had taught him manners.

"Evening, ma'm. Good day for mackintoshes."

Rebecca smiled at him. She had a jocund and luscious smile when things pleased her, and she was smiling more as a widow than as a wife.

“You shouldn’t have come out without one.”

“Ha, ma’m,—I tore my old ’un on a nail in the castle of Elsinore. Sounds funny,—that.—Yes, I want a mackintosh. Right, my lad, I’ll try it on.”

Obviously, the thing pleased him, as did Rebecca and her son. He buttoned it up under his chin, stuck his hands in the pockets, and looked down at his boots.

“How much?”

“It’s nearly new,” said Rebecca.

“Yes, m’am, but how much?”

“Twenty-three and sixpence.”

“Knock off the tanner and I’ll take it.”

“It’s yours,” said Karl’s mother.

And would he like it wrapped up? He winked.—“It’s going to wrap me up as far as the old ‘Globe.’ Know what the ‘Globe’ is, my son?”

“A pub,” said Karl promptly.

“Wrong this time, Romeo. Ever been to a theatre?”

“No, sir.”

“Sir,—that’s—manners. What price Sir Henry, or Sir Beerbohm? You come along to the back door of the Globe one day and ask for Tom Vidler, no—not Tom Tidler, and I’ll show you a box of tricks.”

Such was the beginning of a friendship between Mr. Vidler, Rebecca and her youngest son. Mr. Vidler combined the functions of chief scene-shifter and carpenter at the Globe theatre in Islington, and though the “House” was classed as suburban, it boasted a tradition. Kean, Phelps and Irving had acted here, and Mr. Vidler took himself and his position very seriously, though he was a man of quips and phrases. Behind the proscenium arch he had become something of an autocrat, an oddity whom even bullying stage-managers did not flout. One hot and rather alcoholic gentleman had on a sultry July day shouted—during a rehearsal—at Mr. Vidler.—“What—the hell—have you been doing with those bloody slides, you damned old idiot?”—Mr. Vidler had addressed his mates. “Run ’em off, boys. The gentleman does not like them. And there won’t be any scenery to-night.” The blusterer had discovered that Mr. Vidler was not to be shouted at, or called an idiot, and especially not an old one. “No manners, no scenery, sir. We’re not the Walls of Jericho.”

Mr. Vidler had long been a widower, but looking upon Rebecca he found her comely, comfortable and comely. He would have married her had Rebecca been willing, but Rebecca was not, and Mr. Vidler, being a man with a philosophy, was not huffed by her refusal. In fact, he wanted company, especially on Sundays, and

since he was allowed to take the boy out, and to sit and smoke his pipe by Rebecca's fireside, he accepted friendship without responsibility. As he confessed to himself in intimate moments—he was a bit old for the job, and Rebecca wasn't exactly a grandmother.

Moreover, there were Augustus and George, and Mr. Vidler had no liking for either of them. Augustus was slimy, and George an arrogant lout, and Mr. Vidler with his tight and almost ascetic little mouth, was tart with insolent youngsters.

But he revealed to Karl the mysterious and spider-like world behind the footlights. To begin with, the interior seemed a dark confusion of canvas and ropes and timber, of queer dark passages and strange little rooms. It could be draughty and dark and silent, but when it came to life it was a world which the boy found fascinating. He became accepted there almost as a stage mouse, a creature with dark eyes and quick movements who was never in the way. Sometimes the door-keeper would allow him in during a performance, and Karl would watch Mr. Vidler and his henchmen at their work.

Mr. Vidler always wore that bowler hat, like some crown of authority, also a white apron, and no coat. He functioned in his shirt sleeves. And from him Karl learnt all about back-drops, and the flies, and the gridiron, and slides, and the footlights, and border-lights. It was in those days a world of painted canvas, a world that flapped, and shivered if someone slammed a property door. Karl, secreted in some crevice in the wings while the curtain was down, would watch some new back-drop unfurled. It might be a forest, or a cathedral, or a castle, or a village green, an artifice, a sham, and yet to Karl that life behind the scenes was vivid and real. He watched men whisking furniture on to the stage after they had whisked other objects off it, and the thing was done with a kind of fierce, noiseless stealth. He watched the actors, heard them joking in the wings before going on to become somebody else. He thought them very great men. As for the ladies—they were all wonderful, and sometimes awful.

Then there was the prompter, Mr. Bones, a skeletal creature with pince-nez perched half-way down his nose. Stage-managers Karl avoided; they sometimes looked at him like irritable gentlemen who had found a stray dog to kick. Karl made friends with one of the call-boys, an impudent young fellow who not only summoned people from their dressing-rooms, but rushed to the Bunch of Grapes for pots of beer.

Strangely enough Karl saw all the inner functionings of the drama before he sat on the house side of the proscenium and watched the curtain go up. At Christmas the Globe ran a pantomime, and on that particular Christmas Rebecca and her son

had stalls for Cinderella. They were paper stalls, a present from Mr. Vidler. Karl wore a new suit and collar and tie, and his mother was in black satin.

Karl had seen Cinderella off the stage, drinking beer out of a tankard and talking good cockney. When he saw her on it, the illusion somehow triumphed. She had lovely legs and could dance, and a pair of dark eyes that were both amorous and roguish. Karl felt with the Prince. He fell in love with the lady, and lay awake half the night playing Prince to his own child's dream. He was completely romantic, assigning to himself the part of hero. He rescued the lady from robbers and wild beasts; he knelt on one knee at her very pretty feet and breathed those eternal words—"I love you."

His mother received no confession. Mr. Vidler, taking a few pulls at a pipe in the carpenter's shop on a foggy afternoon, found Karl in the doorway.

"Hallo, my dear, and how did you like Cinderella?"

The child's face was all shimmering.

"Isn't she beautiful, Mr. Vidler?"

Mr. Vidler was not so sure.

"She's got a nice pair of legs and plenty of cheek."

Karl's eyes protested mutely, and Mr. Vidler, recognizing the symptoms, was magnanimous.

"Like to be introduced, my lad?"

Karl nodded, and Mr. Vidler nodded back at him, and Karl was told to slip in half an hour before the evening performance. The keeper of the stage-door happened to be in a whimsical mood, and Karl was caught by the collar. Where did he think he was going? Karl explained with eagerness that on this wonderful night he was to be presented to Cinderella.

"Please, Mr. Piper——"

"Going to be introduced to Miss Godbold, are you?"

"No," said Karl—"Cinderella, Miss Ivy St. George."

"The same, my dear. Lottie Godbold in Peckham, Ivy St. George on the posters.—Well, since you're under fourteen,—I'll pass you through, but I'm a cracker on knuts. She's caused me more trouble than a wagon-load of monkeys."

Karl did not quite understand, but he said "Yes, Mr. Piper," and Mr. Piper grinned and let him through. Karl was no connoisseur of legs; he was just a dream-struck kid in short pants, a jolly little beggar. The boy found Mr. Vidler supervising the setting of the first scene, his bowler hat on the back of his head, and his tie bulging under his shiny chin. Mr. Vidler looked at the child and nodded.—"You keep out of sight, my dear. God's got indigestion."

Presently, Mr. Vidler took Karl up the stairs and knocked at the door of a dressing-room. There were voices within, and loud laughter.—“Hallo,—what’s what?” Mr. Vidler opened the door a crack and spoke.—“Gentleman to see you, Miss St. George.”—“Is it—bald?” asked a voice. “No, Miss, it doesn’t shave yet.” Miss St. George laughed, and Mr. Vidler pushed Karl in. He saw two ladies sitting on hard chairs in front of tables and mirrors. One of the ladies, a sumptuous blonde and the Principal Boy, was amusing herself by smacking her splendid and princely thighs.

“Yours, Lottie.”

Miss St. George was making up. She saw the reflection of the child in her mirror. She had been approached by Mr. Vidler on this small admirer’s behalf. She turned in her chair and gave him a wonderful smile.

“Are you—Karl?”

Karl’s eyes and mouth were round. Obviously, he was beauty struck, and Miss St. George was a little bored with The Boys, elderly and otherwise.

“Come and give me a kiss, my dear.”

Her voice was less refined than the voice of the destined princess. She was in tights and an old dressing-jacket. Karl went solemnly to be kissed. His Cinderella’s face was all strange and sticky, eyelids blackened, her mouth like strawberry jam. Karl’s lips touched the grease paint, and a childish illusion died in him. Life was different on the other side of the drop scene.

2

Karl’s brothers were for ever quarrelling. George, now aged seventeen, had been apprenticed to a bicycle and motor mechanic in the Holloway Road. It was a source of pride to George that he was using a razor daily to remove a vigorous growth of ginger-coloured hair, while Augustus’s chin was satisfied with a bi-weekly scraping. George was loud, flamboyant and arrogant, with a passion for bright yellow boots and flaring ties. Augustus wore red. He could not cope with George on the physical plane, and so—with a little icy smirk—he placed himself upon the platform of the mental and employed sarcasm.

Rebecca would suffer no wrangling in public. She was very much the matriarch.

“None of that, you two.—And where did you get those boots, my lad?”

George was not above making secret raids upon his mother’s shop, oiling his way downstairs very early in the morning. He was a vain beast who liked to dazzle the women.

“Bought ’em.”

His mother was not to be bluffed.

“Take them off and let me look.”

“Do you think I’m a bloody kid?”

“I don’t think much of you at the best of times,” said his mother,—“and don’t you use that word in my house. Show me those boots.”

George, as though to humour the old woman, removed the right boot.—“There you are.”—His mother gave him a dark look and demanded the other boot. Yes, that other boot was marked on the tongue with an R.S. in blue ink.

“Thought so,” said Rebecca, putting both boots into her capacious lap; “you keep out of my shop, my lad. It is not a playground for sneak-thieves.”

But Karl’s brethren did agree upon one matter. Their mother indulged in gross favouritism. She spoilt young Karl. Karl could have free clothes out of the shop; if there was any shortage of food, Karl did not suffer from it. Karl could ask for a second helping of jam roll and get it. His two brothers were jealous of Karl, and their jealousy was—in a sense—prophetic. He was the beloved, and as one of the world’s beloveds he was to provoke the hatred and envy of many other men.

Even in the case of Cinderella there was a clash. George, who was a patron of the Globe’s gallery, and who was proposing to extend his patronage to a junior member of the chorus, had become a source of annoyance to Mr. Piper. There were loiterers and loiterers, and a gentleman who could offer a sop to Cerberus might be allowed to smuggle in notes, but Mr. Piper would not tolerate louts on his doorstep. “’Ere, you blow off.—I’ve seen enough of your phiz.” And when George’s small brother confessed that he had been admitted into the star’s dressing-room, George was disgusted.

“Blooming kid like you.—What had she got on? Pink tights?”

Karl was secretive. Did one discuss romance’s legs in public? Rebecca and her three sons were at the supper table, and George liked showing off before his brothers, and especially before that pale parsnip of a Gus.

“Did she kiss you?”

Karl nodded, and then—George—as a man of the world—proceeded to be pathological. He knew a thing or two he did, and if Rebecca allowed the kid to be kissed by women like Lotty Godbold, well—it might be a case for the doctor. George dared to use a particular word and to suggest a certain disease—His mother flared into one of her white, but controlled, furies. Karl was sent out of the room, and told to wait upstairs. Yes, he should come down to finish his supper. And then Rebecca dealt with George, while Augustus stood in a corner, pale, smug, and

approving. She laid upon George the nearest weapon that came to her hands—a small poker—and George, with his large red paws protecting his head, was driven out into the night. His mother addressed to him a few final words from the doorstep.

“If you ever use words like that again in my house, my lad, you’ll go out and stay out.”

George was a vindictive young brute. Returning from work on the Saturday and going up to his room to adorn himself he saw Karl in the back garden busy with an empty packing-case. The child was clever with his hands. George watched him, while he changed his clothes, and then, going down and assuring himself that Rebecca was busy in the shop, George marched out into the back yard.

“Hallo, kid.—What’s the game?”

Karl looked anxiously at George.

“I’m making a theatre.”

“Going to put Cinderella in it,—what?—I’ve got a message for you from Cinderella.”

“Really?” said Karl.

“Yes, really. You come into the shed. It’s secret and confidential.”

George, having enticed his small brother into the shed, and closed the door, stood in front of him, grinning.

“Like to hear the message?”

“Yes, George.”

“The lady told me to give you a smack on the mug.”

George had hard red knuckles, and he struck the child across the face with the back of his hand.

“Now—then—blub.”

But Karl refused to blub.

“Let me out.—I’ve got to help in the shop.”

“Sneak,—would you?—Blub. Go on, blub.”

Again that red knuckled hand smacked Karl across the mouth. The tears came, but not quite as George had expected them. Karl’s face was wet, but it flamed. He threw himself upon George, beating at him with his fists, until George, giving him a shove, sent him sprawling into a corner.

“That’s it,—blub.—And then go and sneak to Ma.”

But that is just what Karl did not do. The child was not a whimperer. In years to come he was to learn to take bitter stabbings and cudgellings and sneers, and to take them with a cock of the head, and a white, resolute scorn. He could be gay and witty in the face of venom. Squeal? Not he, and so give his enemies cause to gloat.

When George swaggered off, giving Karl's embryo theatre a kick as he passed, Karl crept upstairs and washed his face, and plastered his hair with a brush dipped in the jug. His tears had been tears of tempestuous anger. He carried out his stool and sat himself down to watch his mother's property.

Rebecca observed him from behind the counter.

"Karl."

"Yes, mum."

"Put your overcoat on."

In the heat of the affair Karl had forgotten his overcoat. Conflict did not freeze him. It made him hot of soul.

3

Karl was thirteen years old when he deserted the parade ground for the drama.

No one said to him "You're getting too old to play with lead soldiers." He just grew out of the one, and into the other.

His first toy theatre took birth in the packing-case that Brother George had kicked. Incidentally, George called it "The—ater," and when Rebecca consecrated to Karl's art the back attic, George looked at Augustus with the disgusted air of a man whose mistress has jilted him.—"Why doesn't she give the kid the whole ruddy house?"—Mr. Vidler had a share in the creating of Karl's model theatre. He was technical adviser, and clerk of the works, but he left the constructing of the model to Karl. On Sunday evenings he would come in and assist, bringing with him material that would be of use, pulley-wheels, wire, brass hinges, oddments of canvas and of glue. The one gas-jet in the attic flared from six till nine while Karl and Mr. Vidler sawed and planed and sandpapered. Rebecca had bought her beloved a chest of tools and a cheap fretsaw outfit, and she would climb the stairs and watch the work in progress.

Augustus made a habit of reading in his bedroom, and his mother charged him sixpence a week extra for the midnight oil. Karl was allowed free gas, another grievance for George. But Rebecca was dreaming dreams about her beloved, and she did not dream dreams for her other sons. It was she who realised that a theatre needed paint for its wings, and its back-drop, and Karl had his paint box. The first back-drop was a piece of discarded American cloth, painted on its reverse side and fastened to a broomstick with reels screwed to its ends.

Karl's earliest attempt at scene painting was distinctly impressionist, a very blue sea, and a splodge of black rock, and a forest sprouting rather unconvincingly from

the very waves. Mr. Vidler bristled his eyebrows at it.

“That doesn’t fool me, my dear.”

“Have I got to fool you, Mr. Vidler?”

“I’m the public, my dear, and I’m sitting in the stalls. You’ve got to think of the gallery, and you’ve got to think of the stalls.”

But the completed model, with an old picture frame with a couple of gilded chair legs attached to the proscenium arch was a remarkable product. It was correct in all its details so far as the stage and its mechanisms were concerned. It had a grid, flies, a back-drop, wings and slides, tin footlights, a drop-scene, and an orchestra below. Karl’s idea was to work a musical-box into the orchestra. The thing functioned. It had no roof, and by standing on a box behind the scenes and leaning over, Karl could manipulate his model, pull strings, shift slides, but heavy breathing tended to make the candle-ends in the footlights wave and flicker.

Enter the actors. At first they were figures cut out in cardboard and attached to wooden stands with wire handles that could be manipulated from the wings. Karl wrote his own first play, and the development of the architect into the dramatist was—perhaps both inevitable and significant. The less said about that first play—the better. Karl kept the manuscript, and smiled over it when he had come to maturity. It dwelt with love in a village, and the only unusual thing about it was that the hero was a gentleman and the villain the village blacksmith—which was not life according to Slopp.

But Karl found the manipulating of his figures and the declaiming of the dialogue bad art. Either his mother or Mr. Vidler became the voice, and in his mother he discovered unexpected histrionic abilities. Almost, Rebecca acted the parts herself. As for Mr. Vidler, he was a stern critic, experienced as to entries and exits, posings and groupings. Karl began to learn a great deal about his own particular theatre and its problems, and its limitations. He became, in fact, the child *régisseur* with ideas. He wanted to do all sorts of wonderful things with his theatre, improve its mechanism, its scenery, and its lighting. Those candle-ends at the foot of the stage were very crude, and scenery should not flap.

The boy had not heard of Gordon Craig, or Appia, or Max Reinhardt, and Mr. Vidler was equally innocent. Had he been told of Reinhardt’s revolving stage no doubt he would have scoffed at it as a new-fangled fad. With Karl it was otherwise. He might squat for an hour in front of his theatre, contemplating it, but the young mind was not static. He was Winged Mercury, demanding that things should move swiftly; and a mechanism was always so far behind your soaring fancy. At the Globe theatre there were those interminable waits, with the gallery peeling oranges and

sucking sweets, and beginning to shuffle restless feet. "O, get on with it," and Karl agreed with the gallery.—Couldn't the play be made to flow more swiftly without those boring intervals when the illusion reverted to bathos and chatter?

The idea came to Karl quite suddenly. He had been setting up a rustic scene, using animals from an old Noah's Ark, and to follow it he had to stage a railway station with toy engine and carriages. Why should one have to drag all one's properties off the stage and replace them? Supposing the stage itself went round?

Karl should have jumped up with a cry of "Eureka." He sat and smiled, and then ran down to his mother.

"Mum,—I've got an idea.—Why shouldn't the stage go round?"

Her beloved's eyes were bright.

"Why not, dear?"

The innovation was put to Mr. Vidler. In fact, Karl demonstrated his idea with a turn-table made out of the top of a barrel, revolving on marbles set in grooves. Mr. Vidler sat on a stool, sucking an empty pipe. A stage that went round?—This was red revolution.—But why not?

"Well,—I'm dashed!—Why didn't I ever think of that before?"

Being Mr. Vidler, he had now objections to raise. If you cut up a stage into sections, the sections would be small, wouldn't they? And how were you going to link up with the wings and the proscenium arch? Karl had his answers ready. Didn't some scenes require more space than others, like Westminster Abbey and a shop. Your stage wouldn't be just divided into four—like an apple. One bit of scenery might run right through, and form a backing for parts of the others.

Mr. Vidler grunted, and bit hard at the stem of his pipe.

"It might work," said he, "and it might not.—It might chuck some of our chaps off the job. That's a thing to be remembered, my lad."

But Karl and his inspiration transcended labour problems.

"Wouldn't the audience be pleased?—Besides, you could have more scenes, Mr. Vidler, not less."

"And what about the money, my dear?"

As yet finance was below Karl's young horizon.

But Mr. Vidler, passing through, had a few words with Karl's mother.

"That boy of yours is givin' me shocks.—He looks like being a bit of a genius."

Rebecca smiled upon him. Such was her dream.

CHAPTER V

In that catastrophic year of 1914 Karl became one of the familiar figures of the Essex Road. A dark, slim lad of sixteen, he took charge of that portion of his mother's shop which projected upon the pavement, for during the winter Rebecca had suffered from bronchitis, and Karl had insisted upon her remaining inside the shop. Insistence was a new quality in him, and not unpleasing to his mother, and like the note of a strong young wire, vibrant and musical. The boy had a peculiar dignity of his own. As a shop-assistant he was somewhat unusual, dealing capably and quietly with a world that might purloin a pair of pants, but was sensitive to politeness and to humour.

"Young Slopp" was not conventional according to the standards of the Essex Road either in his clothes or in his manners. Instead of an overcoat he wore a white sweater under his jacket, with a bright blue scarf tucked into it. His mother, sitting near the oil-stove inside the shop, with the shop door closed by Karl's orders, kept two peep-holes open in the windows through which she could watch him. Other women might have referred to Rebecca as the old black spider. Would her devotion devour her beloved?

Karl, even at sixteen, was tall and mature. He carried his head high, had a tinge of brown in his skin, and hair that waved. He looked people straight in the face, but always as though they were some way off. His smile brought them nearer, but a something in his eyes kept them from coming too near.

Rebecca began to know that her Karl was attractive to women. Did it concern her? Yes and no. Her beloved was good to look upon. Could she blame her sisters? She might wish both to boast to her secret self, and to put up a glass partition between her Karl and the wenches. Would he be attracted by women? O, probably, but not like that lout of a George who went about rooting at sex with his snout.

The Smart girl from next door was always on the pavement, a fat, fair thing with popping blue eyes and a giggle. Rebecca had seen her stand in front of a grave and composed Karl, and button up his coat for him.

"You'll catch cold, dear"—or was it an invitation to promenade?

She was two years older than Karl, but the sex of her did not appear to disturb him. Almost Rebecca could have sworn that her beloved was indifferent to women. He appeared to treat them all alike, the fat and frowsy in slovenly ulsters, the bonneted and wheedling, the bold young matrons who stared him in the eyes, the

wenches who were just sex-conscious. He attended to business. A pretty face could not insinuate itself between him and the price of a pair of trousers or a child's sailor jacket. He was always—"Yes, ma'am" or "No, Miss." Only on rare occasions would he come into the shop to consult with his mother on some reduction in price.

"Shall I knock off a shilling, mother? Her boots are all to pieces, and she's got a cough."

Rebecca would look out of the window.

"The one in the bonnet?"

"Yes."

"You can knock off a shilling, my dear."

Not that Karl was untempted. Far from it, but like some sensitive children he was acutely fastidious, and rather squeamish about sex and food. The texture of the thing had to be clean and fine. His senses were more quick and delicate in their reactions than the senses of the vulgar man, and that which roused Brother George to frenzy nauseated Karl. Fat meat, a greasy plate or one that smelt of the dishcloth, a fork with eggstain on it, a soiled towel, such things had offended the child. He was almost absurdly squeamish about other people's bodies, and his distastes were many and subtle. A handsome, coarse fleshliness—so devastating to most men—especially when they are middle aged, actively repelled him. He disliked certain types and features, sandy women, porcine women, prominent teeth or discoloured teeth, pinched noses, high foreheads, a yellow skin, congested fingers.

His day was a busy one.

At half-past six he ran downstairs to light the gas-stove for early tea.

At seven he was washed and dressed and at his table in the attic window, either reading or writing. He had produced two plays, put each aside for six months, and on re-reading them condemned them as tosh.

At eight he breakfasted with his mother. His brothers had their meal at seven-thirty.

From eight-thirty to nine he walked or ran.

From nine till four he was the salesman. At four o'clock his mother gave him tea, and until five he lived again his other life in his attic.

From five-thirty to seven there was more shop.

At seven they supped.

From eight to nine on three days a week Karl sat at the feet of a certain Mr. Belcher, one of his discoveries in Highbury Fields. Alcohol had made of Mr. Belcher a social failure and a temperamental success. Brilliantly shabby, and the occupant of a bed-sitting room in Camden Street, he had so little respect left for anything that he

was able to instil into Karl a dislike of the cheap and the nasty. Mr. Belcher had a red and Roman nose, the mind of an aristocrat and a scholar, and a whimsical and wicked wit. He suggested to Karl a sagacious parrot on a perch, a parrot with a red beak and one round black merciless eye. Mr. Belcher's varied career as an Oxford don, a master in a public school, a journalist, a sandwich man, a betting tout and shabby sitter on seats, had rendered his experience catholic. Any piece of humbug was like an old lady's lace cap, to be snatched and torn to pieces. His aphorisms were as varied as his experience.

"If you want to move the public, capture its subconscious."

That was a new saying both to Karl and to society, but when Mr. Belcher had explained it, Karl understood.

"I may be allowed to be facetious, but you—never, my dear. The dreadful facetiousness of self-conscious youth! Give your subconscious a chance if you want to be big."

And society, what of society, the oligarch, the democrat?

Said Mr. Belcher—"If you hear a little dog snarling at a street corner you can be pretty sure that he is a socialist, and rabid because the other fellow happens to have a bone."

"Get a bone, my dear, and stick to it.

"Don't be fooled into dropping it by people who talk altruistic tosh, and whose mouths are slaving for your bone."

Mr. Belcher taught Karl some Latin, a little algebra, much history, and the mood of modern science. He indicated to Karl an attitude toward life instead of forming him into a set piece. He was fond of the word Flux. "Things flow, my dear, even down my throat. Don't take to the tramlines. Get in the air."

He was contemptuous of all isms and ologies. He warned Karl against labels, cliques, brotherhoods, and literary clubs.

"And be sure, my dear, that if you make a success of anything, you will be loved by most of the women and hated by most of the men."

From nine to nine-thirty Karl walked hard, generally in the direction of Highbury Station, and he walked with his own youth as his comrade, and not looking into the faces that he passed. He was very sure of himself, yet quite free from arrogance. His brothers accused him of cockiness. He would turn home to spend the rest of the evening alone with his mother, for Augustus belonged to a political club, and George had affairs. Rebecca showed no desire to control her second son's morals.

Once a week Rebecca and Karl went to a theatre. It was part of her plan that Karl should see every play of the season, and afterwards they would discuss it

together, and not only the play, but the setting, the lighting and the music. Shaw was massacring the middle-classes, and for a year or more Karl was a disciple of Shaw. Mr. Belcher's opinion was that Shaw was too damned clever.—As for realism, it did not satisfy Karl. The thing was too photographic and cold and dreary. Romance pleased him better, but not the romance of the conventionalists. Vaguely as yet he apprehended the romance of the real, the colour, the swagger, the swell of emotion, a subtle simplicity, the splendour of brain, bowels, blood and heart. He read the Greeks, and Shakespeare, and the moderns,—Russian and French and German when he could get them in translations, but though he pulled other grapes, he understood already that the wine must be his own.

2

George was fastening his braces. George was a difficult getter up, and never the early and industrious apprentice.

George winked at himself in the mirror, opened his mouth and sang. His notion of singing was to bawl, swaying slightly on his fat thighs as he did so. The song was years out of date, but it suited the occasion and shaped itself to the attack. It was a thing you could bellow, even while brushing your hair.

“Yip—I addy—I aye—I aye,
Yip—I addy—I aye.”

George brought out the Yip like a man slapping someone whom he had caught bending. George had cunning. He did not Yip every morning. Let that ruddy young brother of his be kept guessing. Scribbling poetry, what? Here was a manly voice to tear up the little beggar's inspiration.

George heard a door open. Ha, he had drawn the poet from his desk. Karl's voice came through the door.

“Must you make that filthy noise?”

George yelped exultantly, and brushed his hair.

“For God's sake, shut up.”

George swung to the door. He pulled it open, and confronted a white and furious Karl.

“And what's the matter with you, snotty?—Can't I sing if I feel like it?”

Karl gave him a little homicidal smile.

“O, call it singing!”

“It's as good as your bloody scribbling. Think I'm going to creep about like a mouse because I've got a sniffy little brother——”

Rebecca was listening at the foot of the stairs. Her voice intervened.

“George.”

“Hallo.”

“Come down here.—I have something to say to you.”

George was afraid of his mother.—“Be down in two ticks, ma.” He gave his younger brother an evil look, slammed the door, and finished dressing. Karl returned to his room and with an air of frustration, sat down at his table and stared out of the window.—His mother was waiting for George and the delay only hardened her purpose. As a Jewess she should have been equally partial to all her children, but Rebecca had weighed prejudice in her hand and accepted it. Was she to choose the gold or the dross? She could be fanatical, and as a fanatic she waited for her second son.

He came clumbering down the stairs like a large animal.

“What’s the trouble, ma?”

So, George was going to be insolent. She stood in the middle of the passage with her large hands over the swell of her apron.

“You’ll stop that shouting in the morning.”

“Shouting?—I’m only singing.”

“It’s the same,” said his mother, “and you’ll stop it.”

“Why should I?—Just because——”

“Yes,” said Rebecca inexorably, “because of Karl.”

George flared. He went off the deep end. If there was to be a row let it be his row. Hadn’t he a grievance? To be told to keep quiet because a younger brother sat and scribbled. Hell! He was not going to stand this sort of thing. It was just ruddy favouritism.—He shouted. His mother’s face remained heavy with a kind of ruthless calm.

She turned and walked to the street door at the end of the passage and opened it.

“My house, my lad.—You’ll do what I tell you or leave it.”

George’s shouting mouth hung open for a moment—a silent hole. He stared at his mother, and then he resumed his shouting.

“I’m quitting.—I’m fed up.—Mus’n’t wake the baby, what?—I’ve got plenty of places to go to.”

His mother nodded at him.

“Then—go.”

He went, and such was the passing of George. He reappeared periodically, either to display himself and his clothes when his fortunes were fair, or “To touch the

old woman for something' when he was short of cash, but Rebecca remained ruthless towards George. There was no fatted calf for him.

3

Concealed behind a row of skirts in her bedroom cupboard Rebecca kept a little old safe which had been purchased second hand. Its paint was peeling off, and the brass handle had no polish, but Karl's mother was not concerned with the exterior of her strong-box. It was the contents that mattered, cash, title deeds, stock certificates, ledgers, her pass-book, some jewellery. Rebecca loved money, because it was hard to come by, and because of the power it possessed. She was secretive, both about her treasure and her affairs, fearing not moth nor corruption and thieves, but the demands of nature. Not even Karl knew of this safe, though its contents might be plunder stored away for the fertilizing of her beloved's future.

Rebecca banked with Lloyds in Upper Street. There were occasions when she interviewed the branch manager and discussed with him the purchase of stock. She kept a sum of ready money in her safe for the emergencies of her business, for Rebecca had to buy as well as sell, and when a bargain was to be driven the production of ready cash often clinched the deal in her favour.

A February evening and frosty. The shop was shut, and Karl at Mr. Belcher's. Rebecca had locked her bedroom door, and opening the cupboard, pushed aside the clothes that hid the safe. She had the day's takings to put away. She was alone in the house, and but for the clangour of passing trams, the Essex Road was in a muffled mood.

She unlocked the safe, and deposited in a small black and gold cashbox three sovereigns, and seventeen shillings in silver. There was an entry to be made in a ledger. The gas jet was flaring, and as she turned the tap to steady the flame, she remembered that Augustus had not come back for his supper. She stood for a moment with her fingers on the tap of the gas-bracket, while the face of her first-born interposed itself between cashbox and ledger. Gus had been behaving rather mysteriously of late. He slept and ate in his mother's house, but rather like some casual lodger who came and went, and whose essential life was lived elsewhere. Augustus had always been secretive, a somewhat funereal young man, who—if he had any sins to confess, chose no family confessor.

Rebecca's fingers were still on the tap when she heard a tram stop outside the house. There was nothing singular in the stopping of a tram, but a little interval of silence seemed to link the incident with the ringing of the side door bell. The metallic jingle came from the end of the passage near the kitchen where six old-fashioned bells hung darkly just below the ceiling.

Rebecca frowned. She locked the safe, hid the key under the mattress of her bed, and went downstairs. The bell was still trembling in its spring.—She was alone in the house.—Karl had not rung that bell. There had been a note of apology in its summons, a suggestion of hesitant and surreptitious carefulness. Karl rang much more gaily.

She could hear voices. So, there were two people outside, and one of them had rung the bell. Rebecca went softly down the passage; she was close to the door when she heard a woman's voice make a remark.

“Better ring again, hadn't you?”

It was a young voice, and yet incipiently shrewish. The bell was rung again, and even more timorously so.

“I suppose the old woman's in?”

“There was a light in her bedroom.”

The voice of Augustus! What was her first-born doing on his mother's doorstep with a young person who spoke of Rebecca as the old woman? Some conspiracy was afoot. Had love come to Augustus, and was the face of the loved one to be revealed to his mother? Rebecca was far wiser than her first-born. If Augustus was being moved to marry a young woman with a voice like that, he would most certainly regret it.

Rebecca put both hands to the door, and turning key and handle simultaneously she opened it suddenly upon those two. A gas jet was burning behind her, and its light fell upon the two faces. She did not look at her son, but into the eyes of the strange woman.

There was a pause, and then Augustus was heard to say—“Mother, this is Emily.”

Emily was seen to smile, and the smile had a fallacious brightness, like the glitter of a knife.

“Ah,” said Rebecca,—“come in, Emily.”

But Emily glanced at her man, jerking her chin round at him as though prompting his courage.

“Emily and I are married.”

Rebecca's large black figure filled the doorway. She seemed to breathe heavily for a moment. Then she smiled at her son's unexpected wife.

“Well, that's news, my dear, but come inside. Draughts give me colds on the chest.”

She was bland, almost motherly. She stood back against the wall and let them in. Emily entered with the air of a young woman who was ready to be saucy if Rebecca

gave her half a chance. Rebecca looked at Augustus as he passed her, and saw only a self-conscious profile. Augustus was feeling very uncomfortable. His mother's dark eyes were on him like the eyes of some familiar and formidable seer.

A solitary gas jet was burning in the parlour. Rebecca lit the other two, and gave the fire a poke.

"Sit down, my dear."

Emily was already sitting down, and on her dignity as wife and matron. Rebecca, poker in hand, turned and smiled upon her. Augustus was standing behind Emily's chair like one of those young Victorian husbands in a wedding photograph.

"Well, well," said Rebecca,—“this is a surprise, isn't it. I expected Gus back to supper, and he brings back a wife.”

Emily was watching Rebecca like a sandy cat who was not quite sure how this old black cat was shaping.

"You needn't be afraid, Mrs. Slopp, that we are expecting you to put yourself out."

"O, no, my dear."

"Gus and I are in lodgings."

"Most considerate of you, I'm sure."

Rebecca was summing up her new daughter. Emily was sandy with pale eyelashes. Emily had a long thin nose, sharp at the tip, a muddy complexion, patches of yellow pigment in her pale eyes, a mean tight mouth. A shrew, and she had Augustus in her pocket. But Rebecca understood. Her firstborn lacked courage. He had been afraid to tell his mother. He had preferred to confront her with an accomplished fact, and with the sandy and sinewy assurance of Emily.

"Well," said Rebecca,—“I suppose you young things have ways of your own. For better—or worse—my dears. And when is the baby expected?”

Augustus looked shocked.

"Nothing of the kind, ma."

Rebecca was smiling at Emily, an Emily whose nostrils and mouth were compressed for conflict.

"Well, well,—Gus was always such a shy boy, my dear, but you'll cure him of that. And perhaps you would like a little supper."

"Much obliged I'm sure," said Emily,—“but we had it in our lodgings.”

Rebecca did a gracious thing. She bent down and kissed Emily. The magnanimous and the ironical were mingled in her, and though Emily's answering kiss was a peck, that was just Emily and like Emily accepted. This family affair was brief and formal. Out in the street Emily declared that the old woman had swallowed it

pretty well. “I thought she was going to be nasty.” Augustus’s verdict was more casuistical.—Meanwhile, “the old woman” remained solidly in the open doorway, confronting the night, and the fatefulness of the occasion.

Exit George, exit Augustus. A tram went by, clanging its bell urgently at some dark object that threatened to impede it, and Rebecca smiled to herself. Was she not rather like that tram, wanting all obstacles—human and otherwise—out of her way?

She would be alone now in the house with Karl.

She closed the door, and shuffling slippers into the parlour, she sat down by the fire. The silent house seemed to share her secret exultation. Rebecca sat and listened for the footsteps of her beloved.

CHAPTER VI

Emily had been throwing out hints.

Emily, whose temperament rendered her incapable of living in peace with a landlady, had compelled Augustus to rent a house in Chalfont Street. It was a very small house, and Emily and her husband were content with furnishing two rooms and the kitchen. Augustus had saved a little money, though a clerk on two pounds ten or so a week could not be expected to control much capital, and Augustus disapproved of capital. Emily had money in the Post Office savings bank.

So, Emily was throwing out hints. Emily considered herself subtle, but her dispensing of suggestions could be as bold and oblique as the accosting eye of the lady of the streets. She might insinuate, but her smile was crackle-ice. The direct and the positive could be applied to her husband's employers, Messrs. Benskin & Brown; they were sharks, mean exploiters, and Emily said what she thought about them. She was beginning to say things to Augustus about his mother.

"What's she done for us,—I'd like to know?"

Emily had a way of asking questions and of answering them to her own satisfaction.

"A second-hand chest of drawers!—That's all she could rise to.—And that house—full of furniture, and just the two of them in it."

Augustus was learning not to obstruct his wife. Emily carried the horns, and when she put her head down Augustus stood aside and gave her the wall.

"Mean—I call it.—She must have money put away, and she hasn't done a thing for you.—Of course I've got a pair of eyes.—All she cares about is that little brother of yours."

Augustus agreed with her. Karl had always been the favoured child.

"Well, why don't you ask her for something?—You're a regular Esau—you are. She's put young Karl in the business, and you're the eldest."

Said Augustus—"I wasn't going to waste my ability on selling old clothes."

Emily was sarcastic. Socialism was all very well, and Emily was ready to accept it provided it would prove good business. Meanwhile, Emily became active on her own account. Rebecca began to see more of Emily than their natural affinities required. Emily tried insinuations. Augustus was a delicate young man, and tender in the stomach. And couldn't Emily help her dear mother with the washing and the mending, or even in the shop?

Rebecca was bland. She contemplated the sandiness of Emily and her sly solicitations. Emily's mean mouth smeared itself with honey. Emily flattered.

"A young woman's got enough to do in her own home, my dear. I always had."

Balked by Rebecca's impregnable and robust cheerfulness Emily began to throw out hints. She no longer strewed them about her mother-in-law's slippers. The old woman refused to see them; she walked over them. Caltraps were needed. Emily became a little injured and shrill. Emily wanted so many things, a new sofa, personal adornments, a gas stove, a gramophone; her conviction was that Rebecca was able to supply her with these articles. Young Karl was kept on jam. The little amateur gentleman! Karl was reserved and silent with Emily; he did not like his sister-in-law; she was boiled mutton and caper sauce, and Emily knew when she was not liked.

Rebecca remained impenetrable. She was wise. She knew her Emily, and Rebecca had suffered from Emilies in her shop. Rebecca was a little deaf; Rebecca was stupid; Rebecca smiled over the most obvious hint and did not stoop to pick it up.

She caught glimpses of Emily in a mirror. Emily had an air of saying things to herself about Rebecca. Emily's face looked pinched.

"Hoity-toity, my girl," thought Rebecca; "I'm a stupid old woman. I—don't—see—anything. And you are working up for a row, aren't you? And I'm not going to oblige you."

Emily's hints became innuendos. Was her mother-in-law being purblind on purpose? Would it be necessary for her to plant a dart in her mother-in-law's fat person? And then, one March evening Emily lost her temper. It was a ragged virtue and easily mislaid, and Rebecca had been particularly exasperating. Rebecca's temper had put on Sunday satin, all black and shimmery. She sat with her two hands clasping her beneficent tummy.

The row arrived like half a sackful of soot dislodged from a dirty chimney. Emily had come with the intention of speaking her mind, and of telling the old woman a thing or two. She began by referring to the business, and to the sweetness of her husband's nature; Gus might feel hurt—because nothing had been done for him, but Gus was not—mean.

Emily was advised to hold her tongue.

"You mind your own business, Emily,—and I'll mind mine."

So, Rebecca was coming it high and mighty!

"And what have you done for Augustus, I'd like to know? I'm not going to keep my mouth shut when my man is being treated badly."

Rebecca's smile was solid.

“Well, get it out, Emily, get it out.”

“I will.—Disgusting favouritism I call it.—I suppose you think you’re going to make a little gent of Karl.”

“Something better than that, Emily. Ever heard of a genius?”

The cat in the Emily spat. She had claws, and she planted those claws in Rebecca.

“Genius,—poof. I’m not a humbug.—I say what I think, and I tell you——”

“Yes, Emily. Does it matter?”

“Matter?—Why, you’re an old fool. You’ll have Mr. Karl Suck-a-Thumb for a year or two, and then he’ll get a girl.—And where will you be——?”

She began to scream.

“And where will you be?—What will you be?—He’ll want to suck his sweet, and you’ll be just a fat old fool.—Left in the lurch, my dear.”

Rebecca rose slowly from her chair. Her face was like white wax.

“That will do, Emily.—You can go.—When I want you I’ll send for you.—You can go.”

Augustus’s wife flung out of the house, banging both the parlour and the street doors, and suddenly Rebecca’s knees began to tremble. She sat down heavily in her chair. Emily had planted her barb and opened in Rebecca’s consciousness a little secret wound that would refuse to heal, and whose edges would be kept raw with this chafe of perpetual fear. That young shrew had not spoken unadvisedly. Did not the wise book say that a young man should turn from his parents and cleave to the woman of his choice?—Some day Karl would marry.

Rebecca lowered the gas and drew her chair close to the fire. She felt cold. She stirred the coals and held her hands close to the flames. She seemed aware of the shadows and the uncertain flickering light. She was alone in this familiar room, and somehow it had ceased to be intimate and warm. Would the days come when she would be alone like this, an old woman sitting solitary by the fire?

A tram went by, sending a faint tremor through the house. The sound of the iron wheels had scarcely died away when Rebecca heard the street door open. Karl. She sat back in her chair, and tried to feel at ease and to smooth out those creases in her soul.

Karl opened the parlour door. He stood there in the doorway, head up, lips apart. The sensitive surface of him seemed to pick up the vibrations of something that had happened in the room.

“Who’s been here, mother?”

Rebecca gave a little inward shiver.

“Emily.”

“What did she want?”

“What would Emily want, my dear?”

Something in his mother’s voice made Karl go to her quickly, bend down and put his lips to Rebecca’s forehead.

2

But Karl’s mother was to fear the war more than she was to fear strange women.

In August, 1914, she shrugged her shoulders at the monster. It was over there beyond the narrow sea, and the life of the Essex Road went on as usual. There were—of course—the patriotic posters, Lord Kitchener’s blue eyes and pointing finger, an occasional brass band pumping up martial ardour. The brown stain in the streets increased. But Rebecca shrugged her shoulders. The war might last six months, a year, perhaps two years, and Karl was sixteen. Her Karl could not possibly be involved in it.

But as the monster began to grow, demanding more and more blood and flesh and the youth of the world, Rebecca would pause like a woman who had felt herself secure upon a hilltop and turn to look down into the valley. Young Smart from the fruit-shop next door had been killed in the Salient, and old Smart, grey and bitter and withered, would keep asking Rebecca that unpleasant question.

“Gus and George gone yet?”

Rebecca could not answer for her sons, but old Smart appeared to be unpleasantly interested in the young men’s movements.

“Better for ’em to go before they’re fetched. Conscription’s coming. And don’t you forget it.”

“I’m minding my business, Mr. Smart.”

“Business as usual, what! Not now, my dear.—It’s everybody’s bloody business, and don’t you forget that—either.”

Each day the war seemed to come a little nearer to her doorstep. Other women brought it to her, women who had gone grey and came to sell her their absent husband’s clothes, or women who looked hard eyed and pinched.—“Your boys gone yet, Mrs. Slopp?” She began to be aware of people looking at Karl. Karl stood five feet ten inches and looked older than his age.—Karl and his toy soldiers? Somewhere upstairs the remnant of that army lay forgotten in a cupboard.—Would Karl?—How was Karl feeling?—What did Karl think about the war? For Rebecca

had tried to keep the war out of her home. She refused to read the papers. She behaved as though this absurd horror did not exist. There had been a strange silence between mother and son, as though each felt the shadow of the thing between them. The routine of their little world continued, and in its attic Karl sat and read and scribbled. Sometimes, when the boy was out, Rebecca would go up, steal into the room, and look at those white pages. She read all that he wrote, and he did not know it.—Almost she searched his manuscripts for indications, hints, warnings. Karl was living in a quiet phase, and sometimes his air of young moodiness frightened her.

She had cause to remember that particular Sunday morning. Karl had gone out; Sunday was his walking day, and he would cover twelve miles in the morning. Rebecca was making Karl's bed when she heard the street door open. The bracket clock in the parlour had just struck ten.

Rebecca went out on to the landing.

"That you, Karl?"

"Yes."

She was sensitive to the inflections of her son's voice. It sounded tense and strained. Something had upset him.

"You're back early."

He did not answer her, and his silence brought her down the stairs. She found him in the parlour, standing by the window, and looking out into the backyard.

"Anything wrong, Karl?"

He kept his back to her.

"Yes—that name.—I hadn't thought of it before.—I met a fellow I used to know—with some other chaps. He lost a leg out there."

Rebecca held her breath.

"What's wrong with the name, dear?"

She saw his head give a jerk.

"O, well—they said things.—They asked about Gus and George.—You had better call me Charles, mother."

"What did they say about your brothers?"

"O, just called them—what they are.—There are three of us—and not one has had the guts to go out there and help."

And suddenly Rebecca looked fierce.

"Quite right.—They ought to go."

Karl was seventeen.—Rebecca had heard of boys of seventeen volunteering. Meanwhile, her other sons hung back. Rebecca had not regarded the war as a family affair, but when she realized that the dilatoriness of Augustus and George might expose Karl to other forms of persuasion, she became patriotic. Karl was not like his brothers. He had fine feelings, and was generous and impulsive.

The ruthlessness of Rebecca revealed itself. It became the duty of Augustus and George to go to the war. She did not confess to herself that in a crisis she would sacrifice both of them to retain Karl. Were Gus and George to do their duty, she too might claim to have done her duty as a mother, and feel herself justified in clinging to her beloved. Karl had such beautiful hands and ears; he was too fine and precious for that butcherly business.—Surely, England might leave an old woman her third son. Did she not need him to help her in the shop?

Rebecca became the passionate patriot. She had not seen George for five months, but one September evening George turned up, liquorish and flashy. He had come to show himself off, and his coffee-coloured lounge suit, and his green tie, and his yellow boots, and his gold ring. He looked fat and arrogant. Surely, his mother would welcome him?—"Well done, my sly and sheeny boy."

Karl was out, and Rebecca seized her opportunity.

"Hallo, ma."

"I've been wanting to see you, George."

She led George into the parlour and sat him down. George laid his bowler hat on the table, and looked at his mother with cunning, bright little eyes. He had a well-greased air.

"Got any beer in the house, ma?"

Rebecca had not. She stood with her back to the door, and watched George draw a cigar from his breast pocket, and bite off the end of it.

"When are you joining up?"

George gave her a sudden, nasty look, and lit his cigar.

"Joining what?"

"You know what I mean," said his mother.

George blew smoke and thrust out his yellow boots.

"Me—go to the war? Ta, ta, old dear.—I'm in munitions.—Some job.—We're the chaps who are going to win this ruddy war."

His mother observed him.

"With the—girls, George, as usual."

"Good biz, ma."

"And no mud on your nice boots.—You ought to be ashamed of yourself. You

ought to be in the trenches.”

George laughed.

“I’m not such a bloody fool, old dear. Don’t you worry about me.—I’m dug in. What’s the wheeze?”

“A big fellow like you—doing a girl’s job. If I were a girl—I’d spit in your face.”

George flared up. He was not wholly insensitive to popular opinion, though he shrugged it off with a truculent swagger.

“You mind your own business, ma.—This war’s a bloody capitalist stunt.—Yes—I know what’s what.—I’m one of those who’s got the guts to stay out of it.”

Rebecca nodded her head at him.

“You’re a coward” said she—“that’s what you are.”

4

Rebecca had no better fortune with Augustus.

Augustus was growing very like his father both in figure and philosophy, though Augustus was more sure of the world’s ultimate salvation. He was going about with a little sly smile oozing down his chin. He could say to his intimates “Sit tight. The fools are blowing their own rotten show to pieces. All the better for us. Our turn’s coming.”

Augustus was engaged in sundry subterranean activities. He had the bitter tongue of his father, but with more slime on his lips. He might deplore Labour’s surrender to Jingoism, but the reaction would be inevitable, and he and others of the brotherhood were doing what they could to embarrass the patriots. Sabotage was the word, slipping out at night to put sand in society’s grease-box.

Rebecca caught Augustus just as he was leaving the house in Chalfont Street to meet certain of his intimates. Rebecca turned the new Hampden back into the house. Emily was busy ironing in the kitchen, but when she heard her mother-in-law’s voice she came to listen at the sitting-room door.

Augustus met his mother on a higher plane than Brother George’s. He produced a philosophy, and principles. He disapproved of war; he would not be coerced into soiling his hands in the capitalist shambles. Yes, his conscience was clean, and if necessary he would suffer for it.

His mother tried sarcasm.

“I suppose, Gus, that if a burglar broke into your house, you’d get under the bed.”

Rebecca was indulging in claptrap, and Augustus told her so. She had caught the

catch-cries of the crowd. She was letting herself be fooled by mob-emotion and the propaganda of a venal and purblind Press.

“I’m not to be seduced,” said her firstborn. “I can look ahead. This war is going to be the end of capitalism.”

Rebecca would not let him make a speech.

“You always were good at excuses, Gus.—It will be a fine new world with you and George running it.”

Then Emily appeared. The moment for intervention had arrived. She was more shrill and bitter than Augustus.

“I’m not going to let my husband go and be killed for a lot of shopkeepers and idle rich.—You leave Gus alone. He’s got ideals. And you—driving him to murder.”

Rebecca became very calm in the presence of Emily’s indignation.

“You’re one of the—careful ones too, are you, Emily.”

“Careful?—I like that.”

Once again Emily planted her barb.

“I know what’s at the back of your mind. Favouritism, favouritism. You want to push poor Gus into the trenches and keep that little sucking-pig—safe.”

Rebecca rose from her chair.

“Thank you, Emily. If you can’t keep your temper, I’ll try to keep mine.”

CHAPTER VII

The secret brotherhood to which Augustus belonged was attempting to approach soldiers who were on leave, and to preach pacifism to these poor sheep whom a financial clique were sending to the shambles. The weaker sort of man fresh from the horror of the Somme might be susceptible to these seductive and sympathetic voices, but not always so. Tell a man that his courage is just stupidity, and that he is being exploited in hell that the rich man may remain in heaven, and he may turn in exasperation and rend the ingenious friend. Augustus had had some success with the tired and the disillusioned, but happening one day upon two Australian soldiers sitting on a seat in the park, Augustus approached them. The colonials looked sour and bored. It was the day after a debauch, but Augustus believed that he saw upon those fierce brown faces disgust with this world of false heroism and of humbug.

The Australians listened, eyeing him like two fierce birds.

Said one, stretching his legs—"Are you being funny, you bit of chewed string?"

No; Augustus was not being funny. He was seriously assuring these two that the war was a monstrosity in the way of propertied humbug, and that the poor silly sheep——

"Hell!"

One of those lounging figures uncoiled itself like a spring. Its blue eyes blazed in a brown face.

"Stinking fish, you bit of chalk and cheese.—Say that interesting thing again, will you?"

Augustus said it—though he did not quite like the look of the weather. And then the man from Australia smote him.

"You foul, festering fetus."

Augustus rolled on the ground. He was kicked by angry feet, but the Australians let it go at that. They did not take defeatism by the collar and pass it on to the police. Augustus returned to his wife with a disfigured face and dirty clothes. He bore the stigmata of his martyrdom.

Emily was furious.

"Who did this to you?"

Augustus mentioned Australia.

"The savages," said Emily—"that's what they are, savages, raping and bullying

all round the town, taking girls out in taxis and——”

Augustus was exploring a loose tooth with the tip of a finger.

“Don’t you worry, my dear. Our turn’s coming.”

Had Rebecca heard of this affair it might have caused her to feel both fear and a passing satisfaction. Karl’s mother, consumed by a secret suspense, was spending herself on business. She had both big hands deep in it, clutching it by the handful. The thing had become a kind of inspired mania with her. Clothes, clothes, new clothes for a changing community. She wanted to sweep Karl into the spate of her new enterprise, involve him in it,—submerge him in it. She wanted to assure Karl, herself, and the world that she could not carry on without the support of her beloved.

Rebecca had done business with a certain Mr. Isenstein, who, though Rebecca had married a Gentile, did not exclude her from the chosen community. Mr. Isenstein liked Rebecca, not only because she paid for what she purchased, but because she was one of the few women he had dealt with who did not attempt to elude their responsibilities by parading their widowhood or lifting a petticoat. Mr. Isenstein had been prospering. He had seen a sign in the heavens and rented a warehouse in Aldersgate Street.

“Fur, my dear. There is going to be money in fur.”

Rebecca had had her flair. Were not the young women suddenly in funds and freedom, and eager to express their *zeit geist*? Mr. Isenstein could supply her with the goods. She interviewed her bank manager, cleared one window of her shop and put up a notice—“Next Week Will Be Fur Week.”

Mr. Isenstein was scouring the country, for the humble coney had become more significant as a provider of fur than of food. There could not be too much coney. The dressers of fur were to work overtime. Rabbit pelts were to be transfigured and to assist in the new sex swagger. Lapin became lapin seal, lapin mink, lapin mole, lapin sable. The little brown beast with the white scut was to achieve social success.

A trade van from Mr. Isenstein’s warehouse had unloaded Rebecca’s wholesale stock. She had her tickets ready. She had agreed with Mr. Isenstein that the first prices should be tentative; she would begin with a few bargains, tempt the public, and then raise her prices should the first consignment sell well.

“I want you to help dress the window, Karl.”

“Charles, mother.”

The correction depressed her. He was insisting on the Charles, and Rebecca feared any omen.

“I can’t get on without you, my dear. The show opens to-morrow.”

The shop blinds were down and the gas lit, and mother and son became busy in the shop. The parlour was full of trade cases. They were piled along the passage, leaving Karl just room to squeeze through. The gangway was too narrow for his mother to negotiate it.

“I want that box, Karl. Two sables in it.”

Karl smiled at his mother, though he was not confronting life as a humorous affair. His youth was out in the wilderness in secret anguish. Would his mother ever think of him as Charles? He went out into the passage, extracted a box, and carried it into the shop.

“Unpack it,” said his mother.

He lifted out the fur coats, and as he did so he was conscious of his hands. Soft flesh and fur? They were clean hands, though there was an ink stain on one finger. Ink! The hands of a scribbler and a handler of furs, and the hands of the world were bloody. Hands were holding rifles, throwing bombs, slipping shells into guns. He would be eighteen in a month. And he was helping a woman to display fur coats to tempt other women and girls.

Karl’s face was overcast.

The window had been supplied with six wooden stands upon which six special coats were to be displayed. The staging was none too solid, not sufficiently solid to bear Rebecca’s bulk. It became Karl’s business to climb up there behind the drawn blinds and, with his head in a stuffy, gas-poisoned atmosphere, arrange those coats.

His mother handed them to him. She might be conscious of her beloved’s moody face, but she would not remark upon it. She was busy and cheerful.

“Put the sable in the middle, Charles.”

“Why not call it rabbit?”

His mother laughed.

“Don’t you look good business in the mouth, my dear. As if everybody didn’t know? Life’s just a game of bluff. Now, two seals, one in each corner.”

“Who is going to buy these things?”

She ignored the question.

“One can do one’s bit by keeping people cheerful. A little more that way, my dear.”

When the window was dressed to her satisfaction she told Karl to pull up the blind, and going out by way of the shop door, she stood on the pavement and appraised the show. It was half-past ten at night, and raining, and Rebecca was alone with her display. But the picture needed background, a coloured sheet to show off those six models.—But what was her beloved doing? He was fingering the sleeve

of the lapin sable in the centre of the stage; she saw him drop the sleeve almost like someone saying good-bye and dropping a hand. His back was turned to her.

That little gesture seemed prophetic. Rebecca went back into the shop, like a woman concealing a secret fear.

“It looks splendid, my dear. But it wants a back-drop.”

“Yes, mother.”

She saw him smile at her stage fancy, but he did not look at her, and after that one glance she was afraid to look at him.

2

No one handed Karl a white feather.

Like many a sensitive lad he may have seen the white symbol floating in the air like swansdown.

He did not want to go to the war. He had no illusions about the war. The make-believe of waving flags and blaring brass had passed. A resigned and dogged realism had replaced rhetoric; the whole business was as drab as khaki. Only the press, a few politicians and some old ladies of both sexes continued to talk heroic tosh. Karl had spoken with the men who had come back.

He saw the war as a filthy business, a vast and savage scuffle in a foul ditch. You became a slave, or one of a herd of cattle, hardly deserving to be distinguished by a number, driven here and driven there. You were voiceless. Your consent was not asked when you were sent up to be slaughtered. How could man be fooled by so monstrous an illusion? A war to end war! He supposed that some sort of text was necessary. And the great comradeship? O, no; he was a rather separative creature, and he shrank from that anonymous herding, sharing your soul with some primitive and your shirt with the lice. Sensitive? But that was just it. There was a generous impulse urging his shrinking self towards action. One might have to decide in dreadful silence that something compelled you to rush into all that dreadful noise. Karl did not say—

“I owe it to my self-regard.” That might have sounded priggish, as priggish as the saying—“I am too fine and fastidious for this monkey show.” He was somehow conscious of being part of a body of anguish and fear and horror and courage, of a torn and bewildered humanity that suffered and endured. Could any man will himself out of that community of pain into a little sneering, careful clique, and say “I’m not such a poor fool”? The inevitableness of the thing was that you had to be a fool and share in the tragedy of this world folly. Civilization’s agony in the desert? Generous

natures rushed in and accepted the folly, and Karl was realizing that he would have to join the multitude of sacrificial fools. He could not stand aside with the little, superior, clever people.

He had spoken to old Vidler.

“I’ve got to go, Tom.”

“Well, my lad, all the blood and guts of the country are out there.”

At the moment Karl was writing a play, a romantic fantasia into which he had sought to escape. That play would never be finished. The plays he was to write after the war were to be of different stuff.

His mother did not ask him whether he had finished or would finish that play. She knew.

She saw her son’s face as the face of a dear stranger. Her beloved was alone with things. She saw his manuscript each morning lying closed in its brown paper cover. She would open it, and read the same words that broke abruptly into space.

“*Mary*. But why do we do the things we do?—Even when they are against ourselves, even when they hurt?”

Then, the blank half page. There was no answer given to that question. The answer was hidden somewhere in her son’s silence.

His room was over hers, and sometimes she heard him walking about at night, and more than once she crept heavily up the stairs in her slippers, and stood—a large, dim, yearning figure outside his door. She was sure—now.

O, what a world! His mother was grotesquely conscious of herself as a fat old Jewess in a pink flannel bed-jacket, standing helpless outside the door of youth. Shop,—shop!—She had fat hands, and a wedding ring embedded on one finger, and slippers down at the heels. Beyond the drawn blind was the Essex Road and the grey greasiness of an English winter. She had been a seller of old clothes, with a text of “Wardrobes Purchased.” But the Rebecca of the dark landing was just a figure of symbolism, ugly and beautiful and anguished, and crying in her shabby slippers—“O, my beloved, my beloved!”

On four successive Saturday nights they kept the shop open till ten. Islington, Highbury, the Holloway Road, Marylebone, Clerkenwell had heard of the Fur Shop.

“There’s an old Yid in the Essex Road——”

Karl, pale as a young priest consumed by a secret sense of sin, stood and

helped sex to try on its coney skin. There was no need for his mother to tell him that they had sold more than a hundred coats in the month. There had been frequent calls upon the contents of Mr. Isenstein's warehouse. But on this particular night, with frost in the air, and the lights throbbing, he was concerned with a young woman with bobbed hair. Goldilocks! He had helped her to try on six coats; his hands had touched her hair; she had smiled at him. Nice lad. Afterwards, she had paraded in the coat she had chosen and paid for, and he had kept seeing her passing and repassing the door of the shop. Glances crossed, hers oblique, jocund and inviting. She had smiled her challenge at him—"You're to my taste. Come out and walk."

The blinds fell at ten. The shop door was locked, the lights lowered. Supper waited on the parlour table. Rebecca had the kettle boiling on the gas stove.

"Karl."

But even as she called him she heard the side door close. Karl was out on the pavement. He met the face of the girl under the street lamp, eyes mischievous and inviting, lips parted dewy. "Hallo, darling," and suddenly her face grew sullen and dim. Karl went by her, head in air, with a strange, fierce young countenance. She turned to see the light of the lamp on the heels of his shoes. She sneered.

His mother turned out the gas stove and sat down heavily in her chair. She had been on her feet for hours, but it was not her legs that failed her. She would wait. She knew in her heart why he had rushed out into the night. Her face looked all creases; her breasts seemed to bulge. In a month she had made more money than the shop took in a normal year, and the new world's fury for furs was a crescendo. She had success at last in her large, and laborious lap, and it was like a dead child.

She did not touch any food. The clock had struck eleven when she heard youth and its tragedy at the door. It seemed to come in so quietly and deliberately. It had no hat to hang up in the passage.

She managed to smile at her son.

"Supper's been waiting, my dear.—Put a match to the gas stove."

Karl closed the passage door.

"You shouldn't have waited."

"My dear, I didn't feel like eating with this thing hanging over me."

"What thing, mother?"

"You know."

He gave her a deep, still glance. Then he crossed to the kitchen doorway and passed through it. She heard the scraping of a match.

"I've got to go, mother."

"Must you, Karl?"

“I’m a fool, but I’m going.”

She sat very still, waiting for him to come back into the parlour. Had he been other than Karl she might have boxed his ears and with passionate reasonableness sent him to bed. But Karl was not like those other two, and his very otherness was hers. Had she not come to her cliff edge some nineteen years ago, and walked over it? As a woman of large emotions and a temperament, she could understand the supreme folly of loving, the delirium of sacrifice. Her own madness had given her Karl. And on this winter night she was to be articulate for both of them, and that was her salvation. A woman of frailer fibre might have whimpered or scolded or dressed up sentiment in tears. She would neither scold nor reproach; she could be wise in her great moments.

“Tell me, dear?”

“It’s the meanness—of hanging back.”

“Just that?”

And suddenly he was on his knees with his head in her lap. She covered his head with her hands.

“I don’t want to go, mother.”

“You’re so young, my Karl, not yet—of age.”

“I know.—But there is something old enough in me. It hurts.”

She nodded tragically.

“Yes,—I know. Sometimes—women—have to give to men, and sometimes men have to give—to something.”

He was silent. She could feel his hands lying on her fat thighs. Almost she was like some living altar upon which his youth lay prostrate. She could have stormed, accused, ridiculed her crisis, solaced him with easy cynicism, and she did nothing of the kind. She stroked his head. Life had given her this secret love child, and life seemed to demand him of her again. On that night she was greater than she knew.

“Karl.”

“Yes, mother?”

“Do you know what it means to me?”

“Yes, mother.”

She swallowed the passionate anguish in her throat.

“And I’m letting you go.—I’m not saying stay. Isn’t that——? O, well, other women have had things torn from them.—If I had the—silliness to be selfish.—Such waste,—such——”

He raised himself, and drawing his fingers along her thighs, he clasped her hands.

“I know,—waste.—Men being shot to pieces.—It must seem such waste to a

mother.—It seems so to me. But I'm a sensitive fool.—I want to give—like the others.”

His mother kissed his forehead.

“Karl,—when one's a fool in that way—it may be the only time in one's life when one's right.—I was a fool once, my dear, in that way, and I did not regret it.”

Suddenly, she was weeping. Her tears ran unashamedly down her creased and sacrificial face.

“There's a sort of justice in things, Karl. I don't understand, and I do.—You've got to go. You and I are alike that way. We're the fools who give, and that's a thing the real fools might not understand.”

CHAPTER VIII

Emily was one of those who did not understand.

“Crikey! She must be balmy, letting her fatted calf go to be slaughtered.”

Rebecca’s eldest son was both surprised and shocked. Knowing his mother as he did, he would have expected her to fight this madness tooth and nail, and to throw herself between the butchers and their victim. Possibly, there was a self love in Augustus that felt itself affected by Karl’s conventionalism. His younger brother was challenging Gus’s courage and his ideals, and Augustus was approaching that unpleasant period when authority would drag him before the tribunal. He was not going to sacrifice to a bloody Cæsar.

Meanwhile, Emily sat picking at a piece of work with her fingers. Emily had a nose for the mean and the obscure. She found a sneer.

“The golden calf. That’s what it is. All she cares about is money. Selling fur coats to all the little amateur totties. Disgusting—I call it.”

For once, Augustus had the courage to call his wife to order.

“You mustn’t talk like that, Emily. My mother——”

“A precious lot she’s done for you, hasn’t she!”

Augustus did not wholly regret Karl’s insanity. However pure one’s philosophy may claim to be, it cannot wholly transcend life’s propensities and prejudices. Augustus was a very capable illusionist; he could harmonize his internal qualms. He went round to see his mother, but almost before he had broached the matter she effaced him.

“It’s just a question—of character, Gus.”

Augustus was piqued. Did the old woman suggest that by refraining he was less of a hero than a silly, emotional boy?—Good God, what fools women were! Always caught by a flash of the eyes or a gesture. He warned his mother that he felt it his duty to speak to Karl.

“You may,” said his mother, as though giving him leave to open a window.

Augustus did speak to Karl. He began almost as a father. He climbed to a high level. He was even a little emotional.

“I take this—personally,—Karl.—To me—it’s treachery to our ideals, to the love of man for man. It’s a surrender to crowd propaganda—a——”

Karl was in one of his silent moods.

“No use,—Gus.”

“Don’t you understand?—I love humanity.”

And suddenly Karl looked at him with a little merciless smile.

“Don’t talk that stuff to me, Gus.—You—love—humanity!—O, my God!”

His brother’s soapy face seemed to hang in the air like an inflated bladder.

“You don’t know what you are talking about, you young fool.”

Karl turned away.

“If you cared a damn,—you’d be out there in a stretcher-squad.”

2

There was nothing dramatic about Karl’s going. Like many young men he just disappeared from his accustomed haunts for a period or for ever. Having lied about his age, rechristened himself Charles, and been passed by the doctor, he spent two nights in a depot, and was then railed with a number of other men to a training camp in Dorsetshire. The dramatic element was his mother’s, the deliberate restraint with which she chose to stand alone, the courage with which she carried on.

But she was no quietist. She had her business, and that was more than sufficient to keep her on her feet, and now that Karl had left her she wanted help. Girls were growing scarce, and Rebecca chose an older woman, a niece of Mrs. Mutter.

Karl had been gone a week when Emily slithered in. Rebecca had had her flair about Emily; she had expected Emily to arrive and here she was, wearing black, and sympathetic insinuations. Emily had come to suggest that she might be able to help her mother-in-law.

“I could come round when I’ve got Gus off and tidied up the house.”

Rebecca had feelings about Emily. Her daughter-in-law’s cat’s eyes were on those fur coats. Emily was not really sorry for Rebecca or for Karl; Emily was purring in secret over the departure of Karl; Emily would not be sorry if Karl never came back. Rebecca was polite but final.

“Thank you, Emily, but I’ve got a woman. Besides,—I couldn’t take you away from your home.”

Emily looked offended. She was in a perpetual state of being offended.

“Well,—I only wanted to help.”

“Very kind of you, Emily, but I can manage. How is Gus’s indigestion?”

Emily departed with the air of a good woman who had been rebuffed.

Rebecca carried on. Business was booming, and in spite of the exactions of the tax-gatherers it became apparent both to Rebecca and Mr. Isenstein that there were small fortunes to be made in furs. Did Rebecca love money? She did; but her love

was ulterior and vicariously selfish. She wanted success, power, fame, not for herself but for her love-child. Life had snatched him away, but his mother remained obstinately sure that her Karl would come back to her. She kept that room of his sweet and clean. No one else entered it. She would sit for a minute or two in his chair, and turn the pages of the manuscript he had left behind.

On the brown paper cover she could read:

“Fantasy”
“A Play—By Charles Kesteven.”

She smiled over that name. It was not Slopp, or Samuel, George or Augustus. Kesteven? Well, why not? If necessary she would take that name.

Meanwhile, she had Karl’s letters, and her work and three months’ grace. Three months of intensive training fitted a man for France, and Karl was in the P.B.I. That had been something of a shock. The Poor Bloody Infantry!—But the war might end before—No, she would not allow herself to be fooled. Karl’s letters were cheerful. He was with a good crowd; he was boxing, playing football. So very English, and casually so. Rebecca tied up the letters with a black bootlace and was proud. Her love-child was no whimperer. He had his head in the air.

She showed one of Karl’s letters to Mr. Vidler, who still came round on Sunday nights, and the old man rubbed his chin.

“Playing games. Aren’t we mad?—But it’s our gaminess as does it.—That other boy of yours?”

“Which?”

“The one who looks like a Russian.”

“Oh, Augustus. Just slinking.”

Said Mr. Vidler—“I never heard of Russians playing football. Miserable devils.”

So the winter passed, and the spring came, and to Rebecca it had a strange, sweet anguish. It was as though her own youth was renewed in her fat old body. She bought flowers and put them in Karl’s room.—Would the dear body of her love-child be wounded? She carried her inward wound, and bustled about, and was indefatigably active. Her bank balance was mounting up, and the fatal day was drawing near.

Karl came on his last leave. He was going out to France with a draft in ten days’ time. A tram dropped him in the Essex Road, and he saw his mother before she saw him, very much in black and standing in the shop doorway with a fur coat over her

arm. His mother's shop had become much more distinguished and debonair; it had shed those large trays of pants and vests and shirts, and its festoons of coats and trousers. Rebecca was in conversation with a young thing who was becoming a child of fashion.

"No, my dear,—I can't hold it for you.—But if you like to leave a deposit?"

"How much?"

"Two pounds."

"I could get the money next Saturday."

And then Rebecca saw her son, and her business face became transfigured. She pushed the coat at the girl. "All right,—I'll trust you with it, my dear." Her eyes were all Karl, Karl looking tall and slim in uniform, with lean legs that took puttees well; yes, he looked much more like an officer. The girl, holding the coat that had been thrust at her, gaped at the two who were embracing. Karl kissed his mother—not as a public schoolboy would or would not have kissed her, and he did not wait until they were inside the shop.

"My dear, you do look well."

"I feel well."

Rebecca could not shut up her shop, nor did she send for Emily in this emergency, but she went to her safe, took out five one-pound notes and pressed them on Karl.

"Go out and enjoy yourself, my dear."

He smiled at her, but he would not take the money.

"Not feeling that way, mother.—Just like to hang about the old place."

He was curiously grave and quiet, as though his inner life had deepened. The preparation had been spiritual as well as physical, and the ordeal was drawing near. The fear of fear? He wished to try and meet it calmly and with the dignity of his young pride. Apparently, he did not want to rush out after women, or to drug himself with excitement. He seemed ten years older, and so clean-cut and quiet.

"You'll find your room ready, dear."

She deserted the shop for an instant and watched him mount the stairs. His movements were deliberate, easy, and to his mother came a sudden spasm of pride. Her love-child was a man, somehow man as the eternal girl in her had dreamed of, youth going upon adventure, dreadful adventure, but with quiet eyes and firm mouth.

She stood for a moment looking up the empty stairs and seeing that landing window where he had played as a child. Her face had a radiance.

Karl had opened the door of his room. He stood looking in. He saw the table by the window with his manuscript upon it, and on each side a vase of daffodils burning

like flowery candles. He closed the door gently, and crossing the room, opened the manuscript book where he had left it—abrupt and questioning like the edge of a cliff—How much older he was, and yet that same question perplexed him. He took one of the vases, raised it, and smelt the flowers. Spring, youth—and that bloody hazard out yonder! This unhappy generation! But youth had to dare, and to give.

That night when they were at supper together in the parlour he broke bread into his soup with the air of a young disciple obeying some Inward Master.

“The shop’s shut on Sunday, mother.”

“Of course,—dear.”

“Do you remember that day we had in Epping?”

As though she had forgotten it!

“Let’s have a day in the country, mother.”

She was moved, and deeply so.

“Anybody else you want to take, Karl?”

“O no. Just—us.”

“Where would you like to go?”

“There’s a place called Newlands Corner in Surrey. On the Downs. A chap in my hut told me about it.—And there’s a spot not far away called the Silent Pool.”

“We’ll go,” said his mother. “I’ll hire a car or even a taxi. We’ll take our lunch with us.”

4

An April day, one of those rare and golden days. An ancient taxi-driver, disgracefully bribed, drove them down the Portsmouth Road, through West Clandon village, and up to the great grey hills.

Rebecca was no walker, but England lay at her feet. They sent the taxi-man down to Guildford to park himself and eat, and Karl loaded himself up with a hamper, a couple of cushions, a rug, and his mother’s mackintosh.

“I’ll take something, Karl.”

His eyes were for that gracious landscape.

“No need.—I’ve done twenty miles in full marching order.”

Her Karl was strong, not with the strength of that oaf, George, but like the eternal Prince, youth in the spring of the year, straight and clean. That great grass track—the Drove Road offered itself, and they set out along it like two little pilgrims until Karl found a kind of little glade sloping down between two old yews and some thorns. The thorns were stippled with young green, and behind them three great

beech trees stood, the sunlight shining on their grey trunks and their long, bronze leaf-buds. Karl spread his mother's mackintosh and the rugs, and stood looking out over the deep valley.

His mother sat down and unfastened the hamper. Rationing had not yet arrived, and she had prepared her feast, a white cloth, plates, glasses, a bottle of white wine bought at the grocer's. Her big hands were busy, while her beloved stood there—lost in looking.

“Hungry, Karl?”

He smiled down at her suddenly.

“Yes.—I was just thinking.—The war hasn't come over here.”

“It never will,” said she, preparing to cut into a small steak and kidney pie.

Afterwards, Karl smoked a cigarette, and then lay down with his head in his mother's lap. It was like that day in Epping over again, and he was still the child. She slipped one of the cushions under his head. He lay and looked at the sky, and she—at his face. Being gazed at by her eyes did not worry him, for his mother could sit still and refrain from asking silly questions. One of her fat hands lay close to his cheek, with the wedding ring imbedded upon a stout finger. She touched him, and her touch was delicate, like her understanding of his nature, for Karl was different from his brothers, and to him his mother was different.

He fell asleep.

Rebecca sat as though she had a baby in her lap. She could have sat there for hours, solidly still, transcending stiffness and cramp. His service cap lay on the grass. She saw the polished buttons of his tunic rising and falling so gently. His face had a young serenity. She contemplated the texture of his hair and skin, for her love-child had a fineness that was foreign to her other sons. His ears and lips were beautifully modelled, his lashes almost like a girl's.

And suddenly, Rebecca began to weep, noiselessly and secretly. Her tears ran down her cheeks, but they did not touch that sleeping face. It was the dew of her great compassion, her grieving over youth that was to suffer.

“Poor lamb,—poor darling.”

She made no sound. She could not get at her handkerchief. Her tears just dried on her face and dress, and the storm of her emotion passed. The sun shone on her face, and upon the face of the sleeping Karl.

He slept for nearly an hour, and when his eyes opened like the eyes of a child—his mother was smiling. He never suspected that she had been shedding tears.

During those last days she was conscious of hating her other sons, those careful cowards, shirking their sacrifice, and leaving it to Karl and to her.

On that last morning she kept the shop closed. They breakfasted together in silence, the silence of a mutual sympathy.

When Karl came downstairs for the last time with great-coat and pack, she met him in the passage with a face that was both ravaged and smiling.

“I’m not going to see you—again—Karl.”

He looked at her mutely for a moment, and then he understood.

“No, mother, just here.”

She held him for a few seconds against her big, warm body.

“Try and be—careful,—Karl.”

“Yes, mother.”

He kissed her with a protective tenderness.

“I’ll write—often.—Do you know, mother,—I somehow feel I’m going to be lucky.”

Then he turned quickly to the street door, opened it, gave her one look and went. She was to remember that look all her life. She leaned against the wall, her head touching it, her hands twisted in her apron, but she made no sound. A tram rumbled past. She felt that he was on that tram.

At two o’clock she opened the shop. She was her solid, pragmatical self, alert and cheerful, perhaps a little more abrupt than usual and not to be persuaded to confer upon prices. She had made her bargain with life, and she was in no mood to allow her sisters to chase bargains at her expense.

“No reductions, my dear. My coats are marked for cash.”

But every time a tram went by she was conscious of an inward tremor.

CHAPTER IX

Karl stood close in to the parapet, his head down, and the crown of his steel helmet pressing against the sandbags. There were other men in the trench, hundreds of them, and he was not feeling like showing the world his face.

Shells were rushing overhead, English shells. They were bursting on the German first-line trench. The noise was beyond being noise. Karl's right hand held his rifle; the butt rested on the earth, the bayonet touched his shoulder. He was not conscious of the grip of his thumb and fingers on the wood and metal. Something inside him seemed to be counting. Was it his heart? He felt cold. His knees.—O, damn his knees!—How much longer?—Would he get over the parapet?

A voice beside him said—"Cheerio, kid; it's not so bloody awful—when you've started."

Karl's head gave a jerk. He looked at the face of the man next him. It was the colour of clay; there was a kind of smirk on it. He saw other men, bayonets, tin hats. One fellow had the dead end of a cigarette stuck to his lower lip.

"All right, Bossy."

"Makes your guts feel all tied up, what? First time I went over I'd 'ave sworn my belly was in my boots."

Karl's head was up, his face dead white and stiff. His lips felt dry.—Was he going over?—Yes.—Over the sandbags into a machine-gun spray or a sudden burst of H.E.—Would there be machine-guns——? O,—hell!—And just about this time his mother would be——

"Get ready," said a voice as though about to start a race.

Karl felt his back and legs grow taut.

"Keep near me, kid."

"All right, Bossy."

His heart seemed to be beating out the seconds.—Five, four,—three——

A whistle blew.

He seemed to come to life like a loosened spring. Something leapt in him. He was scrambling up and over; he was one of the first over. Earth pockmarked with shell-holes, rusty wire, rubbish, strange filth. He broke into a trot. The barrage had lifted from that disorder of torn wire and soil and shredded sandbags that had been the German first line. Something touched his sleeve. A vague clatter beside him, and he saw an arm shooting out and a rifle and bayonet striking the earth.—Someone

had gone down. His chin jerked to the right; Bossy was there with a pinched grin on his clay-coloured face. A piece of wire caught at his left puttee, and he tore free. He was mounting that pile of rubbish. He was looking down into what had been a trench; much of it was full of fresh soil, bodies, blood. By a traverse a figure was kneeling with its arms over its face. Someone leapt down and past him and bayoneted that kneeling figure. The crossed arms flew up and open. Karl saw the German's face, a mere boy, mouth open, screaming. Another man bayoneted that child. The grey figure fell over on its side, its hands clasping its belly. Other men, leaping down one after the other, stabbed that grey figure. It was the one live thing to be killed.

Horror!—How long had he been standing there, staring? Three seconds, half a minute? He had counted seven bayonets jabbing that child. Blood rage.—How filthy!—He stumbled down into the German trench. A hole yawned close to him, the half blocked mouth of a dugout. A brown figure leaned over it, Mills' bomb ready.

“Anyone down there?—Come out—you bloody swine.”

Karl heard no answer. He saw the man pull the pin, and toss the bomb down into the darkness.—An explosion. For a moment that black hole fascinated him. He put his head down to listen. He fancied he heard men groaning.

2

Tours of duty in the trenches, reliefs, billets, Divisional moves, entrainings and detrainings, French villages, jaunts in buses, baths, delousings, kit-inspections, sing-songs, football matches. Men coming, men going, old faces, new faces, letters, nights in the fug of rat-infested dugouts, army blankets, sodden socks, rations, mud, stand-to, sentry-duty with your head above the sandbags and a Boche machine-gun clacking, those filthy fatigue parties at night, patrols, bloody cross-roads with the transport being shelled, sweat both stale and fresh, latrines, lice, strange laughter.

How long would it last?

Would that which cringed and shrank and dared in him endure? Would a day come when he would suddenly start screaming, yes, like that fellow Parsons who,—during a strafe—had become a wild animal trying to tear with its paws a hole in the ground. All those stiff, stern faces, the badinage, the smiles that were not quite sneers, the fortitude, the patience of plain men, the kindness. How long would he stand it? Would it grow easier? No. The strain was cumulative. And the horrible meanness of this fear, the fear of being disembowelled, torn asunder. Sometimes he felt like a brittle stick that suddenly would break in two. He wanted to hide,—skulk.

He wanted to go sick. There were moments when he did not care what happened to all those other men. Only he must escape, live.

Curious—that he should have a reputation for courage, he, the battalion's baby.
“The kid has guts.”

And his guts felt all twisted. His courage was a thing of pallor and of pale lips, a kind of ghost courage, or the courage of a corpse that moved in jerks. He was one of the lucky ones. He had not been touched. His luck was a joke in the platoon.—“My turn to stand next Charlie.” But within him was that invisible wound, growing deeper and more sensitive as the weeks went by, a red gash in the substance of his soul. It could not be spoken of. Fear had to be fought in dreadful silence.

Three months. He had been in two raids and three attacks.—“O, mother, mother!” Did someone cry “Keep smiling,” or someone sing moaningly—“I want to go home.” And how were those Germans feeling? Poor devils,—swine, men.—How good the rum was, and that stewed tea in the grey of the morning. Bacon sizzling and smelling in the company cookhouse.—His mess-tin was spotless.—They made him a lance-corporal. Bossy was dead; Alf and Jim were dead; Harry was home with a “blighty.” New faces, but hell was always the same.

He sat in an estaminet and drank cheap red wine and wished himself in bed with the French girl behind the bar. By god, how he would kiss her!—Football. He played outside right; he was fast on his feet, and clever. His mother, the shop, that little room of his. A peaceful frowst by the fire. Trams in the Essex Road. Old Smart's fruit shop.

How much longer was it going on?
Would he be killed?

There were days when he felt that he was growing like an animal. He had seen men fight over food.—Animals? No, not quite. Man was an amazing beast, somehow transcending his beastliness.

And then—that awful show in the Hulluch sector, a dugout blown in, men buried, shells coming down. He had turned to run, and then something had held him back.—He was working like a madman with a shovel. A shell-burst blew him over. He was at it again, his face all mud. There was a singing in his ears. He did not know that he was shouting—“Dig, you blighters, dig. We must get them out.”

They gave him the M.M. for that episode.
How ironical!

There was no fear in Karl's letters, or in the brevity of those field postcards.—“I am well,” yet for Rebecca this was no season of ease. People might tell you that you could get used to anything, but Rebecca could never accept the war as a normal condition of affairs, with her beloved out there in the trenches. She could not escape from suspense. She feared the postman, and yet waited for him, and would become short of temper if three days went by without a letter arriving. She, too, had both to spend herself and suppress emotion. The shop became a cage in which her almost feral maternity prowled up and down. She was fiercely restless and active; she lost more than a stone in weight that summer, but she was glad to tire herself out. That meant sleep.

In September she took a second shop in Upper Street, stocked and staffed it, and prepared for the boom in furs to repeat itself. It did. Her bank balance was piling up. Sometimes at night she would sit and ponder over her pass-book, wondering whether all this effort was to end in—nothingness. Would her house of dreams be blown to pieces? And yet she slaved and hoarded, passionately, and with a purpose.

She saw nothing of Augustus and little of Emily. Then, one October day Emily appeared, an Emily who was nibbling with rage.

“They’ve put him in prison.”

Rebecca stared at her absently.

“Who?”

“My Gus. Just because he’s got principles, and dared to stand up to them. The bloody butchers.”

Rebecca was busy, and in no mood to listen to Emily’s calico voice.

“You had better go and sit in the parlour and calm yourself.”

“Calm myself!”

“I haven’t time to be sorry for Gus. He’s safe, isn’t he? What have you to grouse about?”

“That’s all you care.—My Gus has shown more courage than young Karl. It takes some courage to be a conscientious objector.”

“Does it!” said her mother-in-law with irony.—“Well, if you ask me—Gus has never given me sleepless nights. I’d think much more of him if he had.”

Emily rushed to the door. Her rage was a complex emotion, for in her secret and envious soul she coveted so many things—money, fur coats, adventure. His mother was right; Gus was not the sort of man who gave a woman sleepless nights, and Emily was sandy and sensual. Young men would not look at her thin lips and skimpy face.

“That’s all you care.—I suppose I shall have to go out and work.”

“Well, that won’t kill you,” said Rebecca; “there’s plenty of work. Why don’t you go into a munition shop?”

“And spoil my complexion?”

“That would be a pity, wouldn’t it!”

Emily made a noise like a cat.

“I didn’t come here to be insulted,” and she went.

Rebecca had not seen or heard of George since the summer, when he had turned up with a very flashy young woman with a large mouth and golden hair.

“Meet the wife, ma.”

Mrs. George had attempted to kiss Rebecca, and not very successfully so, for her mother-in-law had put forward a large and defensive chin. She had not liked the look of George’s wife; she might be a peach, and much more luscious than Emily, but Rebecca had divined a crisis in her second son’s affairs. Such golden Ethels did not live on thistles. George had been jocund and genial.—“Say, ma,—you must be lapping it up!” His mother had not reacted, and George and his wife, after staying to supper, and finding no fatted calf, had taken a sulky leave, with Ethel’s guinea-a-time smile much diminished.

“Nothing doing there, my lass.”

“And she must be simply rolling!—Disgusting—I call it.”

There was provocation in the coincidence of George’s turning up on the very day that Rebecca received the news of Karl’s winning the M.M. George was very much in queer street. He and Ethel had been purchasing various merchandise on the instalment system, and George had been behaving tactlessly in his munition shop. He had been throwing his weight about, airing sanguinary opinions, and backing them with bluster.—“They daren’t touch me.—I’d have the whole crowd out, and they know it.” But George’s extreme views and his bluster had both been challenged by a capable and patriotic works committee. Nobody liked George, not even those who held advanced views upon the social system. He was a blatant beast. And George, still floating with a swollen head, had been discharged, and his name passed to the recruiting authorities.

George came to his mother to borrow money. He was under the illusion that he could go north and secrete himself in some other shop. He had changed his lodging because the police had been making inquiries. He owed bills; but the bills were of less importance than his safety. And Ethel’s smile was not even Cheshire.

“Let me have a fiver, ma.”

Rebecca may have felt like dispensing five-pound notes, but not to George. She

insisted on explanations. They came sulkily and mendaciously, but there was sufficient evidence in them to satisfy the mother.

“So—you want to get out of joining up. That’s it, is it?”

She flourished Karl’s M.M. in his face.

“Go and join up and you may get something.”

George was sullen. He was not going to be pressed into a bloody capitalist show. Let them try it. They would find him a tough proposition.

Rebecca let her temper flare.

“Get out, you great coward.”

And George got out. His mother could still be a rather terrifying person when her passions were roused.

4

The bells rang rather prematurely for the victory at Cambrai, but a few days later faces had recovered their patient glumness. Rebecca’s face was solemn, not because the Germans had reacted and given G.H.Q. a fright, but because a week had passed without any news of Karl. Not a letter, not even a field postcard. Rebecca had lost weight, and during that crisis in her season of suspense, her face showed it. Her cheeks sagged; there were deep creases in them; her double chin became more pronounced. Dark bags hung under her eyes. Her black hair, bundled up perfunctorily after a restless night, was lustreless and streaked with grey. Her clothes had a desultory air.

Had Karl’s Division shared in the Cambrai show? What was the use of asking oneself such questions? Rebecca put on one of her fur coats and a new hat, hired a taxi, and went forth to importune the War Office. A forlorn hope, O,—certainly! She penetrated further than was usual, only to be assured that no information could be given her. It would be transmitted to her officially should there be anything of import to announce.

Rebecca endured another letterless week before the official notice reached her. Corporal Charles Slopp was missing. That was all the official world could tell her at the moment.

Rebecca’s soul went grey. But, like the Germans at Cambrai, she reacted. She did not sit down and rend her garments, and pour ashes on her head. There was in her a kind of elemental and obstinate trust in the vitality and inevitableness of her maternal faith. She refused to acknowledge tragedy, even the shadow of tragedy. She opened her shop, and showed her broad bosom to the world. Had Death

stalked in, she would have looked him calmly in the face, told him to stop his nonsense, and offered to sell him a fur coat. She would not admit in that moment of suppressed anguish that her beloved could be mortal.

Emily had been watching the casualty lists in the daily paper. She came hurrying round from Chalfont Street on her way to work, for Emily had put class hatred in her pocket, and was helping a middle-class family to keep its house in order. She gave her employers to understand that her husband had been called up. She allowed the family to be sympathetic.—Emily caught Rebecca in the greyness of a foggy, frosty morning. The shop struck cold. Rebecca had her hands over the oil stove.

Emily nibbled at her.

“I’ve just seen the news.”

Rebecca met her with heavy, composed pallor.

“What news, Emily?”

“Do you mean to say you haven’t seen poor Karl’s name?”

Rebecca rubbed her hands together over the stove. She was intently wise as to the quality of Emily’s emotion.

“I’ve known that for days, my dear. No news is good news.—I’m not letting myself worry.”

But such assurance did not suit Emily’s temper.

“Well,—I do think you’re wonderful, ma.—Of course, everybody knows what missing means.—There’s a woman next door to me whose boy hasn’t been seen or heard of since June.—Terrible—I call it.—Just sitting at home and waiting.—Of course, it doesn’t do any good to give up hoping,—not until—one really knows.”

Rebecca rubbed her hands slowly over the stove.

“Very good of you, Emily, to come round.—Thanks—for your sympathy.—Don’t worry, my dear, on my account. I am quite sure Karl is safe.”

Emily gave a pinched stare.

“Well,—that must be a comfort to you.—Though I must say that if it was my boy _____”

Rebecca nodded at her.

“Quite so,—Emily.—You wait till you have a child of your own,—if you are ever going to have one.—Thank you, my dear.—I’ll let you know when the good news comes.”

Having warmed her hands,—ostensibly for the day’s work, Rebecca went behind the counter, and began to open and shut drawers as though to assure herself that their contents were intact. She gave Emily no more of her attention; and Emily, having flung her barb and seen it rebound from her mother-in-law’s stout bosom,

opened the door of the shop.

“I do hate these raw mornings.—They always make one feel the worst—about things.—But it’s no good being downhearted, is it? As I said to my neighbour—‘Well, if the poor boy’s dead—he can’t suffer any more.—But—really, it’s—too wicked.’”

Rebecca placed a cardboard box quietly on the counter.

“Please shut the door after you,—Emily.—It keeps the cold air out.”

5

Early in January Rebecca’s faith was justified.

She received an official notification stating that her son was a prisoner in Germany.

Two days later a letter came to her from Karl. It was scribbled in pencil on what appeared to be the torn-off margin of a newspaper, a significant fragment.

“Mother,—don’t worry. I’m a prisoner and well.—I’m in a prisoners’ camp. They are quite kind to us. I’ve managed to get this off to you.—
Love.

CHARLES.”

Rebecca had just come downstairs dressed to go out. She was paying a surprise visit to the Upper Street shop, for Rebecca had found it necessary to keep the world guessing. As she was to say to Karl in his great days—“Never let them take you for granted, my dear.” She sat down for a moment by the oil stove. Her heart seemed to be doing funny things inside her. Mrs. Mutter’s niece, Euphemia, glanced at her a little anxiously.

“You do look queer, dearie.”

Said Rebecca—“I feel it.—I feel——”

“Faint,—dearie?”

And then Rebecca laughed, and went on laughing.

“No,—just as though I had eaten too much.—You’ll find a little brandy in the parlour cupboard, Phemie.—Bring me a good tablespoonful, and have a little yourself.”

Mrs. Mutter’s niece persuaded her to go and sit by the parlour window. It was always so stuffy in the Essex Road shop.

“It’s the suddenness of things, Mrs. Slopp.—But ain’t it a mercy the boy’s safe.”

“He’s more than safe, my dear.—Bring me that letter block, will you. I’ve just

remembered—I want to write a letter.”

Using her knees and a pencil she scribbled a note to Emily.

“MY DEAR EMILY—

“I know you will be so relieved to hear that Karl is safe.”

Her eyes were mischievous as she licked the flap of the envelope and stuck it down. Yes, that would be a great relief to Emily!—Meanwhile, Rebecca’s soul seemed to be seething with ideas.

“I’m going to do something about this,—Phemie.—Look after the shop till I come back.”

Rebecca posted the letter to Emily, and on her way to Upper Street she called at a sign-writer’s. She wanted two big notices preparing, something arrestive and colourful to put in her shop window. Yes, and she wanted them done at once.

Three days later both Upper Street and the Essex Road crowded outside Rebecca’s windows. A large notice in Red, White and Blue invited the public to enter.

“Come in and Take Free Tickets for Free Fur Coats.
Three Prizes to the Lucky Numbers.”

Almost it became a case for the police, such was the congestion on the pavements. Each shop offered to the public a bag full of cardboard tickets. Rebecca had chosen her lucky numbers. They were 18, 29, 303. Eighteen was Karl’s age, twenty-nine the day of the month on which his mother had heard that he was safe, three hundred and three her number in the Essex Road. No fewer than two thousand, five hundred and seven tickets were drawn. The lucky numbers and the names of the winners were posted up in the window.

Emily had an added grievance. She had heard of the excitement, and during her mother-in-law’s absence she had pushed her way into the Upper Street shop, and put her hand into the bag.

Emily had drawn number 13.

CHAPTER X

Rebecca was to possess both the glory and the flowers.

Old Mr. Vidler passed away early in the year, leaving to an absent Karl his collection of autographed photos of celebrities, two note-books full of stage jottings, a message and a hundred pounds in cash.—“Tell him not to forget to please the Pit.” Mr. Belcher had drunk himself into Paradise early in the war, so both of Karl’s mentors were shadows. They had done their work.

From Karlsruhe—apposite name—he was transferred to a prisoners’ camp at Abenheim in Bavaria, Marlborough country, and suggesting Strauss. It was a mixed camp, but a good one, and its commandant no Prussian, yet in that crowded community Karl soon developed a hatred of collectivism. To begin with, he was perpetually hungry, and desperately bored. A diet of cabbage, potato, war bread and thin skilly did little but raise the wind. For the first three weeks Karl was without money or great coat, and too sensitive to cadge a cigarette.

His mother became a provider of parcels. Having been warned by a customer that the private parcels were less likely to reach their destination, she denied herself the delight of the individual choice, and arranged with Selfridge’s for a weekly parcel to be sent. Cigarettes she posted. She wrote three times a week.

Her early letters were questioning. With air raids and propaganda assailing her, it was very natural that Rebecca should have little faith in the humanity of the Hun. Was Karl receiving his food parcels? For a month nothing reached him, and then at Abenheim he received four parcels simultaneously, intact. From that date they reached him regularly.

There was a sentence in one of Karl’s letters that somehow had slipped past the censor.

“These people are starving, but they don’t touch our parcels.”

His mother was challenged by that sentence. It was more potent than any propaganda. She began to believe that the Germans were not bad sort of people. Their children were hungry, but they did not steal the food she sent to her son.

She passed on the information to Mr. Smart next door, but Mr. Smart was incorrigible. He had lost a son, and business was difficult, and a war diet was giving him dyspepsia. Propaganda rumbled in him like the wind.

“Starving!—I hope they are.—Serve ’em bloody well right.—I ’ope they’ve got it in the guts.”

Mr. Smart’s candour helped to stimulate a purpose that was maturing in Rebecca’s mind. She was full of plans these days. Even the March offensive could not discourage her. When other people were looking somewhat blue she began her counter-offensive against the crudities of the Essex Road. Her Karl was to transcend the Essex Road. She had opened a third shop, in the Seven Sisters Road; she was a capitalist to the tune of four thousand pounds in War Stock; her bank balance was as plump as her person.

She explored. She discovered that there was a house to let in Highbury Terrace, a quiet but imposing house. She called on a firm of estate agents, was given details and an order to view. Early in April she became the tenant of No. 73 Highbury Terrace. She transferred her furniture, bought new, and settled with Euphemia in No. 73. One of her first acts was to choose and garnish a writing-room for Karl. Its window looked over the gardens at the back of the terrace. It was a quiet room, and she placed his table and manuscripts in the window.

She kept this house a secret from Karl. Ostensibly her letters continued to reach him from the Essex Road. She was becoming more and more the directress and less the saleswoman, and her supervision was firm but kind. Her staffs, improvised from the new working world, soon learnt to respect Rebecca. She was very much a person, autocratic yet jocund, and not to be fooled. She wore black, and began to be interested in her appearance and her figure; she had her hair dressed regularly, and remembered her complexion. She would smile at herself and say—“My dear, you may be a fat old woman, but there is such a thing as style.” She was moved to cultivate style, a certain air of pleasant sumptuousness. She dreamed of herself and Karl mounting the magic stairs together.

He wrote asking for books and paper. Apparently, his appetite was for plays and poetry. He had not developed the rebel impulse, or turned sour.

Rebecca smiled to herself.

People might call her a ruddy old profiteer, which they did, and she was ready to laugh at them. The Emilies of the world might nibble and sneer, and mutter threats. The new Rebecca sailed solidly upon her course. Let the lean and unprofitable kine try bumping her. They would rebound, and her abundance would pass on its way un milked.

At Abenheim, Karl’s attitude to life was conditioned by the presence of a crowd. There was that in him which lusted to be alone, and he was never alone. Men ate, and slept, and exercised in masses. A facile, futile cheerfulness was the

mask that best concealed one's secret soul. He wanted to read, write, think, and some primitive man would jostle him.

“’allo, sulky face.”

One had to smile or fight, for there were evil beasts in the crowd. Men rubbed each other on the raw. They got on each other's nerves, and quarrelled and sulked. The inevitable bully was in evidence. There was one of these gentlemen in Karl's hut, a foul-mouthed oaf who chose Karl for his victim.

“What price—the h'amateur gent?—Scribblin' poetry, what! Or writing to muvver?”

The beast was jealous of Karl's otherness, the cur snarling at a thoroughbred. Karl was sitting on the edge of his bunk one night, writing a letter, when Cash snatched the pad from him and proceeded to read in public Karl's letter to his mother.

Karl stood up, white and dangerous.

“Hand that back, will you.”

Cash grinned at him.

“You keep your bloody mouth shut.”

They fought. Cash was the bigger man, but the substance of him was rotten. He had not Karl's swift ferocity, his cold cleverness. And Karl could box. He knocked the beast out with an upper-cut, and henceforth Cash left him alone.

But there were other disgusts, uncleanlinesses, sexual manifestations, a suppressed eroticism that grew perverse. Karl discovered the ugly streaks in a one-sexed crowd. A fellow who had posed as an actor, and had explored a cultural intimacy, actually hinted at other intimacies. Karl froze.

Meanwhile, he made three friends, men—who sought to escape as he did from the crowd consciousness. He and a little Frenchman from the Midi gave each other French and English lessons in odd corners. Karl had had a German grammar bought for him by a friendly guard, and he and this same German chatted together. Karl's third friend was a city clerk—a delicate, shy creature with a passion for music.

The camp had its bitter members. There was a group that began to talk much of Russia. It formed itself into a Prisoners' Council, and tried to proselytize.

“Wait till we get home.”

Karl remembered hearing as a child that God was a jealous God. In that German camp he altered the saying to Man is a Jealous Beast. There were men who were jealous of his parcels, though he was generous to his friends. Other men were jealous of his aloofness, of his air of purpose, of that German grammar. They were jealous of his interest in things which interested them not at all. They wanted to be

noisy and cheerful and matey, all in a bunch together, easily otiose, and Karl was different. They resented his strenuous unlikeness.

“Bloody little scab.”

They were all the more jealous because they could not take liberties with him, and had seen him counter Cash.

For Karl was not fated to fall to the socialist swindle, or to be caught by the cant of the collectivist. He was healthy and harmonious and a person. He had in him a growing sense of power. He was going to do things, not talk about them. His youth, somehow coming to its flowering in that crowded environment, was challenged, provoked, stimulated. Not that he was arrogant. Life was thrusting up in him, and he was strangely and quietly sure that he was not one of those who would stand at street corners and grouse because other men were more resolute, laborious, and creative. No man who has in him those secret sources of power is attracted by the collectivist creed. He will despise it, and especially will he despise the men who exploit it, those clever advertisers of altruism who would build a pyramid of theory and plant themselves on the apex. A bunch of yellow carrots and the poor, proletarian ass. Karl, having his own magic beanstalk and meaning to climb it, had no use for carrots.

Abenheim tantalized him. There was one window in his hut from which he could see trees, dim hills, the spire of a church like a floating grey blue bubble. Spring was in the air. Some of the men were cultivating little gardens. He wanted to escape from the crowd.

And one morning his German friend presented him with six violets, and a hint whispered through a wire fence.

“Why don’t you volunteer for farm work.—They are going to send some of you to the mines.”

Karl laughed.

“I don’t know anything about farm work, Ludwig.”

“Never mind.—Say you do.—You’d learn.”

Emily, walking alone in Highbury Fields, and looking upon her mother-in-law’s new mansion, was moved to exclaim—“Coo, doesn’t she think herself grand!” Emily had written, warning Augustus of the change in his mother’s material affairs, and Augustus, accumulating envy, hatred and bitterness in that House of Martyrs, wrote seriously to his mother.

“I think you ought to do something for my wife. It is no fault of hers that I am suffering for my principles, and that she is suffering for them with me. Had my father lived, he too would have set his face against this monstrous inhumanity.”

Almost, Augustus lectured his mother. At the end of the letter his neat and niggling signature moved her to look out of Karl’s window and smile at a black cat asleep upon a wall. Augustus Slopp! How unharmonious, and shiny seated and undistinguished. Yes, Augustus was the son of Samuel. She put a large white hand to a large white chin, and let her eyes rest upon the brown paper cover of her love-child’s manuscript.

“Charles Kesteven.”

The idea had been simmering for a long time below the surface of things. Why not shed that ungainly, shabby and shuffling surname, and become Kesteven? Was she not proposing to join with Karl in conquering a new Canaan? Karl was not Slopp. For, somehow, Rebecca was feeling her beloved’s adventure big within her. It was as though she and her Karl were to be born again into a gay, laughing, glamorous world. She was young, absurdly and splendidly young, in spite of her solid curves. Yes, by the prophets, she would do it, and confront her beloved with a new house and a new name.

“Gorgeous old snob!”

She chuckled. What—exactly—was a snob?

She went to call upon a solicitor who had done legal business for her. She announced her purpose. She desired by Deed Poll to change her name from Slopp to Kesteven. How prophetic and singular her choice was to be she did not then know. Charles Kesteven, a name to conjure with, to set the little jealous people chattering like angry apes.

When the thing was done she wrote a letter to her beloved and signed it with the new name. There was mischief and mother-wit and laughter in her letter.

Karl read it, sitting in that little attic bedroom of his, with its window opening upon the dusk and the clouding flicker of a great aspen tree.

“Kesteven!”

She had taken it from his manuscript! What a woman his mother was! She understood. But how was it she understood, and so subtly and so shrewdly, things that were delicate, jocund and debonair?

“You’ll have to play Kesteven, Karl.”

He stood up, with his head close to the sloping ceiling, his hands in his trouser

pockets, and laughed. Something had fallen from him, a name, an uncouth garment.

From below a woman's voice called to him.

"Supper's ready, Karl."

3

For Karl's lot had fallen in pleasant places. To begin with, the faces of old Fritz and old Bertha had reproached him. Had he not come to them under false pretences? In June the meadows of Mutzig asked for a man who could swing a scythe; in the Bavarian uplands men still used the scythe; and this English prisoner was a city lad. Old Fritz with his huge moustache and very blue eyes, had grumbled both at Karl and at Authority.

"Why do they send us a man without hands? It is stupid; it is a waste of good food."

Karl had felt guilty, and had told the truth.

"It is bad to be in a prison camp, Herr Müller. I wanted the country. I'll work."

Could a lad learn to scythe grass in three days? No,—it was impossible. Old Fritz would make a complaint. He wanted a country lad. And then—the two old people had looked at each other, Old Bertha had whispered something,—“The boy's name is Karl.” Moreover, this English lad could speak German, and was good to look at, and strong and clean.

"I'll try you," said old Fritz.

Karl had smiled at the German woman.

"I'll work hard, and I'll be no trouble to you, mother."

Sentiment had settled it. These old people had a son named Karl, who, as an English prisoner, was working on a Hampshire farm. The coincidence was conclusive. This English Charles had changed places with German Karl. The attic they gave him was Karl's, so was the bed, and the chest of drawers. He occupied the son's place at the table in the farmhouse kitchen. These old people were good to him; there was no bitterness in them, only a patient waiting for the war to cease.

Country, and such country, spruce woods, beech woods, secret meadows, orchards, and in the hollow of the valley that great blue lake. When old Fritz first took Karl into one of the upland meadows, Karl stood and gazed. Some things might seem too beautiful to be true, especially after that crowded camp. This grassland was a mist of colour, marvellous with flowers, blue campanula, yellow rattle, purple orchis, cornflower, rose campion, white and yellow daisies, sorrel, blue salvia, mauve thalyctrum, pink betony. Karl did not know the names of the flowers in

the hay, but did that matter? The sun was out in strength, grasshoppers shrilling. The lake was almost as blue as the sky.

“We make hay soon,” said old Fritz. “All this will fall to the scythe.”

Karl smiled.

“What a pity.”

Old Fritz looked at him whimsically.

“Yes,—like the war.—I wanted a lad who could scythe.”

“Show me, father.”

Old Fritz went into the barn and took down a scythe that hung over a beam. He ran a thumb along its edge.

“You will never learn to sharpen a scythe.”

“Show me,” said Karl.

Old Fritz humoured him. If the English lad wanted to try his luck, well there was the orchard. He could make an experiment in the orchard. Fritz demonstrated the craft of scything, and Karl stood and watched, noticing the straddled legs, and the swing of the shoulders as the old man’s body pivoted on the hips. The blade purred through the grass, rhythmically taking a swathe.

“Looks easy,” said Karl.

“Yes,” said old Fritz, “after forty years.”

Karl tried it and was humbled. He ran the point of the blade into the ground. The scythe seemed to break the grass without cutting it, or it hacked off ragged tufts. There was no smooth swing, no rhythm in the movement. Old Fritz chuckled.

“You’ll never learn to scythe—before the war is over.”

Karl willed it otherwise. Was he not something of a humbug; had he not deceived these good people? He fought all the morning with that maddening steel blade; he sweated; he blistered his soft hands; his back ached. The damned thing mocked him. It lost its edge in five minutes, and Karl had to find old Fritz and ask him to show him again how to sharpen it. He cut his wrist trying to use the stone. He had his wrist tied up by old Bertha, and went at it again.

He crawled to bed tired out,—but he was up at five. The old people heard him in the orchard.

Said old Fritz, “It’s a good lad, but——”

“Let him go on trying,” said his wife. “It makes me think of Karl being here.”

But this English Karl’s conquest of the scythe was something of a *tour de force*, for conquer it he did. As a mower he was no oiled expert; he wasted his strength, and cut less grass than old Fritz could cut in half a day, but somehow the spirit transcended and retrieved the insufficiencies of the flesh. The new farm hand

functioned. Karl was ready to spend himself, and he shared the contents of his parcels with Bertha and Fritz.

But the beauty of it, the tranquillity, the shadows of the woods, the sunlight in the grasses, flowers, the smell of the hay. Karl learnt to set up those hundreds of queer little wooden posts upon which the hay was cocked to dry. One or two village girls came up from Mutzig to help with the rakes. They flirted with Karl, and Karl was ready to make love to all the women in the world. Why not? His youth was good and strong in him. He had to learn how to handle a pitchfork as well as a scythe, but that was a much easier task. Old Fritz managed the horse and the wagon.

When the hay harvest was over—there were other things to learn, but Karl had the early morning and the evening to himself. He sat at his attic window and wrote. He was working at a play. There was a new spirit in him. He would have said that his youth had suddenly come to maturity, and that he was conscious of things as never before: colour, perfumes, the subtleties of sunlight and of shadow, and all those delicate yet brilliant happenings within himself. He had a new sense of proportion, and a feeling for form. His craft was more like a circle, less a pattern of jagged edges and obvious angles.

Sometimes he sat with the old people and watched the sun go down over the lake. Rebecca was sending him tobacco as well as cigarettes,—also chocolate. Karl passed the tobacco to old Fritz, and once more that wonderful Bavarian pipe was charged and lit. The chocolate went to Bertha, but in Mutzig there were children who had not tasted sugar, and much of Rebecca's chocolate was passed on to the children. Karl was happy with these two old people. They had a sanity and a sweetness that the war had not been able to sour. Rumour had it that the war was rumbling to its explicit. If there was discouragement in the village at the failure of the great offensive, there was the hope of peace.

Fritz and Bertha wanted peace and their son. They might be poorer in the future, but peace would be worth it, and a starved Germany had grown accustomed to suffering. They might be bitter against the French, but against the English—hardly at all. Karl was given the other Karl's letters to read. He too was happy in the humanity of his hosts.

Said old Fritz—"Yes, people are always better than their politics."

Karl wrote to his mother about Bavarian Karl. Both he and she were in debt to these country folk, and could not the kindness be echoed? He wished his mother to go down into Hampshire and see this other Karl. Rebecca went. She took with her a fat parcel. She found a quiet, fair-haired young man hoeing turnips. She played Bertha to this Bavarian Karl.

The news came to Mutzig. It lay in the sunlight on the old German woman's lap, and was passed with a smile to her prisoner.

“Read, my dear.—We women have adopted each other's children.”

Karl could confess in later years that those months on a Bavarian farm had given him something that he had lacked: an appreciation of the soil's realities, a sanity, a hatred of social humbug. It was a hard life, yes, full of struggles and contrivings, with essential problems that could not be passed to raucous idealists spouting upon platforms. Social man had become so much a creature of platforms that he was apt to forget the silent, remorseless and eternal earth. The peasant mind might tend to run in a furrow, but it spread the seed-corn of reality.

Each night before going to bed he kissed old Bertha. “Good night, mother.—That's from Karl.”

He went up to his attic under the shingles, and got into that clean bed, and outside his window the aspen tree kept up a mysterious murmuring.

CHAPTER XI

Karl came to the Essex Road.

By the statue of the gentleman on Islington Green, Karl stood for a moment by the railings and looked along that familiar highway as though to savour this adventure of home-coming. As a returned pilgrim he was something of a person to be stared at, a tall, dark, striding youth with a pack on his back, and wearing a field-grey great coat. His cap and his puttees were English, and so was the play in his pack.

He was finding the pavements good to his feet. Here were the poplar trees, and Collins' Music Hall, and the familiar outlines of the diverging streets, and houses that were like intimate faces. Why assure yourself that you were being swindled by sentiment? Human faces might be strange and he was not concerned with them. He held on till he saw his mother's shop across the road, and he stood on the kerb and stared. Things looked smaller. He saw the narrow house, its windows in pairs, the stuccoed cornice, the black chimney-stack. The same zinc chimney-pot raised a bent arm. The fascia board above the shop had changed its face. He looked for Slopp, while being prepared to discover Kesteven. He saw neither. "The London, Suburban Fur Co.," glared in letters of gold.

Karl stood on the kerb for half a minute, and absorbed impressions. There was much fresh paint, bright green doors, shop windows that were more prosperous than of old. The awning was up; had it been down he would have seen that it was a new one. Crossing the road to that familiar strip of pavement, he looked in through the glass panel of the shop door.

He saw his mother, or to be more meticulous he saw a stout person in a black sable coat and a red toque standing in the middle of the shop with her back towards the door. Both hair and skirt had been curtailed. Karl had noticed those shorter skirts, and the woman in the shop showed a pair of stout ankles and new black shoes. She was talking to a saleswoman, and for a moment Karl took her to be a customer who was being served. He opened the door, and the same old shop-bell rang.

"Excuse me, is Mrs. Kesteven here?"

The saleswoman gave him a wide stare, but the figure in the sable coat revolved on those stout ankles.

"Karl!"

He was conscious of being enveloped by this new and sumptuous mother, but if

Rebecca's outer self had altered, her emotions were the same. The saleswoman withdrew herself discreetly to the back room. Rebecca's arms were round her son's neck. He was aware of kissing a suddenly wet face, of warm fur and a pleasant perfume.

"O, my dear."

He was as much moved as she was, though he may have showed it less.

"I didn't wire. I thought I'd—just stroll in."

"Now, isn't it silly of me? God knows where my handkerchief is."

She rubbed a furred sleeve across her face rather like a large and pleasant cat,—and then she laughed. "O, my dear!" She put her hands on his shoulders and held him off, and looked at him. Her boy was man. She remembered that he was not quite twenty, but he looked eight years older. Even his eyes were different. The face of the boy had hardened into the face of the man.

"Well—well."

And suddenly she sat down on one of the shop chairs, and opened her coat as though conscious of the weight and the warmth of it. Her face wore a smile, but her eyes looked through the veil of that smile at a creature whom she had not seen for nearly two years. What manner of man was the new Karl?—She was conscious of a kind of smothering, questioning shyness. Surely he was taller? And how good looking, though his face seemed to have had its soft curves rubbed out. His eyes were so much older. But, of course, they had seen strange things.

The mother in her said, "You look as though you haven't had enough to eat, my dear."

He unslung his pack and laid it on the counter.

"O, the blockade, you know.—Besides, I have been working pretty hard."

"They really were kind to you, Karl?"

"I've promised to go back and see them some day."

She wondered for a moment. Was there a girl?

"Taking your old mother, Karl?"

"That's understood."

"They asked me, too?"

"Yes."

He strolled round the shop looking at things. Obviously, the Fur Company could afford to spend money. The old deal shelves and drawers had been replaced by mock mahogany; gas had given way to electric light. A camel-coloured carpet covered the floor.

Karl reached for his pack.

“Same old room, mother?—I’ll go up and have a wash.”

Rebecca rose to her feet.

“We don’t live here now, my dear.”

She watched his face. She had kept this surprise for him, but what surprises had he for her?

“You didn’t tell me.”

“No.”

They smiled at each other, and Karl knew by his mother’s eyes that the surprise was to be a pleasant one. She had looked at him in just the same way when she had held concealed a new box of lead soldiers.

“The war seems to have suited you, mother.”

“My dear, don’t throw that in my face. I did give something.”

The bell attached to the shop door jangled, and the saleswoman came through from the back room. Two young women with hard bright faces were asking to be shown fur coats. They looked boldly and curiously at Karl, and Rebecca, with a nod in the direction of the manageress, carried her son off. Life might well be complicated by young women with bold, bright faces. Outside, on the pavement, Rebecca slipped a hand under her son’s arm.

“Mind—walking out with an old woman, Karl?”

He gave her a downward, whimsical glance.

“You’ll never be old, mother.”

“Do you feel like that?”

“Yes.”

“Well, God forgive me, so do I.”

Mr. Smart, standing in the doorway of his fruit-shop, saw them pass, and shouted to someone within.

“Old Mother Slopp’s got her boy back.”

His wife joined him in the doorway. She was a thin and faded woman who still mourned for her son.

“She’s one of the lucky ones.”

Mr. Smart spat on the pavement.

“Yes, damn her. The Duchess of Islington, what! Ruddy old profiteer.”

“Don’t, George,” said his wife; “don’t, though I know it’s hard not to feel bitter.”

Rebecca was not feeling bitter. She walked her tall son up the Canonbury Road like a girl on the arm of her lover, and Karl, divining his mother’s secret and her delight in it, played up to this best friend in the world.

“Canonbury Square, mother?”

“No,” and her dark eyes were jocund.

“St. Mary’s Road?”

“Try again.”

“Highbury Grove?”

“No.”

“Calabria Road?”

The inclusion of Calabria Road was a piece of playfulness, and his mother caught the spirit and the promise of it. They had always been agreed that whatever the future offered them it should not be Calabria Road, all red brick and refinement. Rebecca had filled her heart with love apples for her love-child, and unlike many mothers she was to be both happy and wise, since she and her beloved were to play the game of life together.

“Calabria Road, my dear! Tinned salmon!”

Karl laughed. He was finding his mother very good company.

“Why not Buckingham Palace?”

“Such a long walk, my dear.—I have three shops to look after.”

“You’re a company now.”

“We are a company. I put you on as a director.”

She took him up Highbury Grove and across the Fields, and when the cliff of Highbury Terrace rose above the trees, she pinched Karl’s arm.

“There we are. A nice little garden at the back, and a quiet room for you to work in.”

Karl’s face was very serious. He had thought so often of this homecoming, savoured it, explored it and its possibilities, and he had supposed that he would become once more a shop-assistant until more ambitious wings could carry him. And here was this woman in a fur coat with her jocund eyes and shrewd mouth, spreading a magic carpet for him. Things should not be too easy. Possibly, that interlude on a Bavarian farm had saved him from the inflation that made so many young heroes painful problems to their parents and the community. He was ready to strip for strenuous action. He believed in himself, and in the manuscript he carried in his pack.

“Here we are.”

He was aware of his mother’s proud and upward glance as she stood outside No. 73. Had she not worked for all that this house symbolized: solidity, security, a world that was Kesteven and not Slopp. She slipped her latchkey into the big blue door.

“We’re horrid capitalists, Karl.—Rather pleasant.”

“Do we really live here?”

“We do.”

“The whole house?”

“The whole house and nothing but the house, my dear.”

She saw that he was pleased, and as she swung the door open she thought “No ghosts here. What would poor silly Samuel have said about our success? Well, I suppose the world’s failures have to try and humbug themselves and the crowd. That’s socialism. But Karl and I are going to do great things together.” She smiled at him and closed the heavy door.

“Put your pack on that chair, my dear. And this is the last time you’ll wear that German overcoat. I want to show you our house.”

Someone came hurrying up the kitchen stairs, Euphemia, with her mild face and honest eyes.

“Mr. Augustus is in the dining-room.”

Rebecca’s face seemed to go hard.

“Who?”

“Mr. Augustus, m’am.”

Rebecca stood unfastening her fur coat. She nodded at Euphemia, and Euphemia, with a sidelong look at Karl, disappeared below stairs.

“So—they have let Gus out,” said Karl’s mother. “I’ll take you upstairs, my dear, and show you your room. There are new clothes. I had your last suit copied. Do you want to see a conscientious objector?”

She looked straight into Karl’s eyes, and perhaps for the first time in his life Karl realized that his mother could challenge a ruthless candour.

“I’m not terribly keen at the moment.”

She nodded at him and made for the stairs.

2

When Rebecca opened the dining-room door and paused on the edge of the Turkey carpet she saw her “ghost” standing by the high window. Augustus might have been his father. The resemblance was extraordinary, and its effect upon her was like the recrudescence of a shabby and sinister association of ideas. Sallow, weakly bearded, black, a sort of melancholy Christus, Augustus confronted her. Even his legs were like his father’s, long black tubes. A little snicker of a sneer seemed to run down into his ragged beard.

His mother closed the door.

“So, they have let you out.”

Augustus’s lower jaw made a tremulous movement.

“Obviously. One doesn’t expect the fatted calf.”

Rebecca advanced into the room. This indeed was Samuel redivivus.

“Karl’s back.”

“Yes, I thought I heard the voice of the returned hero.”

His mother took off her red hat and planted it on the table.

“Still red, Gus, I suppose?”

He seemed to square his narrow shoulders, and to swallow emotion, just as his father had swallowed it.

“I’m on the side of the world’s martyrs. A new world’s coming in. The fools _____”

She cut him short.

“No Hyde Park stuff, Gus, thank you. Just what’s the situation?”

She sat down on the sofa by the fire, and spread herself and watched him, as a large and capable cat might watch a mouse preening its whiskers and squeaking “Death to the cat world.” This was just Sloppery. The humbug of the woe-of-the-world business filled her with scorn.

“Just what is the situation?”

Augustus was the son of his father. Confronted with a crisis, he became excited and emotional, and rushed into abuse a class, a system, or a creed. He blubbered his cheeks and swallowed. The situation? Did not his mother realize that he was a martyr, a man who had been hounded into a prison by the capitalist gang? He and his fellow-workers were out to tell the world the truth. He and his fellow-workers——And again his mother clubbed his oratory.

“No use ranting, Gus. What’s the situation?”

Did his mother wish to humiliate him? He was profoundly the man of sorrows, mocked at, misunderstood. But—the situation? Well, to be exact, Messrs. Benskin & Brown had given his job to an ex-soldier, and had refused to reinstate a man whose principles had forbidden him to shed blood for his country.

“I thought so,” said his mother, “and if you ask me I don’t blame them. You and your principles are rather on the rocks. And where is Emily?”

Augustus explained that he and Emily were in lodgings, that is to say—in a single room. Emily, it would appear, had sold off the furniture during his incarceration, and Augustus had not had the courage to ask her for a statement of accounts. Emily had been acting as cook-housekeeper to an elderly gentleman in Highbury New Park, and Emily had not been wholly pleased at the return of her martyr.

“Has Emily a job still?”

Augustus struck a high, emotional note.

“Do you expect me to live on my wife?”

Rebecca had placed her handbag on the table. This day was to be hers and Karl’s, and her first-born could rouse no compassion in her. She wanted him out of the house, and most certainly she was not going to give a home to Emily.

“Pass me that bag, Gus.”

He passed it to her, holding it pendant with a thumb and a long forefinger as though it contained something that was unclean. Augustus had not yet heard of his mother’s change of name, though Emily had warned him of her change of fortune. Rebecca opened her bag, and dipped two fat fingers into it.

“Speaking as a capitalist, Gus, I suppose I shall insult you by offering you money?”

She glanced at him dryly.

“But I suppose you can take it from your mother,” and she crackled a five-pound note at him.

“I may have no use for your principles, and I’m not going to finance them, but here’s a present. You had better tell Emily to keep her job while you are looking round.”

“I’ll take it for Emily’s sake. You don’t quite understand——”

Rebecca got on her feet.

“We won’t argue about that. But listen a moment, my lad. I’m not going to pay for your ranting. I had quite enough of that in the old days, and who was it who had to get busy and pay the butcher and the baker? I am not going to put up with any more of that stuff. You understand?”

Augustus wanted to tell his mother that commercial success was corrupting her soul, but he had that five-pound note between finger and thumb, and Emily was waiting for him on a seat in Highbury Fields.

3

Karl had discovered his new quarters. He had climbed stairs that were covered with a green pile carpet between boards that were painted white. “Second floor, my dear.” He had opened a door and seen a red carpet, and rose-coloured curtains framing a window, and in the window—his writing-table with the brown covered manuscript lying upon it.

He went and stood in the window. He saw a small walled garden, grass, an old

holly tree, a stable with a faded green door, other gardens, a winter sky faintly flushed. For London the room was strangely quiet. It seemed to offer him something that he had not known for years, tranquillity, aloofness, an essential secrecy, the tacit acceptance of what he was and might be. It contained a sofa, an easy chair, a gas stove, a case full of his books. A second white door invited him to explore. He found himself in a bedroom with two windows overlooking the Fields. There were towels ready on the towel-horse, and the bed was made and covered with a light-blue quilt. An oak wardrobe had its back to the left-hand wall. Karl opened one of the oak doors and saw a new suit hanging on a hanger hooked to a brass rail. He took it out, looked at it, smiled, and laid it on the bed.

A chest of drawers faced the wardrobe, and Karl opened the drawers in succession. Collars, ties, handkerchiefs, socks, new pyjamas, new shirts, new underclothing. By Jove, how good! To be clean, sleek, himself. His mother—— Well, she was rather an amazing person. Feathering his nest. Would she want to make things too soft? Possession? Yes, there was a wildness in him; he did not want to be anybody's pet lamb. But he did want a bath. Was there a bath? And what were his mother and Augustus saying to each other? Slimy, sententious ass, old Gus.

He went out on to the landing, and at that moment he heard the closing of the front door. There was something solid and final in the sound. He stood for a moment, listening.

"Karl."

"Hallo, mother."

"Found things?"

"I should say so. I'm *en prince*. What about Gus?"

"Gone," said his mother's voice.

Karl smiled at the landing window.

"Mother, can I have a bath?"

"Next floor, darling. Water's hot. I'll show you."

They met on the first floor landing, Rebecca slightly out of breath, for age and a bulky figure made stair climbing an effort, and in her carnival mood she had attacked those stairs at an impromptu run. Her mouth was open, her eyes alight. She laughed at herself and her pantings.

"One gets out of breath, you know. Comes of not feeling old."

And how did he like those rooms? Her eyes watched his. Karl took his mother's face in his hands, and kissed it, and Rebecca closed her eyes.

"O, my dear."

"It's simply wonderful to be back."

“It’s wonderful to have you.”

Her hands hung upon his shoulders.

“Karl,—I’m not going to be a selfish old woman.”

“Could you be?”

“Could I be? Of course. But I won’t be. That’s the way to lose things.”

She opened her eyes at him; and Karl, the returned soldier, realized that his mother had beautiful eyes.

“My dear, I only ask you one thing: Be gay, be naughty, be wild; run after life, but don’t be a ranter. I’ve had so much ranting. I’ve always thought of you as doing things, not ranting about them. People seem to rant when they are failures.”

He looked at her steadily.

“I want to do things. I’m rather fierce about doing them. I’ve a play for you to read.”

She hugged him.

“That’s splendid.”

She showed him the bathroom with its new white porcelain bath. She, too, had things to do. She bustled downstairs and resuming her hat and coat, shouted to Euphemia. “Phemie, I’m going out. We’ve got to cook a dinner. O, drat this rationing! What have you got? That bit of beef. And some tinned apricots. Damn tinned apricots. I’ll see what I can do in Upper Street.”

She hurried out, slamming the blue door triumphantly, and at the corner by the cross-roads she missed Augustus and Emily by fifty yards. They were going towards the Holloway Road, and Emily was haranguing her husband. She was telling him with candour what she thought about civilization, the social scheme, landladies, and her mother-in-law.

“Disgusting—I call it.—If I had an old Yid. No, I won’t shut up. She’s simply rolling. Living in a house like that. Showed you the door, did she? Now, just fancy that. Five quid. And young Karl on jam. I say it’s disgraceful. We’ve got empty pockets, and she’s bulging; yes, simply bulging. Yes, let’s have a bloody revolution. Grinding the faces of the poor. I’d like to see the clothes torn off their backs. What? You agree? Well, why don’t you do something, why the hell don’t you do something? I’m ranting, am I? Well, I like that. What have you ever done but rant? Jaw, jaw, jaw, and you can’t stand up to a fat old profiteer. Coo, you make me sick.”

Augustus may have taken his wife's tirade to heart, for, in later years while maintaining before the altar a high altruism, he found that in public places and in the pursuit of power an appeal to the Emily in man was good politics.

"Their pockets are bulging. Yours are empty."

For, as Karl was to say to his brother, "Some of you people dreamed a beautiful dream. I'll admit that, though I don't believe in your dream. But what disgusts me is your humbug. You assume the halo and put on a white robe, and then sneak round the corner and inflame the greedy beast in man. O—yes, you do. I've listened to you at factory gates and in back yards. Bribes to the baseness in man, envy, hatred, and malice. I should have much more respect for you if you cut the cant and went out with a butcher's knife and a basin and shouted 'Come out—you successful swine, and be bled.'"

Meanwhile, Karl was drinking champagne with his mother, and the hearts and eyes of both were merry. The dinner was an improvisation, a feast of DORA, but Euphemia was brought from below stairs and made to drink a glass of wine.

She looked at Karl in his new suit. Euphemia showed her gums when she smiled. "Happy days, Mr. Karl, and many of 'em."

The eyes of Euphemia were the eyes of woman. Surely Mr. Karl should be the child of fortune. His looks should propitiate the goddess even as they pleased the honest eyes of Euphemia. In the parlance of the streets—he was a lovely lad. And would Mr. Karl take early morning tea? Euphemia could manage it. She was ready to surrender her sugar ration.

Rebecca, refilling Karl's glass and her own, looked at her son with little sparkles of light in her eyes. All barriers were down between them. Her beloved was no stranger to be watched and wondered about, but a child who asked questions and was innocently frank in his confessions. Hence the sparkle in her eyes, eyes that would never be old, because she understood youth and loved it. Life was going to be a good business for both of them, and not merely in the quest of the Apples of Gold. And what were Karl's ideas? To paint the town blue or red? "No, not red, my dear—please—not red." His ambitions? Karl, full of good wine and the company of this best of friends, let his youth go. Yes, he wanted to live, laugh, shine, swagger a little. He wanted success, freedom, money. No, he had no urge to reform or to uplift humanity.

"I'm rather damnably ambitious. You have to be rather full of your self."

She exulted.

"That's what I want you to be, Karl. The people who set up as saints—are just that—because there is no devil in them. Don't be a saint."

He got up and stood by the fire, and leaning one shoulder against the mantelpiece, looked down at her.

“I feel I have the stuff in me. I’m not ranting. It’s rather astonishing when you first realize that there is something big and strange inside one.”

She raised her glass and her jocund eyes to the lovely audacity of youth. That was the cry she asked for, not whimpering and moaning, or the snarling of weaklings with a grievance.

“It’s in you, Karl. Brought anything back with you?”

He smiled at her, and then looked at the fire.

“O, yes, a play. I wrote it out there.” His smile became whimsical. “I think it’s rather a good play.”

“Let me read it.”

“It’s in manuscript.”

“Don’t be silly, dear. I could read you backwards. I’ll take the play to bed with me.”

She did. “Golden Rain” was contained in a cheap exercise book, and Rebecca sat up in bed and read Karl’s play from cover to cover. She was no dramatic critic, merely a shrewd and large-hearted creature with a knowledge of life that had not come to her from books. The play astonished her. It was so vigorous, colourful, mature. Whence this brilliance, this comprehension, this raw bright realism? A boy like Karl! How did he know——? But that was just it: a genius. She laid the script on the quilt and sat staring, with her lace cap over one eye. But this was tremendous! She knew a thing or two about life! Couldn’t she spot the value of a fur coat? And her beloved had written this!

She bundled out of bed, and upstairs on her bare feet, to knock at her son’s door.

“Asleep?”

“No. Anything wrong?”

“My dear, it’s tremendous. Sir Oscar Bloom has got to read it.”

Karl sat up in bed.

“Oscar Bloom? You don’t mean to say you know him?”

“O, don’t I!” said his mother, “he’s a friend of old Max Isenstein’s.—Karl, I’m coming in.”

And she went, voluminous in white, turbulent, triumphant. Karl was sitting up in bed in pale blue pyjamas. He saw his mother’s excited face.

“You’re a bit prejudiced, mother, aren’t you?”

She fell upon him and kissed him.

“I should say so, and with reason. My dear, I always had a feeling that you could do it, but not like this!”

CHAPTER XII

Had Rebecca's love been less full of understanding, there might have been an early clash between them, but she was wise in her knowledge that Karl was very much man.

"I want to find some things out for myself."

She gave him a hundred pounds, and his "head." Infinitely shrewd was she in using no bridle, even though Karl's acceptance of a banking account was provisional and the result of mutual concessions.

"I'm not going to sponge."

He assured her that the hundred pounds was a loan, and she could retort that life would not convict her of being an obviously selfish old woman. He was no small boy in a sailor suit to have his hat adjusted and his socks pulled up, and sailor suits were going out of fashion. Nor was crude interference to her liking. She, too, had a robust self-confidence and a sense of adventure, and in Karl she was renewing her youth. The war might have passed, but the elemental qualities of man's striving remained. Karl wanted to conquer things for himself; and his mother, smiling deeply, knew that she wished him as he was. If he came back bloody and bruised, she would be there. If he returned with trophies, she would acclaim them. She was the woman behind the scenes; the kind of woman to whom men tell things.

She had occupations of her own, the affairs of the fur business, and the inquisitiveness of the taxmongers. It had not even been suggested that Karl should revert to the rôle of salesman. He and his mother breakfasted together, and then went their ways. She never asked him what he was doing, and, consequently, usually he told her. It seemed to become a habit with him, this telling her things.

"What do you think I've been hunting for, mother?"

"And you haven't found it?"

"A typewriter. There doesn't seem to be a machine—new or old—for sale in London. I suppose the various Ministries, and Army orderly rooms swallowed the lot."

She laughed.

"I have one in the Upper Street shop. One of my girls can work it. I'll have it sent over."

"But, mother."

"Better still, let the Garner girl type for you. She's quite good at it, and she has

plenty of time.”

“I’ll pay her.”

“No need, my dear. I don’t pay her extra when she sits and powders her nose.”

So “Golden Rain” was put in Miss Molly Garner’s hands, though Karl interviewed her in person and explained how a play should be set out. And could she do a carbon copy? Of course she could. Rebecca watched her son demonstrating to Miss Garner the intricacies of headlines, margins, spacings, stage directions. He was absorbed in the business, and not at all conscious of Miss Garner as woman, whereas Molly was obviously conscious of him as man. Rebecca, observing them felt the flutter of the feminine soul. Miss Garner was being very refined. “Yes, Mr. Kesteven.—Quite so, Mr. Kesteven. Really—I shall love doing it for you.” She made oblique and upward eyes at the playwright, and Karl was the blind young god.

“I’d like the manuscript locked up each night in the shop safe. Is there one?”

“Yes, my dear,” said his mother.

It occurred to her that many women would run breathlessly to do things for him, perhaps because of his air of being intensely interested in—something else. That might be his problem—and hers. What was her beloved going to make of sex, and at a time when sex had escaped in its pyjamas from the Victorian bedroom? Sex was inevitable and she did not shirk its inevitableness. She was honest with herself. She admitted that she would prefer a series of episodes, but was Karl constituted for episodes? She was beginning to appreciate his intensity, the white urge of his passion to accomplish and express. Were he to spill that intensity into some particular woman’s lap? Yes, it might be pretty serious, and all the more likely to occur if success played the jade with him. Give him success, and sex might be mere drapery.

One night he asked her a question.

“I wonder if you will understand what I am going to say?”

“Try,” said she.

“It’s about Sir Oscar Bloom.”

His mother gave him a quick, deep glance.

“You want to try him—yourself.”

His smile was instant. “How did you know that?”

“Perhaps—because I’m your mother. But that might be quite the wrong reason. And I’m old.”

He remarked somewhat irrelevantly to the world at large. “Some of these young women are such fools.”

She laid that remark in her lap and considered it at her leisure. Young women!

Had he been exploring the new freedom? And just how and where? So far as she knew his opportunities had not been extensive, or was Miss Molly Garner supplying him with a universal symbol? Miss Garner was telling herself and some of her intimates that she was mad about the boy. She was trying in fragmentary asides to tell Karl that she thought his play marvellous.

“Go ahead, dear,” said his mother. “I understand. But you may find Sir Oscar rather—difficult.”

“Elusive? Well—naturally. But—after all—the play is the thing.”

“Yes, dear; and you don’t want to be foisted.”

He looked at her quickly.

“That’s not the word. Didn’t you watch me learn to walk? Probably.”

His mother drew a deep breath.

“Did I not! Go ahead, my dear. I hope I shall never fuss or crab you.”

But she did not tell him how she had hung behind him when he was a tentative toddler, her hands ready lest this adventure of walking should take him too near the fire, or lest he should pitch forward and bring his small head in contact with the fender or a table leg.

“That’s the spirit,—Karl.”

He got up and kissed her.

“Somehow—I feel that I shall always be able to tell you things.”

“That’s better than a kiss, my dear. Most children don’t feel like that.”

2

Miss Buck was a woman of much capacity, with a high colour, and a bobbed head of barley-sugar coloured hair. She sat in the outer room of Sir Oscar Bloom’s office at the “Parthenon” and clattered away on her typewriter with thick and emphatic fingers. The Parthenon’s stage door was also the entry for those who sought by devious ways and dim staircases to penetrate to the “Presence.” Sir Oscar was as mysterious as any Cretan minotaur. Did the intruder manage to get by Mr. Tombs in the “hall,” he had to carry the defences of Miss Buck, and Miss Buck—as a secretary—was inviolable. She looked at people with those prominent and bold blue eyes of hers and demanded information.

“Got an appointment?”

“Yes.”

“What name?”

Miss Buck would look up the applicant’s name on her list, and as often as not

the visitor was bluffing.

“Wasting my time. Don’t be silly.”

As Sir Oscar’s strong woman she was inexorable. He had the reputation of being as elusive as a toy balloon in a ballroom, bounding from all contacts, floating heavenwards, not to be captured. Sir Oscar had found Bertha Buck managing a Kensington hotel, and falling for her florid capacity and candour, had offered to double her salary if she would become his secretary. “I want somebody to sit between me and all the world’s damned fools.” Miss Buck had said “Right-o. On a five years’ contract, and with a twenty-per-cent. rise each year.” Hot stuff, Miss Buck. Sir Oscar had not regretted his selection.

She went with him everywhere, usually with a fat notebook and pencil in her strong hands. Sir Oscar controlled three theatres and a music-hall, and was interested in a night-club and two hotels. Also, he had just opened his Repertory Theatre at Coventry. Miss Buck guarded him everywhere like a stout and spirited hen. She would be on the stage with him during rehearsals. She interposed herself between him and any assailants, and flapped them off. She shouted at underlings. She slapped them if they did not pay instant attention. She even slapped Sir Oscar’s stage-managers. She knew everything that was going on. Her notebook was Domesday. She had a passion for bright greens and ambers, and rather penetrating perfumes. Sir Oscar’s world had a saying—“When in doubt—go Buck.”

Bertha was typing a letter when the door of the outer room opened. A young man stood there in a blue lounge suit. He had one of those very new and hairy milk-coloured soft hats in his right hand; also a pair of gloves and a cane. Miss Buck looked at him obliquely and with severity.

“How did you get in here again?”

He had entered without knocking, and a notice on the door said “Knock.”

The young man smiled at her.

“Are you—always—here, Miss Buck?”

“Pretty much—always.”

“Well, that’s splendid, isn’t it?”

She resumed her typing.

“I gave the doorkeeper orders.”

“It wasn’t his fault.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“He happened to be round the corner.—I just walked up.”

She looked at him solidly.

“You’ve got a damned stiff neck.—Wasting my time.”

“Nothing doing?”

“Not a bean.”

Karl sat down on a chair by the door, and looked at his wrist-watch.

“Why don’t you come and have lunch with me.”

“Go to hell,” said the lady.

Karl laughed. Miss Buck admitted that he was a lad with exceptionally white teeth. And he did not make eyes, or play at being young Paris. She continued her typing, and appeared to become absorbed in it. Again, Karl looked at his watch.

“Yes, time you were going, Mr.—”

“Kesteven. Karl Kesteven.”

“Better not let him catch you here.”

“So—he—is in there?”

“I didn’t say so.”

“Well, that’s just what I want him to do.”

She withdrew her hands from the keys, and gave him her attention.

“Look here, my lad, if you take my tip that is the one thing you won’t do. He can’t stand being submarined. There are some doors you can’t rush. Take my advice and don’t try it.”

“But it’s a very good play, Miss Buck.”

“They—all—are.”

“But—mine—really is.”

He rose and stood smiling at her.

“You do—do your job. I’ll take your advice. But why won’t—you—read my play?”

“Me?”

“You do, don’t you?”

“Dozens of ’em. I’m the trier on.”

“Sir Oscar tries them on you?”

She nodded, and her blue eyes were less uncompromising.

“I know in two ticks whether I like the stuff or not, and most of it is utter tripe. I’m pretty quick at plays—and at people.”

Karl stood holding the door handle.

“I bet you are. Same here. Now, why not come out to lunch with me. It’s twenty to one.”

Her eyes had begun to like him.

“Some lad, aren’t you. Think you can get me——”

Said Karl “It might be mutual.”

She glanced at the inner door, grimaced, and then gave him an oblique look.

“Damned cheek,” and she resumed her typing as though waiting for him to open that door and go. He didn’t. He withstood the pressure of her silence.

Without looking at him she spoke above the dancing keys.

“Think you have clicked, my dear?”

“I’m not quite that sort of ass.”

She finished the page, and proceeded to extract it.

“Corner of Swallow Street at five-past one.”

Karl gave her a little bow.

“That’s rather great of you. And I shan’t talk about my play.”

Karl’s self-education in the matter of the metropolis was almost that of a gentleman of the Regency. He was taking dancing lessons and fencing lessons at Angelo’s, and boxing with a well-known professional. At Angelo’s a fellow pupil had told him that “The Little Trianon” in Soho was the smart feeding-place of the moment. Karl was not yet a member of a club, but he had changed his name, and had had cards printed: “Mr. Charles Kesteven, 73 Highbury Terrace.” He had lunched twice at The Little Trianon, and when he gathered up his blue-eyed goddess, he was not without experience.

“I say, I’m awfully proud of taking out Sir Oscar’s secretary.”

“Is that all—I am?”

“Hardly. Do you mind the Trianon in Soho?”

“Hardly.”

They laughed, and Karl began to like Miss Buck. She was jocund and vital, and in some of her qualities not unlike his mother. She could be rattling good company in all sorts of situations, as Karl was to discover.

Karl was bowed to at the Little Trianon, and his hat, cane and gloves taken, for he was becoming a person there. Nor was he fobbed off with a poor table. He asked for a table in an alcove, and he had it. But the ritual of smart feeding still perplexed him, and he had not yet educated himself to lunching *à la carte*.

“We’ll take the lunch, waiter.”

He looked at Miss Buck.

“Will that please you? Such a bore—choosing.”

“All right for me.”

“What about a little red wine?”

“Just a little.”

And then, seeing that she was becoming interested in him as man, she began by asking him about his play. He smiled at her. His dark eyes held her blue ones.

"I haven't come out to lunch with my play."

Miss Buck began to like him better and better. This was a very bright lad. And what a skin, and what teeth!

"That's rather gallant of you."

"Quite spontaneous. Natural reaction."

She laughed.

"You ought to be in the diplomatic service."

He said, "Thanks. I'm quite happy here."

Miss Buck was not able to allow herself more than an hour for lunch, but in that hour she had found out a good deal about Karl. He more than interested her. The lad had a dignity of his own, a quick wit, and temperament. She let him walk back with her to the "Parthenon" and at the stage door she gave him her blessing.

"Send me your play to read."

"Might I bring it?"

"That's an idea. But I don't read plays here. I have a little flat in Bloomsbury. No. 7 Burton Street. I shall be in to-morrow evening."

They smiled at each other, and at the play within the play.

"I'm in luck. It's really awfully good of you."

She went through the doorway with a backward glance at him.

"Wait and see."

That evening at supper Karl had the air of a young man feeding upon secret preoccupations. His mother could observe such matters and refrain from remarking upon them. She was wise as to certain of her son's activities. He was at work on a new play; he was boxing and dancing; she could detect signs of a new world-confidence. He could tie his own dress tie. He put in two hours, reading a day. He looked very fit and happy.

At the end of the meal he said to her, "I had some luck to-day."

"Sir Oscar?"

"No almost better than that. Sir Oscar's secretary."

"Miss Buck?"

Karl concealed his surprise.

"You know her?"

"I met her at lunch. And when, my dear?"

"Oh, I've been making a nuisance of myself at the Parthenon.—I haven't been able to penetrate to the presence, but——"

"She told you to send in the play?"

"I took her out to lunch, mother."

“Miss Buck went out to lunch with you?”

“Yes; I think I have got her interested in the play.”

His mother looked at him shrewdly, but she did not tell him that a woman might be interested in something else. Now, what sort of creature was Miss Buck? Was she Catherine of Russia or Romance? Rebecca had seen Sir Oscar’s secretary as a hard-bitten, colourful lady of three-and-thirty. Well, well, these hazards had to be met in the course of adventure, and Karl’s mother attempted no interference.

“She may be very useful, Karl.”

“She may be.”

Next morning Rebecca took a taxi to Max Isenstein’s. She and Max understood not only business, but each other.

“Max, I want to ask you a question.”

“Ask it, my dear.”

“You know Oscar’s secretary?”

“I should say I do.”

“Has she any—influence?”

“With Oscar?”

“Yes.”

Mr. Isenstein looked sly.

“She’s one of the toughest propositions in London. What she says to Oscar, goes.”

Rebecca jiggled a foot and looked dark.

“What sort of woman is she?”

“Emancipated, my dear.”

“Damn it, Max,” said Karl’s mother; “that rather leaves me in the cupboard. Is she the sentimental sort?”

Mr. Isenstein chuckled inwardly.

“Shouldn’t say so, Becky. Likes life *à la carte*.”

Rebecca smiled at him shrewdly.

“Well, that’s a relief.—But one can never be sure.”

3

Karl arrived at Burton Street with a neat brown parcel and an incipient black eye. The bruise could not be helped. He had received it in a two minutes’ scrap with Mr. Jack Jones, his professor.

“You go for me, sir. No feather dusters.”

Karl had gone for him whole-heartedly, and Mr. Jones had fought back. "Sorry sir, I didn't mean to jab quite so hard, but you asked for it." Karl had laughed.

"And got it. How did I shape?" Mr. Jones had grinned at him. "You've got the guts."

Miss Buck herself opened the door to him. She had no resident maid. She was in an evening gown of apple green, and she had had her hair waved.

"Well,—here you are."

She glanced at his brown paper parcel.

"I have taken you at your word."

"I don't say things I don't mean."

She led the way into her sitting-room, and Karl saw a sofa covered with yellow brocade, an occasional table with a whisky decanter, a syphon and glasses, and a silver cigarette-box. The room was lighted by a shaded lamp on a second table. A gas stove was burning.

"The sofa's the most comfy place."

Karl sat down and laid his hat, gloves and parcel beside him on the sofa. She stood by the table.

"Have a little drink?"

"Thanks. May I?"

And then she saw that half-closed, swollen eye.

"My dear, what—have—you been doing?"

"You mean—my eye?"

"I do."

"Jack Jones, my boxing pro. gave it me."

"Hard luck."

"Oh,—I asked for it.—All in the day's—play."

She took the stopper from the decanter, and began to pour whisky into a glass. She was generous with the whisky.

"Half and half?"

"No, right up, please, with soda."

Their fingers touched as she handed him the glass.

"Help yourself to a fag."

She sat down on the sofa and poured herself out a whisky.

"Well, here's luck—to the play."

They drank, and then she appeared to notice his hat and gloves and the parcel lying between them. She gathered them up, and placed them on the table under the lamp.

“Now tell me things.”

She found him a little shy, and she liked him all the better for it, though he had shown no shyness when he had been delivering a frontal attack upon the defences of Sir Oscar Bloom. But this was a different affair, more oblique, an incident in billets, two people sitting on a sofa and appraising each other. She was so much older than he was, so much more mature and experienced, and able to introduce into the interplay a discrimination that was catholic. He might be able to use his fists, but his eyes, mouth, ears and hands were sensitive.

“Tell me things.”

“What things?”

“About yourself.”

“Don’t you get the precedence?”

She looked at him whimsically through her cigarette smoke.

“Wouldn’t interest you, would it?”

“Why not? You’re rather unusual.”

“Think so? I’ve been a chorus girl, and I’ve run an hotel.”

“Well, that’s real.”

“So the war blew up your illusions?”

“Not quite. It blew up a lot of humbug. It made some of us more real.”

He observed her. Her lids were half-closed. She had a handsome head, a fine throat, strong shoulders. Yes, she was very real. There was nothing flimsy or finicky about her, a strong, attractive creature in her pagan health.

He said, “My mother used to keep a shop. Yes, I served in the shop till the war came.”

“That wasn’t—the whole story.”

“No; I began with a toy theatre when I was a kid. It’s always been in my mind. I have more than a feeling——”

She nodded her head at him.

“Can you take knocks? Well, like that eye? I should say you can. Because you may get them.”

He gave her a curious smile.

“Nothing could be quite so bad—as the war. I may have to be punched into learning all the tricks of the game.”

She said, “I may be able to save you some of those knocks.”

CHAPTER XIII

There was not much that Miss Buck did not know about the dramatic world, and not very much that she did not know about men, but even the great ones of the earth were guessing. What did the public want after four years of war? *Chu Chin Chow* and *Romance* were breaking records, but it was unwise to assume that the public would continue to crowd to such products. And what a public and what a period to cater for! Surely, one might assume that the whole world would ask for farces, succulent musical comedy, good rich food after all this confounded rationing. It might even crave for romance. Would it tolerate Shaw? Would it storm the stage and kick to pieces anything that was pretty-pretty? There seemed to be only one certain assumption: khaki was taboo.

Sir Oscar Bloom had put on fragrant and flashing musical comedy at The Parthenon, and after a month's run the piece was failing to fill the house. At the Coventry Repertory Theatre he was trying out two plays by John Carless and Michael Dawn, and neither play appeared to promise much popularity. Agents were pestering him, offering him daily masterpieces, things he described as rubbish raked together in a hurry. He turned his eyes to France and to America. Did the public want to laugh or cry? Did it crave to forget, to be fooled, to be drugged? Sir Oscar could claim immense experience, and the quality that is described as flair. When he saw the particular play he would know that both he and the public wanted that particular play, but as yet he had not seen it. Something that had an element of wildness but was not too wild; something supremely human yet mordant in its humanity; something new with the newness of a strange new world. Sir Oscar believed that the play that he was seeking would be by a young man, youth naked, swift and audacious. The pre-war people were just potterers, with the exception of Bernard Shaw. Sir Oscar was not a Shavian.

Like Rebecca, Miss Buck read "Golden Rain" in bed while smoking a sequence of cigarettes. She had never known herself to get excited about a play. Possibly she had been promising herself more excitement from the playwright than from his work, but she read "Golden Rain" at one sitting—or rather—at one lying. It astonished her. It was not only devilish clever, but devilish real. It moved her, and she could say to herself, "I'm pretty tough, but this makes me feel queer in my throat and tummy." It was not a literary play. The construction and the stagecraft of it struck her as admirable. Had she not watched some twenty plays in production, and she knew

when a thing worked and when it would get across the footlights. Terse vital dialogue, movement, one big situation, and an unexpected curtain. But not too unexpected. The public must be allowed to feel that it has been wise all the time.

She sat up in bed and lit a last cigarette.

“By God, but the boy’s got it. He wasn’t bluffing.”

Nevertheless, she knew how to approach Sir Oscar. She sent the play back to Highbury Terrace by a special messenger with a note enclosed.

“MY DEAR,—

“I think this is—it. But let us be quite official. Post your play to us as though nothing had happened behind the scenes. Let it drop from the ‘flies,’ so to speak. Even great men like to make discoveries.”

For Bertha Buck this was a very generous gesture, and though in later years she did boast that she had been the first person to read a Kesteven play, she allowed Sir Oscar Bloom his panache.

She admitted herself casually into the presence, with “Golden Rain” in her hand.

“We have had twenty-one submitted this week. But there is something here you might like to read.”

“Who sent it? Green? I told Green that if he pushed any more pups on me——”

“No; it came by post. Quite an unknown name, a man named Kesteven.”

Sir Oscar looked at her sharply.

“Kesteven?”

“Yes.”

“Any letter with it?”

“Of course.”

“What sort of letter?”

Miss Buck went for the letter. It was formal and brief, and it attempted no introduction, nor did it claim favour or privilege. Sir Oscar puffed out his cheeks, a trick of his.

“I think I know this fellow’s mother. She——But never mind. I’ll read the thing. You’ve read it?”

“Yes, just in the way of business.”

“Any good?”

“I think it shows very distinct promise.”

She was clever in her casualness. Sir Oscar became sulky and truculent when he had cause to suspect that someone was using secret diplomacy. He could swear that

he was one of the most pestered men in London. Asked out to dinner by some fashionable person, he went, expecting to find some fellow who was wangling an introduction, or to have a play pushed up his sleeve. He was suborned, flattered, ambuscaded. Even in the sanctuary of his club, members would come and sit by him. "I say, Oscar, I've got a nephew who." People tried to foist upon him young women who were convinced they could act. And Miss Buck was employed to stand behind him or in front of him with a swatter and keep off this swarm of insects. He relied upon her ruthlessness and her integrity, or rather—he paid her generously to be ruthless and unbribable. So she trod lightly, and he did not suspect her of smuggling young Kesteven in at the sacred door.

Sir Oscar was the third person to read Karl's play in bed.

"Golden Rain"

A Play

by

CHARLES KESTEVEN

Golden Rain! A good title that, somehow suggesting a shower of precious metal. Sir Oscar was always having to remind the superior people that the drama was not a pale and earnest lady proposing to parade Piccadilly in her night-dress and preach a revival. The front of the house was of more importance than the part behind the proscenium. The box-office was a mouth, and if the public did not fill the mouth, dramatist, actors, stage hands, and share-holders were in Queer Street. And the critics?—O, well never mind the critics. There were only two or three dramatic critics in London who mattered. The rest were young jackals. Get the public, and the critics could go to blazes. Who ever sat down to write a play or a novel for the critics? Shakespeare was not exactly a moron. He wrote for his public, all his public, great gentlemen and shopkeepers.

Sir Oscar read the first act. It pleased him so well that he got out of bed, lit the stove, put on a dressing-gown and slippers, and sat down in front of the stove. He liked to smoke when he read a new play, but on this occasion he did not smoke. It began to dawn upon him as he read, that this was the very play his feeling for things had been groping for.

He slept on it. Next day he passed on "Golden Rain" to his stage-manager at the Parthenon.

"Read that, Jack. See what you think of it."

Two days later Jack Hammond came into the "Presence" with Karl's play in his

hand.

“I don’t know what you think, sir, but my feeling is that we’ve got a winner.”

“That’s my feeling, too, my lad. It’s a perfect play from the public’s point of view. Gives ’em just what they want, and something more. The something more is for the few. It gets the belly and the head. Damned few plays do that.”

“Who is—Kesteven?”

“Quite a youngster, I believe. I’ve been looking for the one new man. He may be it.”

Miss Buck had been listening at the door. When Mr. Hammond passed out, and Sir Oscar rang his bell for her, she carried to him a ten in the morning, secretarial face, her notebook and her pencil.

“O, Miss Buck, about that play?”

“What play, sir?”

“That thing you passed to me, ‘Golden Rain.’”

“O, yes, I remember, sir.”

“I rather like it. It is a little young, of course, but it has points. Drop a line to the author, and tell him to come and see me.”

“At once, sir?”

“Well—say to-morrow, about twelve.”

2

Karl did what very few young men would have done: he reminded himself that Miss Buck was before all things Sir Oscar Bloom’s confidential secretary, and that there might be two women in Miss Buck, each capable of certain loyalties. He put the case before his mother. Sir Oscar Bloom wished to see him officially; Miss Buck, unofficially. It was a distracting moment for his mother. She wanted to ask him whether he would have been interested in a particular woman had there been no play to be placed.

“Don’t sign anything, my dear, until we have had advice.”

She was wise in not attempting to explore the Buck affair. Was she jealous?—Oh, a little. This other woman was trespassing upon her territory, or attempting to share in a young man’s adventure. Yes, but wasn’t that sort of thing inevitable, and had she not prepared herself to accept episodes? There had been no suggestion of a young man’s boasting, no sly, self-congratulatory smile. He was excited.—Well, and so was she.

“Don’t give yourself away, Karl. Miss Buck may be a good friend—and remain

Oscar's confidential secretary."

He understood her.

"I'm not going to be rushed, mother."

"Keep your head, my dear," and wasn't she there to help him keep it?

But Miss Buck was not Delilah. She was quite capable of combining an affair with business, and of acting for both parties, with just a little prejudice in favour of youth. She sat with Karl on her sofa and gave him a humorous description of her diplomatic activities.

"Mark you, my dear, Sir Oscar can't stand being managed. Every man likes to think that it was he—and he alone who was wise before the event."

"What did he say about my play?"

"That it is quite promising, but rather young."

Karl was a little piqued by the patronage of faint praise.

"I think it is better than that."

"So does he."

She gave his ear a tweak.

"How do I know?—Well, never mind.—But I am holding the scales."

He looked at her with little burrs of light in his eyes.

"Thanks for the warning. I wonder why——"

"Do you?"

Her arm lay along the back of the sofa, a bare arm, softly hollowed at the elbow.

"Well, let's change the subject."

"What—is—the subject?"

He smiled at her. His head was very near the hollowed arm.

"One shouldn't be too lucky, you know. You seem to be bringing me a great deal of luck."

"Like it?"

"Who wouldn't? I'm human."

"Same here."

Karl's first impression of Sir Oscar Bloom was that of a fat man seated at a desk as though he and the desk were attached to each other. Karl saw a large, wax-white face, coffee-coloured eyes, a cap of oiled black hair. Sir Oscar's torso was short and thick, the legs under the desk of the same quality. His hands were engaged in filling a gold cigarette-case with Egyptian cigarettes, and the movements of his fingers

were deliberate and neat.

“Good morning, Mr. Kesteven.”

“Good morning, sir.”

“Sit down.—I think I know your mother.”

Caricaturists gave Sir Oscar a top hat, fur coat and cigar, and the face of the creature might be white wool, vellum or marble. The coffee-coloured eyes were smudged in large and black. A very spiteful fellow had drawn a picture of him as “Joshua before the Walls of Jericho.” Sir Oscar’s enemies were many, and yet like Disraeli he had a happy way of confounding them by being what many of them were not—a gentleman, and something of a genius. They had to allow him a sense of colour and a feeling for the drama’s atmosphere, though they spoke of these qualities as the attributes of a flashy Oriental. Sir Oscar’s intimates were equally sure that he was Aryan, and not yellow lard. His smile was rare, and his sense of humour precious, and as though to fool his enemies he would sometimes cultivate an air of spacious coarseness. He liked or he did not like. He did not trouble to express dislike, but ignored the people and things that were displeasing to him. That saved time and tissue. It was not truculence, but efficiency.

Karl and Sir Oscar looked at each other, the young man and the autocrat of five and fifty.

“This play of yours, Mr. Kesteven.”

Karl waited, faintly smiling.

“I like it. Why didn’t you get an introduction to me through your mother?”

Karl’s smile became more pronounced.

“I think because I wanted to try it on my own. And you must be so bored, sir, with people cadging introductions.”

Sir Oscar pushed his cigarette-case across the desk.

“Yes, that’s so. Smoke? How long have you been writing plays?”

“Since I was about twelve.”

“Had any stage experience?”

“Only as a looker on, sir.”

Sir Oscar lit a cigarette, and sitting well back in his chair, considered this youthful dramatist. Youth can behave like dynamite, provide one explosion and end—in nothingness. Sir Oscar might be soapy skinned and outwardly stolid, but he was as quick as some women in getting an impression. He liked this lad. He liked the quiet way he sat there, his white teeth, his full-faced candour, his lack of obliquity. He did not fidget or exhibit temperament. Young Kesteven had manners, a dignity, and Sir Oscar had found most clever young men uncomfortable creatures. They seemed to

sit on their cleverness as on a cushion full of pins. They were apt to be facetiously impertinent or aggressively servile. They either talked too much or were insolently dumb. He would have said that ability and good manners do not go to the same tailor. The nice lads were—as a rule—unmarketable, and perhaps that was the reason why they were nice.

“Have you anything else you can show me?”

“Another play, sir? Yes, I have written two acts of another play.”

“I should like to see it.”

“Very good of you, sir, but it may take me a month to finish and correct. To be frank, I don’t want to be hurried. One shouldn’t be caught with one play.”

“Quite right. Don’t hurry. Youth’s in such a devil of a hurry, wants success as it wants a woman. I think there may be a future for ‘Golden Rain.’ You may agree to let me try it out at my Repertory Theatre. But I should like to read that second play.”

Karl was about to thank him, but Sir Oscar had not finished.

“You’re rather young, you know. That’s a very insulting thing to say, isn’t it? If I like the second play—we can begin to think of an agreement. Got an agent?”

“No, sir.”

“You will have to employ an agent. Talk it over with your mother. She is a good business woman, I believe. Later, you may be able to manage your own affairs.”

“Couldn’t I leave it to you, sir?”

Sir Oscar’s brown eyes twinkled.

“I might do you, you know!”

He looked at his watch.

“Well, what about some lunch? Come out and lunch with me at my club.”

Karl was a little flushed.

“I’d love to, sir.”

He helped Sir Oscar on with his overcoat, and passed out with him into the anteroom. Miss Buck was busy with her typewriter, her face decorous and impersonal.

“Going to lunch, Miss Buck. I shall be back at two-thirty.”

“Very good, sir.”

Karl happened to meet Miss Buck’s blue eyes. She closed one of them behind Sir Oscar Bloom’s back.

Lunch at the Garrick Club was to Karl more significant than a smile from a handsome wench in the dress of Fortune. Let it be remembered that he was a child of the Essex Road, and that beyond lunching at a Soho restaurant his knowledge of napkins and table silver and the world and its ways was limited. He was to learn and

to learn very quickly, like the young man in “Golden Rain.” He glanced with interest, but with not too obvious an interest, at the portraits on the walls, and at the live club men who upheld an eminent tradition. He had a glimpse of Gerald du Maurier. Sir Oscar and Seymour Hicks met in a passage, and Karl was introduced to that most witty and vital gentleman.

Karl’s shyness was not too evident. It was even possible to enjoy the mild anguish of feeling shy in such surroundings, and to be inwardly proud of the provocation. He was lunching with Sir Oscar Bloom at the Garrick Club! What would old Tom Vidler have had to say about it? Karl kept both his smile and his poise. He was finding Sir Oscar unexpectedly easy to lunch with.

And why? Because this sallow, swarthy person chose all the dishes and talked in a way that dispersed the fog of self-consciousness? Had he—Karl—expected pomposity, a presence like a towering and solemn Parthenon? Sir Oscar played with a toothpick. He enjoyed his food and his own voice. He might be old in the cunning of his craft, but in his essential love of that craft he was ageless.

“Ever heard of Max Reinhardt, Kesteven?”

That set Karl off, but not bumptiously so, and in a little while he and Sir Oscar were like two boys out to rob an orchard. The stage-play was a great game. The older man found that this youngster had ideas upon matters that he—Sir Oscar—had lived with for thirty years. The drama was a mistress, not a wife. Lighting, subtleties of setting, the intimacies of suggestion, the scrapping of the multiple and the trivial in favour of the simple and the single. The Victorian bric-a-brac drawing-room idea was dead. A photographic realism would soon be as dead. Karl talked colour, those vibrant clashes of blues and greens and purples. The stage should cease to be a mere peep-show, a box of marionettes. And then, suddenly, he blushed and became self-conscious.

“Rather cheek of me, sir. You know all this.”

Sir Oscar’s brown eyes had lost their flatness.

“Not cheek, my lad.”

“Thank you, sir. What one thinks one knows.”

“Is it—knowing or—feeling, Kesteven? An audience is emotion—of sorts. No use giving them mere fireworks, unless you are a genius like Shaw. Shaw has been spending his life smashing middle-class mirrors. Get it out of your head that you have a mission. Educating the public! Priggery. Never touch uplift. Life isn’t uplift.”

When Karl walked out of the Garrick Club he was—in the old figurative language—walking on air. He was a little exultant, a little excited, but not too inflated. Your new chariot might be rubber-tyred, but the mysterious pneuma of the

ancients was not a mere question of physics. Karl's impulse was to rush home and tell his mother, a most unusual impulse in a man who had ceased to be a child, but both Rebecca and her beloved were unusual. They were to play the great game rather like mother and child, though Karl did keep some toys shut up in a secret cupboard. He forgot all about Miss Buck and her Ariadne thread. He went Highburywards, feeling rather sure that Sir Oscar would stage his play.

4

Karl had his own latchkey and as he opened the door of No. 73 he heard a voice, a familiar and unpleasant voice, loud, declamatory and alcoholic, the voice of Brother George. Karl stood still. The voice of this silly brute who was his brother brought back memories of red knuckles and squelches of bullying laughter. Brother George, back from the war after six months in an M.T. section of the A.S.C. at a base-port, and very much in liquor, had turned up to see what he could get out of the old woman.

Karl listened for half a minute before opening the dining-room door. He saw his mother sitting white and solid in a chair by the window, her hands crossed on a bag that lay in her lap. George was in khaki, and on the hearth-rug. His service-cap lay on the table. He had brought into this quiet room a smell of dirty clothes and sweat.

His blue eyes bulged at Karl out of an evil and inflamed face.

"Hallo,—so here's Mr. Change Me Name. The bloody little hero, what!"

Rebecca sat very still with her eyes on her youngest son.

"You had better leave George to me, Karl."

Karl closed the door. He knew, as well as his mother did, that George became actively dangerous when in liquor. So, George had been trying to bully his mother, and Rebecca was afraid for his—Karl's sake.

Karl was brittle ice. He had heard some of the nice things that Brother George had been saying.

"Back from your war, George."

His brother's lower lip stuck out. The large red face was thrust forward on the thick stalk of its neck.

"Feeling funny, are you?"

"Just a little."

"See here, my kid, I'm not taking any lip from you."

Karl's eyes fixed themselves on that red and brutal mouth. He wanted to hit that mouth.

“Too much rum ration, I think.”

He heard a faint crackling sound, and turning his head saw something crisp and white in his mother’s hands.

“I won’t have any rowing here, George. Here’s something.”

But Karl put himself quickly between mother and son. He kept his eyes on his brother.

“Put the money away, mother.”

George lurched forward, and so brought his large red face nearer to Karl’s.

“You keep out of this business, see. You go outside, girlie, and leave me and the old woman alone.”

Karl smiled at him.

“Think so? Well, think again.”

He turned to his mother. He slipped a hand under her arm.

“Go upstairs, mother. I’ll talk to George.”

Rebecca surprised herself and her sons by allowing herself to be put gently out into the hall by Karl. “Go upstairs, mother. I can manage.” She went up the stairs. She heard the voice of George say “You ’ave got the old woman in your pocket, haven’t you!” Rebecca sat down on the stairs just above the first landing with her bag still in her hands. Perhaps Karl had been right not to let her buy off that blackguard George. But would Karl?

Something was knocked over in the dining-room. It was followed by a second crash, a spurt of foul language, and a jingling of glass on the sideboard. Rebecca got to her feet and looked over the banisters. Was Karl being knocked about by that drunken brute? She would go down—— And then she saw a brown figure with its arms covering its head come backing out into the passage.

“Blast you.”

A white object shot out and up and caught George on the jaw. George’s legs seemed to give way; he crumpled, and his mother sat down again on the stairs. Karl had knocked the blackguard out. Well, wasn’t that splendid! She saw Karl opening the front door. She watched a flaccid, fuddled and inco-ordinate figure being bundled down the passage and pushed out into the street.

But that was not quite the end of the incident. A greasy service-cap had been left on the dining-room table. Karl went for it and tossed it out into the roadway. He shut the front door and came to the foot of the stairs.

“He won’t try it on again, mother.”

“O, my dear!”

“By the way, I think Sir Oscar is going to stage ‘Golden Rain.’”

CHAPTER XIV

Emily read the papers. Also, she had at her service all those illustrated journals which advertise the doings of a rich, fashionable and successful world, and they emphasized the fact that Emily was outside the world's shop window. Moreover, a three minutes' walk took Emily into Oxford Street, where she could discover other provocations.

Emily and her man had slipped into the most unexpected of billets. Since necessity willed it, they had become servants, or in Emily's language—domestic slaves. They had been engaged as a married couple by Dr. Massingbird of Wimpole Street. Dr. Massingbird was a bachelor and a fashionable physician, hence the *Morning Post*, and the *Daily Mail*, and the *Bystander*, *Sphere* and *Sketch*. Emily cooked and cleaned and made beds, assisted by Augustus, who, in black, opened the door to Dr. Massingbird's patients. Augustus might regard this situation as an interlude, a temporary refuge until the great day dawned. He employed his leisure, such as it was, in other activities. He was a member of the "Lenin League," an obscure society with its headquarters somewhere in Soho.

When Dr. Massingbird was out in the evening, which—being a gay bachelor—he was on some five evenings a week, Emily would ascend from the depths and occupy the dining-room. If Life was listing Emily as a basement bargain, she was determined somehow to rise to upper floors. She would sit and poke her sharp nose into those picture papers.

"Disgusting, I call it. Look at 'em swilling fizz. Suckers, that's what they are."

It was Emily who discovered that particular paragraph in the *Daily Mail's* dramatic news.

"Sir Oscar Bloom is to produce at The Parthenon this autumn a play by a new dramatist, Mr. Charles Kesteven. Mr. Kesteven's play—a first play, 'Golden Rain'—has been running successfully at Sir Oscar Bloom's Repertory Theatre at Coventry."

Emily thrust the paper at her husband.

"Just you read that!—Some people have all the luck. Disgusting, I call it."

Augustus had to be shown the paragraph. He was rather slow at picking things up.

“Young Karl!”

“Yes, dear little Karl. I haven’t forgotten what he did to poor George. Him writing a play! Coo, I bet the old woman’s buying the show.”

Augustus had no little black beard to pick at. Wimpole Street did not encourage black beards. So he caressed his Adam’s apple.

“The Parthenon? She couldn’t buy The Parthenon.”

“Well, anyway,” said his wife, “I hope the play will be a ruddy frost.”

2

First Night.

Karl’s mother was dressing. She had had her hair waved—it had to be tinted once a month, but unfortunately you could not have your face dealt with like your hair. Rebecca contemplated the reflection of her large countenance with its creases and its pads of fat. How strange that you should look a hag when you felt seventeen!

She got up from her dressing-table stool and rang the bell. This was an unusual gesture, and Euphemia, fearing that something might be wrong, came hurrying upstairs.

“Oh, Phemie, be an angel and put on my stockings.”

“Yes, dearie.”

“Mr. Charles in yet?”

Of course Mr. Charles was not in yet, and she knew it. Rumour had it that her Karl had fallen into a pit of mutual passion with Miss Dawn Haycroft who played “Gilda” in “Golden Rain.”

“O, my dear, I’m so strung up.”

“There, there, dearie. Your hair looks lovely.”

“O, damn my hair, Phemie. It’s my wretched old face. It’s like a chalk-pit. Talk about whited sepulchres! Mind they don’t split.”

Euphemia, on her knees, unrolled silk stockings.

“I always do like you in black.”

“Yes, one doesn’t look quite so foully fat in black. I have hardly slept for two nights, Phemie. Talk about having a baby!”

“I’m sure it’s going to be a success, dearie.”

“Phemie, ever had a still-born child? No, of course you haven’t. Nine months’ waste. Well, if his play falls flat—I shall feel like that. And he—poor lamb? Isn’t that the front door?”

“So it is.”

“Quick, slip me into that frock.”

There was a sound of youth running up the stairs while Euphemia was dropping the circle of black silk over Rebecca’s head. Karl knocked at his mother’s door.

“Hallo, mother. Can I come in?”

Rebecca gave herself a shake as the silk frock fell into place.

“Yes, dear.”

Karl came in with a large bunch of white roses.

“Thought you’d like these.”

Rebecca’s eyes were beautiful.

“O, my dear, how lovely! If there’s one thing I do fancy. I may have a shape like a cabbage, but white roses.”

Karl smiled at his mother.

“I like you in that frock. Don’t you, Phemie?”

“It’s a dream, Mr. Charles.”

“I should say so.”

Karl kissed his mother.

“Tails up. Everybody’s got the jumps, but old Oscar is as bold as brass. Must go and change. I ordered the taxi for 6.30.”

They were to dine at Amando’s quietly and *à deux*. No magnificent cornstalk blonde was to share in that Passover meal. For had not Karl said—“I shall feel just like I felt before zero hour. One’s so shy of shouting before the event. If the thing fizzles, one might look like a cocky kid with a damp squib. We’ll just have a little dinner together.”

The Parthenon was crowded. Karl and his mother had a box, and Karl did not go behind the scenes. He was in a coldly detached mood, and looking white and fierce—his war face, as his intimates came to call it. He wanted to detach himself from all the machinery of the show, to forget all the faking, the plywood and paint, the boredom of interminable rehearsals. “Golden Rain” had happened in his consciousness before other humans had mouthed and mawled it, and he was in a state of doubt and wonder. Almost, “Golden Rain” had ceased to be his. He had lost his sense of ownership, his craftsman’s confidence. Was the thing bad or good? On that First Night he felt like a boy sitting on a wall, watching some passing show.

He was much less nervous than his mother.

Rebecca, her bosom full of white roses, leaned forward to look at everything, Paper, Press, Public. A post-war public was somewhat perfunctory in its dress. But the thrill of it? Rebecca could have said “I’ve eaten too much. My heart’s pushed up into my mouth.” She looked at Karl. Almost he had the face of a young man who

was bored.

Voices, movement, chatter.

The orchestra.

Up went the curtain.

The First Act: Dawn Haycroft, brilliant and blonde, with strange black eyes. A dangerous combination, that. Darkness over the stalls and pit—that brilliant stage, a sense of something hanging in the air.

Curtain down, lights up.

Rebecca heard a voice say—“Sounded awful tosh, some of it, mother.”

Rebecca put her roses to her face.

“I don’t think so.”

Someone came into the box, Sir Oscar. He was smiling.

“Not so bad, young man. Rather better if your prigs start as cold fish. We’ll warm them up—later.”

He looked hard at Karl.

“We shall want you on the stage at the end, you know.”

“Think so, sir?”

“I do.”

The Second Act: The dim house was very still, and yet Karl had a feeling that the audience—like dark water—was troubled by emotion. Some of his detachment fell away. He, too, was moved by that second act, both as a craftsman and a man. Had—he—written that? Dawn was playing a great part. And Ernest Wildman was superb. He became aware of a little sound beside him, heavy breathing; his mother was in tears. She had her handkerchief out and was dabbing a large face.

Lights up. Applause, more and more applause. The house was a-flutter with white and clapping hands. Rebecca, with the white roses to her face, leaned over and touched her son on the shoulder.

“It’s—wonderful, Karl.”

He was beginning to feel persuaded that it was. The mechanism had ceased to creak. He had forgotten the “wings,” and that gaunt space behind the back-drop, the draughty passages, the gossip, the scene-shifters, the almost cynical phlegm of Gerald Smith, the stage-manager. “Golden Rain” was alive, pouring down in a splendid shower. His face felt hot, his throat turgid.

Someone popped a head into the box. It belonged to Sir Oscar’s publicity man.

“Great guns, Mr. Kesteven. Sir Oscar’s compliments, and he wants you in the wings before the last drop.”

Karl nodded at the head.

“All right, Mr. Gains. Many thanks.”

He heard his mother emit a profound, rapturous sigh. She held his hand during most of the last act.

She whispered to him, “Better go, now, dear.”

He kissed her and went. He found himself in the wings with Sir Oscar, Gerald Smith, George Gains, and Mr. Veitch the stage-carpenter. Faces were sleek and satisfied. Mr. Veitch winked dryly at Karl. There was a profound stillness save for the voices on the stage. Karl was struck by the strangeness of the silence. There were hundreds of dim faces hidden from him beyond that thin partition. Not a sound from the audience. The vast auditorium might have been empty.

Gerald Smith was pressing a button.

Pandemonium!

Karl stood with his hands in his pockets. That cataract of noise seemed to submerge him.

He was aware of Dawn flashing through into the wings.

She kissed him.

Someone was thumping his back.

Wildman rushed in and dragged Miss Haycroft off to take a call. There were three calls. The handclapping and applause seemed to increase.

“Author—author.”

Someone gave Karl a push. He heard a voice say—it was Sir Oscar’s,—“Take your hands out of your pockets, my lad. You’ve got ’em.”

He was standing alone in a kind of glare before a multitude of faces. The members of the orchestra were looking up at him. Hot, pleased faces. “Golden Rain” was going to pour for six months. Steady money. Karl felt like a man caught in public in his pyjamas. He stood and stared. Not a word would he utter. Dreadful fool!

And then—something flopped at his feet, a bunch of white roses. He looked up, saw his mother, and smiled.

He smiled at all those faces.

He heard his own voice speaking.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,—thank you—very much.—I’m afraid—I feel—rather voiceless.—Thank you—very much.”

And for his muteness and his smiling shyness and his young if inarticulate dignity, the whole house liked him.

“What a nice lad,” said the women, “and so very good-looking.”

They gave him quite an ovation, and he just stood there and smiled.

Karl did not remember walking off. He was in the wings. His mother had appeared. She was kissing people, Sir Oscar, Dawn, Wildman. She even kissed old Veitch.

Karl had her roses in his hand. They were just there. He could not remember picking them up.

His mother rushed at him.

“O, my dear!”

Over her shoulder he saw Miss Buck standing alone by the door of the passage leading to the dressing-rooms. She was not smiling. Her blue eyes stared.

Karl was conscious of a sudden spasm.

How quickly one ceased to desire the embraces of a woman!

3

What of the Press?

The critics were very kind to Karl, for they could allow themselves to feel fine fellows in patting this young man on the back while experiencing a pleasant superior warmth. They began by praising and patronizing Karl. He was the new man to be discovered and written up. Only two papers attacked him, though these attacks were not aimed at the dramatist, but at his sponsor, Sir Oscar Bloom. Never again was Karl to receive such patting in the press. He was to write plays that would make “Golden Rain” appear crude metal, but, when the deluge developed, the song of praise became a little trickle of detraction and abuse.

Rebecca’s dining-room was like a press-cutting office. She had ordered every daily, and most of the weeklies. She was far more joyous than Karl.

“It’s a wonderful press, my dear.”

Karl was a little sobered by this pæan of praise. He was terribly afraid of being soused in self-consciousness. And what of that next play?

To Sir Oscar he said—“The critics have been too kind to me.”

Sir Oscar gave him a queer, dry little smile.

“Put wool in your ears, my lad. You may need it, if you make a big success.”

“You mean—too much praise, sir?”

Sir Oscar patted his shoulder.

“No, no, not quite that. You’re new, you’re a discovery, you can be patronized. Wait till you become offensively successful.”

Karl gave him a sharp and half-incredulous look, and Sir Oscar nodded.

“Yes—catawauls.”

There was one person who read what the dramatic critics of the *Morning Post* and the *Daily Mail* had to say about Karl's play. They said very nice things about it, and Emily's nose looked pinched and thin. She was furious over Karl's success. She read out extracts to her husband.

“For so young a man Mr. Kesteven has an extraordinary sense of the theatre. We consider ‘Golden Rain’ to be full of future significance. It is the best post-war play that has been produced in England.”

Emily's face was the face of an exasperated shrew.

“Well, that's not much to say, is it? There've only been about three plays.”

She tossed the *Morning Post* at her husband.

“Coo, won't he be strutting! Cocky? There won't be a word for it.”

Augustus looked glum.

“That's a capitalist game, Emily.”

“What?”

“You can buy the press. I expect my mother——”

There was a rending sound as Emily tore the *Daily Mail* in half.

“Disgusting, I call it. It's only fit to light the fire with. And why should I be lighting old Massingbird's fires? I ask you, why? If you had the stuff in you——”

A little smeary smile trickled down Augustus's chin.

“You wait a bit, Emily. There won't be any *Morning Post* or *Daily Mail* in five years' time. Our turn's coming.”

“It's a ruddy long time coming,” said his wife. “I want my cut at the cake—now.”

CHAPTER XV

During the next three months Mrs. Kesteven had several matters to distract her.

Firstly, the trading of the fur business was beginning to show signs of the post-war reaction. Also, the revenue authorities were harrying Rebecca upon excess profits and super-tax. The bubble of the post-war boom was still tumescent, and there were many people who were deceived by its glistening, iridescent skin.

Mr. Isenstein was not one of the optimists. The little man had a wonderful nose, not only in the flesh but in the spirit. He happened to know that the pawnbrokers were being flooded with superfluous fur coats.

“Get out of fur, Becky. Get into rubber.”

Rebecca was worried.

“What, wind up the company and sell out?”

“Yes,—buy rubber shares.”

“But I’ve got to live, Max.”

“You’ll live, my dear. And how’s the box office?”

“A little quiet, just at the moment.”

So the Company ceased to exist, though Rebecca retained the Upper Street shop and converted it into a costumiers. Having realized a part of her capital she bought rubber shares, but Mrs. Kesteven was not the woman to sit at home and bury herself in the pages of the *Financial Times*. Moreover, she was worried about Karl and about Karl’s play.

“Golden Rain” had filled The Parthenon for a month, and the management had every cause to expect a steady run for the play. “House Full.” Karl saw that mystic sign nightly, and the electric lights painting upon the immense façade the splendour of success.

“GOLDEN RAIN”

by

CHARLES KESTEVEN

Those lights still thrilled him. Had this amazing thing happened? Had he captured London with a first play? His second play, “Captain Carter Comes Back,” was being put into rehearsal at Sir Oscar’s Coventry Repertory Theatre, but Karl, like his mother, was suffering from other distractions. He was in love with Dawn Haycroft.

Everybody knew. Old Tombs, cynical and bland in his glass box at the stage door, smiled almost nightly at Karl.

“Evening, Mr. Kesteven.”

Presumably, this young dramatist in evening dress came to see how the front of the house was showing. Royalties, royalties! Karl was like a child playing with a wonderful new moon, the money moon. Mr. Tombs would wink at his intimates. “Got it bad, he has. Both of ’em in off the deep end. Yes, if you want to find Mr. Kesteven you’ll find him in her dressing-room. I should say so.”

It was a desperate affair, so far as Karl was concerned. Everybody knew about it: Sir Oscar, Rebecca, the dressers, stage-hands, programme sellers, orchestra, everybody but Captain Hugh Marsden—Dawn’s husband—who was with the Army of Occupation on the Rhine. Miss Haycroft’s marriage had been one of those war adventures. She had married a man who wore wonderful white riding-breeches, a monocle, and silk underclothing. Some men envied Marsden, others laughed at him, but not in his presence. In spite of a flat blue eye he was a damned fine figure of a man, male to the fifth toe, and so deucedly sure of it. His vanity was like his face, Phœbus at full noon, polished and shining, a vanity that was all the more offensive by reason of its staring serenity. Marsden had been A.D.C. to a very distinguished soldier, and the war had not soiled him.

But a married woman! When Rebecca was honest with herself she could confess that she was not concerned with the ethics of the affair, but only as it might affect Karl and his career, and Karl’s friendship with his mother. Karl might have affairs with a dozen married women provided that the relations were impermanent. The fact that Dawn had a husband might be an insurance against possible conflagration; also, it might not.

She spoke in confidence to Sir Oscar.

“I’m worried about—this—romance.”

“No use saying anything, my dear.”

So, it was as serious as that!

Rebecca confessed that she did not contemplate interference. Interference was the one foolish and fatal sin.

“Just what sort of woman is she?”

“Well, you’ve seen her. There’s a tinge of red in her hair. Temperamental. The kind that flares up.”

Said Rebecca, “Damn it, Oscar, men shouldn’t leave their wives lying about loose. Any chance of Captain Marsden coming home?”

“I haven’t a ghost of a notion, Becky. There is something else I want to talk to

you about.”

“The play?”

“Exactly. It’s ceasing to fill the house.”

“You mean?”

“A little falling away—each night. No, I have no explanations to give. Two weeks ago I would have sworn that we were safe for six months, perhaps for twelve. Public psychology is a puzzling product.”

Rebecca’s face looked haggard.

“Is it—the play?”

“Well, it is, and it isn’t. Whether it’s the newness of Charles, his novelty? What I mean is—the public gets used to going to a play say by a man like Dorset Fagan, just as it goes on buying Empire butter. It may try a new brand for a month, just out of curiosity. Besides, one’s public is not all of a piece. I should say that Charles hasn’t yet caught suburbia.”

“Just how does one do that, Oscar?”

Sir Oscar laughed.

“Oh, in dozens of ways. A scandal,—for argument’s sake. But I know of no sure way of hooking the public. I have tried every sort of bait in my time. Mass psychology is a mystery.”

Rebecca returned to Highbury. It happened to be November 5th, and in back gardens children of all ages were letting off fireworks. Euphemia had laid the table for two, and had drawn the curtains. Mr. Karl was out.

Rebecca spoke sharply to Euphemia, which was unusual. She wanted to know why Euphemia had drawn the curtains, and piled the fire half-way up the chimney? Wasn’t the night sufficiently muggy? Euphemia was a literal soul.

“Well,—I draw them every night, dearie.”

Rebecca got up with a flounce of her fat shoulders.

“Don’t call me dearie. I’m not feeling like dearie.”

Euphemia looked at her round eyed.

“No, dearie. And will Mr. Karl?”

Rebecca was at the window dragging back the curtains.

“The room’s like a hay-box. No, I’m not waiting for Mr. Karl.”

She was struggling with the large sash window. The frame had a fondness for sticking.

“Give me a hand, silly?”

“Do you want it open, dearie?”

“Do—I—want—it open!”

The lower sash flew up, letting in a rush of cool night air.

“That’s better,” said Rebecca.

She turned and patted Euphemia’s shoulder.

“All right, Phemie. No bones broken. I’m a little upset to-night.”

2

Miss Haycroft flew up the stairs. They were rather dark stairs, but Karl followed tempestuous lingerie and a febrile pair of legs. In the vestibule she had challenged him, “Race you,” and she did.

Her fairness was of the slim and vibrant type, and tinged with red; she was no fat blonde. She could laugh at herself and say, “Yes, I’m supposed to be wonderful, but my nose sticks out like a clothes-peg, and look at my mouth!” but the world found these features provocative. She had one of those glowing skins, a large and poignant mouth—a mouth that filled men with anguish.

Karl followed those slim, swift legs. If she was a little mad, so was he, though his madness was more virginal than hers. Those who knew her would come to declare that in her relations with men Dawn was incorrigible. Her flat was on the second floor. Actually, she led him to the second-floor landing, and there panting and laughing, she was caught.

“O, my dear, I’m going to faint. Hold me.”

She was in his arms, head retracted, eyes half-closed, her face all shimmery.

“What a night!”

He kissed her. He kissed her with the whole of his youth, and the fierceness of a passionate sincerity. She made her body strain against his. She exulted.

“Dawn,—I’m——”

“Darling.”

She put her head back and looked at him.

“O, bad boy.”

“Dawn—it’s dreadfully serious. O, my dear. I know. I ought to be going now.”

She slipped from him with an air of sleek, wise confusion. She was one of those women who, in the most tumultuous crisis, always kept her fingers on some secret thread. So, Karl was serious, devastatingly serious. Well, of course, she had known that. The ardour of a young lover? Rather charming, and so very satisfying as an incident. She dipped into a small silk bag for her key.

He stood there, watching her, hands tightly closed, his youth bleak and controlled.

“I’m not—a cad—Dawn.”

She knew that he was trembling. Doucely, she slipped the key into the door. She pushed it open with the toe of a green satin shoe.

And suddenly she put out a hand to him.

“Just—one—little drink.”

He looked at her hair, her eyes, her mouth, and followed her into her flat.

3

Karl’s mother could not sleep. She had said to herself “Go to bed, Rebecca. No use your sitting up like an outraged wife.”

A few silly fireworks were still popping off in back gardens, and the people next door had a party. Rebecca took a book to bed with her and turned on the lamp by the bed, but her eyes and her ears were at cross purposes, and in the end her ears held the house. She put the book away, turned out the light, and lay listening. She heard eleven o’clock strike, twelve, one.

The party next door had broken up about midnight. Somewhere in the garden two tom-cats were making the night hideous in a love challenge, a melancholy howling that ended explosively in clawings and spittings. Apparently, a window was opened, and an object hurled. Silence remained.

Shortly after one o’clock Rebecca raised herself in bed and turned on the light. She had heard the front door open and close. Footsteps came up the stairs with careful, and considerate stealth. He would see the light under her door. And then, she realized that the footsteps were going on and up. He had not stopped at her door and knocked.

Rebecca lay back and stared at the ceiling. She could hear her beloved moving to and fro in the room above. Presently, all sound ceased. Karl—her little Karl had not come in to tell her things.

But why should he tell her things? His secret life might go past her just as he had slipped past her door. Could she complain? Yet, had not mothers grieved since motherhood began over the young animal that went hunting, to return in the darkness, silently?

Rebecca’s hand went out and switched off the light.

4

At that grim meal—breakfast—when illusions may become queezy over too much sugar in the coffee, Rebecca showed to her son a wisely everyday face. But,

as Rebecca of the Essex Road and of the Fur Co.—now defunct—she did believe that a young man with ambitions should attend to business. He was too much abroad these days, and too little in his workshop, and his mother knew that he was making no progress with a new play.

Distractions! Pretty women, little drinks, flattery, supper dances at the “Majestic,” night-club adventures, press photographers, interviewers. Karl was very young. His mother might be willing to allow him a slight swelling of the head, but her fear was that a sensation-loving world might leave him no head to work with.

“Did you have a good evening, dear?”

As she passed him his coffee she saw that his face was shut against her.

“O, not bad. Out to supper.”

She waited, and then she said, “I want to talk to you about something, Karl.”

His face opened momentarily like a window, and out of it his secret self looked at her sharply.

“Oh?”

“About ‘Golden Rain.’ ”

He looked relieved. So, he had expected her to probe his midnight passion, and he wanted to hide that affair from her. Well, wasn’t that natural?

“I had a talk with Sir Oscar. Box-office depressed.”

“Just a temporary fade-out, I expect. Sir Oscar got the wind up?”

His casual air troubled her. She felt inspired to slap him, even as God is supposed to chasten his pets.

“Well,—I don’t want the play taken off after two months.”

That moved him, though he answered her with some assurance, “Not very likely, is it?”

She repeated the slap.

“More than likely. Sir Oscar’s a business man.”

She saw him looking darkly at his bacon and eggs as though some one had peppered them with poison. Poor lad, these romantic storms were very devastating!

“Business. Yes, I suppose that’s all that matters to a man like Bloom.”

She slapped him again, and more severely.

“Don’t be silly, my dear. And don’t rant. I have had to attend to business for a good many years. And you are making me talk like a father!”

He looked at her sharply, gave her a sudden smile, and then came round the table and kissed her.

“I needed that. Sorry, but I was reverting to Slopp. Quite right. I haven’t been attending to business. Fact is, mother, I’m being educated in the fundamentals of

living. Creative work and too much cock-crowing don't seem to mix. And I'm talking like a good son!"

She pulled his head down.

"No use humbugging each other, my dear. Get back to bacon and eggs."

He sat down with a new fresh face.

"Sex makes one so damned stupid. Well, if 'Golden Rain' dries up, I'm not going to chuck."

Inwardly she blessed him. She said, "I'm not a sweet and nasty good woman to hang round your neck, my dear. I'd rather slap you sometimes."

He smiled at her.

"Slap hard."

And there Rebecca left her crisis. She was able to hold her tongue.

CHAPTER XVI

Both Karl and his mother discussed the crisis with Sir Oscar Bloom, but separately so, and from different viewpoints. Karl had been elected a member of the Garrick Club, and after lunch he asked Sir Oscar to give him five minutes. Sir Oscar and Rebecca had had a previous consultation. As a matter of fact Karl had become somewhat shy of that anteroom at the Parthenon, with Bertha Buck sitting there blue-eyed and casual, and once more attending strictly to business. The lad of one-and-twenty and the woman of thirty-three! Karl had floated up and out of the secretarial world into the splendour of the stars, but the refrigerating process had lacked simultaneity. Miss Buck might be no fool, but she was a good hater. She happened to hate Miss Haycroft pretty considerably, and not merely because of Karl. Miss Haycroft was too sidereal. She treated the secretary as though she thought of her as "The Buck woman," a mere blousy satellite.

Mrs. Kesteven was not disturbed by Sir Oscar's secretary. She was nice to Miss Buck, for, as far as Rebecca was concerned, Miss Buck had justified her existence and her sex. The future might parade before Karl a series of wise and unwise virgins, and it was conceivable that the unwise wenches were to be preferred. Karl's mother might not be wholly ashamed of her son's success with women. Could it be prevented? All that she asked of life was that his career should not have its locks shorn by some Emily or Delilah.

Miss Buck was really a very sensible creature. So far as Rebecca could judge Miss Buck had torn up a temporary agreement and deposited it in the wastepaper basket. But this other woman with her thin, glowing, greedy loveliness was far more dangerous. Just what sort of man was Marsden? A scandal, divorce proceedings, youth leaping into the sea with the lady, only to discover after the first sensuous sousing that she was mostly lips and legs. Rebecca's opinions upon matrimony were those of an experienced realist. Karl was years too young for marriage. Did not all men contrive to be too young for monogamy? Karl would go on falling in and out of love, but such experiences would not matter provided he did not drop into the sacrosanct honeypot. She would like him to be so keen on his job that no particular woman could matter too much. But was that possible?

If a man must marry, let him choose the "mother-wife." Also, in Karl's case the unique creature would need to know when not to mother him too much.

Rebecca sailed past Miss Buck with a cheerful good morning.

“O, yes, my dear,—I rang up. You remember. My ten minutes due.”

Miss Buck nodded stubbornly at her, and Rebecca passed on into the presence.

Men of affairs could say that Mrs. Kesteven was easy to deal with. She knew what she wanted, told you what she wanted, and wasted neither words nor time. She did not approach Sir Oscar as the sweet woman, or the persuasive mother, and for that he was grateful. He lived so much with people who were always acting. Rebecca just asked him a question.

“When are you going to take the play off?”

He sat there, sallow and solid, and looked at her with his flat brown eyes.

“Next month.”

“Is it a question of cash, Oscar?”

“No, not wholly so. It would be an error in strategy, wouldn’t it, to let a young man’s first play—fizzle? ‘Golden Rain’ has scored a moral success.”

“You did not put it on to be a moral success.”

“Hardly.”

“You expected——?”

“I agree. I thought it was going to be a runner. I still don’t understand why the public is falling away.”

Rebecca appeared to reflect.

“I should like it to be given—another chance. Supposing I put in a thousand?”

“You?”

“Well, I’m the most interested person—after Karl. I could make it two thousand.”

“I don’t quite like the idea, Becky.”

She smiled at him.

“I have a feeling about this play. I’d like to back my fancy. Give it another month, Oscar.”

“Serious?”

“My dear, what do you think?”

She patted his desk emphatically.

“Karl’s not to know,—at least—not yet. God forgive me, but I feel he needs a slap.”

“Stimulus?”

“Yes, something to wake him up, Oscar. Too much woman. You can tell him, like a father, that the play will have to be taken off.”

“I see. A flick with a wet towel.”

“Yes, just that. My boy’s a fighter, Oscar. I want-somehow—to keep him

fighting.—You know, after all, we mothers ought to be a little wise about our sons. No. Of course, mostly, we're not. If you will do this——”

Sir Oscar's eyes had lost their flatness.

“You are a wise woman, Becky, and a generous one—Just a little more brimstone in the treacle! I'll give it a trial.”

When, after lunch on that same day, Karl approached Sir Oscar at the club, Sir Oscar was ready for him. He was kind, his voice was bland and hushed. “Let's find a quiet corner, Charles. I want to talk this over with you.” Yes, he was proposing to take off “Golden Rain.” Very disappointing. The theatre was losing money. Yes; but that was not the sole consideration. Karl had scored a dramatic success, and it was important that his first play should not be allowed to fizzle out like a spent firework. They must hope for a better run with “Captain Carter Comes Back.” And what about the third play?

Karl had a very stiff face.

“When are you going to take the play off, sir?”

“In a fortnight—perhaps.”

“None of the cast know.”

“I think some of them have a pretty shrewd idea. I'm sorry, Charles, but I feel that I shall be doing the right thing—for both of us.”

“I'm sorry, sir. I'm afraid I've lost you money.”

“O, we must hope to make it up on the next play. And what about—your third?”

Karl squeezed the end of a cigarette hard against the bottom of an ash-tray.

“Not much of it written—yet.”

“Hung up?”

“No, not exactly. I have been playing about a bit. I'll get back to business, sir.”

Sir Oscar looked hard at him.

“Yes,—that's the idea. One can't be too easy-osy. Certain amount of—ferocity—needed.”

“Were you fierce, sir?”

“Charles, I was a bloody bandit. It is all very well to be princely and serene when you've arrived, but until then——”

Karl found a smile.

“Thank you, sir. Like boxing. You begin to fancy yourself, and then some fellow lands you one on the jaw. Good medicine.”

He got up, gave a tug to his waistcoat, and smiled like the good fighter who can swallow punishment.

“Don't tell my mother, sir, yet. She'll be rather dashed about it.”

Sir Oscar nodded at him. He was pleased with Karl. The lad was worth a dose of brimstone.

2

A slit of yellow light showed in the high blank wall where four stone steps led to the stage-door of the Parthenon. A chauffeur was flapping his arms on the pavement beside a closed car. Two young women stood huddled against the wall.

Karl walked up and down. A north-east wind, tumbling in savage gusts into Plum Court, filled it with flurries of dust and debris. What a brute of a night! A stray piece of newspaper, caught by the wind, blew hither and thither in a kind of futile panic. It sailed along the sidewalk, and rising suddenly into the air, flapped its dirty wings in Karl's face.

"Damn you!"

He thrust the thing off, and it went soaring against the high wall of the theatre. Yes: what a brute of a night! He saw one of the girls run up the steps and appeal to the door-keeper in his glass box.

"Can we wait inside, mister?"

The bald head of the door-keeper was like a hard egg.

"No, you can't."

She fluttered down to join her friend. "Coo, it's too ruddy cold for autographs.—Come on, Maisie." Their shoes went tapping along the footway. The chauffeur laughed, and with a glance in Karl's direction, withdrew into the car. Why didn't the young toff wait comfortably inside instead of mooching up and down in the darkness?

Karl walked round to the front of the Parthenon. Miss Haycroft expected him in her dressing-room, but he was in no mood to meet dressers and stage-hands and members of the cast. His play was a failure, and no one would thank him for that. He crossed the road and stood looking at the brilliant illusion of success—"Golden Rain"—by Charles Kesteven," painted in light across the white façade. He saw Dawn Haycroft's name. She too would be involved in his failure, but then—there was something more between them than failure. She might be sorry, but she would understand.

He returned to Plum Court with its draughts and its dust, and this dreary cul-de-sac contained no illusions. That piece of dirty newspaper was still circulating. People began to emerge from the stage-door, pausing for a moment like bathers on a stage before plunging into the bleak night. Karl stood on the far side, watching the door,

fiercely separative in the face of failure, waiting for the one creature who would understand.

He saw her in the doorway, wrapping her fur coat round her, and looking out into the night. The collar of her coat was like a dark spathe, her face—the flower. The beautiful fairness of her might be dim in this dark place, but to the young lover the intimate and inward image was a thing of light.

He crossed the court behind the back of the waiting car. It was his car, hired for the occasion. It occurred to him that such cars and occasions might not wait upon the future. The chauffeur was out, and ready with a rug.

“What a night!”

Her eyes gave him a quick and brittle glance as she came down the steps.

“Why didn’t you come up?”

“O,—reasons. They sent up the message?”

“Yes.”

She slipped in and he followed. The chauffeur spread the rug.

“Where to, sir?”

“Amando’s.”

“Very good, sir.”

The car was a limousine, and when Karl switched off the ceiling-light they clung together in the sudden enveloping darkness. Her mouth had looked petulant, but in the arms of her young lover she could be quick and wanton.

“O,—boy! But this isn’t—bed.”

He had his mouth to her hair, and as the car swung out into the lighted street they emerged with little breathless laughter from that love-struggle.

“Nearly caught.—Am I fit for Amando’s?”

She sat forward as though posing for a photograph, chin tilted, her long slim hands laid along her knees.

“You’re fit for paradise.”

“Silly. That’s one advantage of bobbed hair.—Before the war, one had to keep one’s head above water.”

Karl picked up a hat that had slid to the floor.

“I’ll be good. I’ve been wanting you so badly.”

“Darling.”

She took his hand, and sank back, pressing her shoulder against his with a little sensuous shudder.

“Why didn’t you come up to-night?”

“Didn’t feel like being public.”

“Shy?”

He was silent a moment.

“No, just feeling unsocial.—I suppose you know the play is coming off.”

She turned her head sharply.

“What’s that?”

“Yes, in a fortnight. They are losing money. Sir Oscar warned me to-day.”

“Nonsense.”

He was aware of a gleam in her eyes, and a sudden rigidity.

“It’s true, my dear. I’m not making a moan about it, but that sort of thing does hurt.”

She sat quite still, staring through the glass partition at the driver’s back. Her shoulder still rested against Karl’s, but inwardly she had plucked herself away from him. Their bodies might be in contact, but her thin and vibrant self was sensitive to other considerations.

“How poisonous! Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. But it’s not—news—yet. I’m awfully sorry, Dawn.”

“Sorry. Well,—I ought to have been told. It’s a dirty trick.”

He put his lips to her hair. “I’m sorry for myself, and I’m sorry—for you. But you’re a fixed star.” She gave a little shrug of the shoulders, and sat apart with herself and reflections that were raw and personal. Certainly, the house had been growing patchy. She had liked the play and her part in it, and her dresses. She had not yet paid for those dresses. It was too—exasperating. A six week’s run—and then—a flop! Besides, she could have had the lead in Fagan’s play at the Shaftesbury. Fagan—that prince of popular pot-boilers whose florid farces were staged yearly like some dahlia show. Fagan was always good for a nine months’ run. O, damn!—Her temperamental study of Gilda in “Golden Rain” had been described as a brilliant piece of stage interpretation. But she did not like unlucky plays, and unlucky people, even unlucky lovers.

Karl was watching her profile.

“Sorry, Dawn. I may have lost something, but this show has—D’you understand?”

Her eyes were shallow.

“Understand? Oh,—of course, my dear.—Rotten for you, rotten for me. Well,—after all, there’s supper.”

Amando’s was crowded, but Karl had reserved a table for supper. Miss Haycroft kept him waiting for ten minutes while she attended to her face and hair in the cloakroom. A jazz-band was playing, and Karl stood and watched the crowd,

with his fists in his trousers pockets. Was this show the symbol of success, supping and dancing at Amando's with somebody else's wife, and then going on to fervid philanderings in her flat? But with "Golden Rain" ceasing to descend, there might be no more Amando's, no more celebrating.

Dawn's voice drawled in his ear, "Have you gone to sleep on your feet, darling?"

In a frock of gold tissue she passed between the tables, a woman who expected to be stared at. She spent most of her life in being looked at. Amando's observed her. "Hallo,—there's Dawn Haycroft." "Who's the sulky looking boy?" She trailed with her an air of peevish ennui, a suggestion that the sex in her would respond to some new provocation. She was petulant. "My dear, I'm so tired." He ordered champagne, and was perplexed by her drooping eyelids and petulant red mouth. Miss Lydia Languish! Yes, evidently the failure of "Golden Rain" had depressed her. But was she sorry for both actress and playwright? His youth, growing cold and clear of eye, began to wonder.

No, she did not want to dance. She did not feel like dancing. For that matter—nor did he. His mood was much more that of a war moment, the bleak and frosty clarity of your sensitive self before the silly blood and rage of an attack. All this fool-noise, this sensual show!

He was aware of Dawn crushing out a cigarette end.

"Let's quit."

He rose instantly. His young ego, chafing, promised itself other poignant distractions in the darkness. He wanted this woman as he had never wanted her before. It was as though the soul of her eluded him, and so provoked him to possess her body.

"Yes, too much people."

In the car he put a sudden fierce young arm round her, and she repulsed him.

"No. Not feeling—like that."

Immediately he was ice.

"Sorry. I won't be an ass."

They sat side by side like two bored married folk, going home yawning. On the pavement outside Burton Mansions he stood hat in hand, correct, casual.

"Sorry you're so tired."

"Night-night,—Charlie."

She pushed a hand at him, and then ran quickly up the steps in her furs. He understood that he was not to follow her, and he let her go, but his casualness concealed a kind of wounded frenzy. Things seemed slipping away from him, and as in the war his youth craved for all those elemental satisfactions.

He got back into the car.

“Where to, sir?”

“O, Highbury Terrace, No. 73.”

“Very good, sir.”

The man had the air of smothering smeamy amusement. Damn him! And in the car Karl found a handkerchief on the seat. He picked it up and held it against his mouth. Fleur de trèfle, woman; a warm and scented body!

The sudden truth sobered him. She was nothing but a body. He lowered the window and tossed the handkerchief out into the night.

3

Someone who had no love for Dawn Haycroft typed a letter and posted it to Captain Marsden in Cologne. The letter was unsigned, and it said—“If you are interested in divorcing your wife, come home and see her nice young lover.”

The Marsden morality was very much that of the idle and ornamental male who had not to spend either his wits or his muscles upon attempting difficult things. The cult of physical cleanliness was carried to extremes but in the satisfying of his appetites Captain Marsden chose to do what he pleased, and what was his was his. The world might consider him a very charming cad, heir to a baronetcy, and a fine figure of a man. Dozens of women had made fools of themselves on his account, and though he found other women interesting, his wife could not be permitted to display too public an interest in other men. Marsden’s vanity went to the best tailor, and conventionally was never out of fashion. Moreover, Dawn was—after all—a very attractive little devil, and absence had made her more so.

Circumstances set the stage. Karl, in the mood of a young lover who was savagely pursuing an illusion, penetrated up those familiar stairs to Miss Haycroft’s dressing-room. He did not knock, but opened the door and walked straight in. Miss Haycroft’s dresser, kneeling and inserting her mistress’s legs into a pair of stockings, looked up with sympathetic consternation at the intruder. Poor young man! Had he not been sufficiently warned that the privilege of yesterday was to-day—an impertinence? And madame was feeling very temperamental.

Miss Haycroft saw the ghost in her glass.

“Well, really!—I thought Jane told you.”

Karl closed the door.

“Yes, Jane did tell me.”

He was looking at the face of his mistress reflected in the mirror. It was a made-

up face, but somehow new and strange and unfriendly.

“O, get out.—I can’t stand people blowing in just before the show. No, wait a moment. Go out, Jane. I want a word with Mr. Kesteven.”

Jane went, with a commiserating glance at Karl. Poor young gentleman, there was to be a scene, and Karl had not yet experienced such a display; Jane had shared in many. But this particular occasion was to be more sensational than Jane imagined. She was standing waiting at the top of the stairs, listening to her mistress saying things, when Captain Marsden came up the stairs with eyeglass and opera hat, the complete man about town and actual husband.

“Hallo, Jane, which is my door?”

Jane’s face could not conceal its consternation, for Captain Marsden had the air of a man in search of trouble.

“O, Captain Marsden, sir,—she’s only got a quarter of an hour before she’s called.”

Marsden’s monocle glared.

“Which door, woman?”

As a matter of fact his wife’s voice gave him the necessary indication. He walked past the frightened dresser, put his hand to the handle of the particular door, and flung it open. He saw his wife on a chair struggling with a strange young man who—apparently—was making a very determined attempt to kiss her. Marsden stood stock still for a moment, his monocle focusing this outrageous scene. Then, he slammed the door to.

“Good evening.—Do I intrude?”

Karl, head up, found himself with his back against a wall. Actually, he had come in contact with it, and felt the flimsy partition quake. But the cue was with the outraged lady. Karl was to be shown how lovers and husbands should be handled, when the lover had become mere proud flesh, and the husband was worth preserving. Miss Haycroft became hysterical. She began to scream. This young cad did not know how to behave. He had neither morals nor manners. He had forced his way into her room. He had tried to follow her into her flat.

“For God’s sake chuck him out, Geoff. Chuck him down the stairs. O, my dear,—you shouldn’t leave me alone so much.”

She flung herself upon her husband. She was in tears.

“O,—Geoff,—these cads.”

Marsden, looking over the top of his wife’s head, glared at Karl.

“Wait a moment, you young swine.”

For while he was trying to disentangle himself from his emotional wife, Karl had

moved towards the door. He paused. He smiled at Marsden. "No,—don't try that game on me. I shouldn't advise you to. I'm going."

Marsden struggled with his wife.

"Let go. I want to."

But woman, having screamed him into a sex rage, now clung protectingly.

"No,—Geoff,—no. He's a boxer,—a young bully about town. He'll hurt you."

Karl was at the door. He did not hurry, for these surprising emotional phenomena had removed him into strange arctic regions of silence and of snow. He opened the door. He looked steadfastly and with a kind of dispassionate curiosity at husband and wife. He turned his back on them, and at that moment Marsden, pushing his wife aside, charged, lifted a leg and landed that kick.

Karl's face flashed round with a sudden fury. He swung and caught Marsden on the jaw, a boxer's blow from the shoulder. And Marsden, recoiling, came in contact with his wife's chair, and sprawling backwards, crashed upon her dressing-table. The back of his head struck the mirror and starred it; bottles and toilet accessories flew right and left.

Karl slammed the door on that last act, and walking past a paralytic Jane, disappeared down the stairs.

4

In Plum Court he found himself laughing. He supposed it to be laughter. He was sweating, shaking. Well, that affair had torn it, finally and with *éclat*. In five minutes or so the curtain was due to go up. No leading lady, no Gilda. Ye gods! Was Miss Haycroft's under-study in the house, and if so how was the poor wench to get into Miss Haycroft's frock? Alarums and excursions, panic and confusion, Rolf the stage-manager sweating his shirt to pulp, and appearing in front of the curtain to apologize to the house, and announce Miss Haycroft's sudden and serious indisposition.

Karl put his head back and laughed.

Yes, he was going to watch the grand finale. He walked round to the front of the theatre where cars and taxis were depositing the last arrivals. He nodded at Hands the head porter. "Evening, Hands." He diverged towards the box-office and smiled at the man inside.—"How's the house to-night, Mr. Parker?" Mr. Parker had a bright face. "O, much better, sir. We're nearly full, I believe. How ironical! Karl took the stairs to the dress-circle. Everybody knew him and everybody liked him. A girl attendant in white and purple held open a swing-door.

“Do you want a seat, Mr. Kesteven?”

He smiled upon her.

“No, thanks. Just standing at the back for five minutes.”

The orchestra was playing *Tales of Hoffmann*, and Karl glanced at his wrist-watch. One minute to go. Would that curtain rise? How could it rise? He stood there looking down upon all those heads, and feeling maliciously and cynically expectant. For the moment the joke was his though some of the laughter might be turned against the promoter of the farce. A couple of women were chattering in front of him, pince-nez perched on constricted noses.—“My dear, I do hope you won’t be shocked. I believe the second act is really—rather naughty.” Rather naughty! Poor canaries! He found himself wondering whether your young dramatist should not avoid all things theatrical, and especially the canvas and cardboard world behind the scenes.

Lights down! Ye gods, had they managed to patch up that emotional crisis?

The curtain went up on the familiar first scene. Roy Maunder was discovered full length on a sofa in the midst of a catastrophic yawn. Miss Haycroft had to make her entry at the end of thirty seconds, dressed as a land-girl, a cigarette stuck in the corner of an impudent mouth.

She came on. She was not the screaming nit-wit of the dressing-room, a woman who had sacked a lover, and seen her husband knocked into her pots and bottles. She was the Gilda of “*Golden Rain*,” impudent, slangy, striding about the stage, completely mistress of herself and of this moment, the expert exhibitionist. Roy had to roll on his face, groaning with ennui, and she had to smack his posterior. She smacked him good and hard.

Karl waited for no more. He slipped quietly away in a mood of “Well,—I’m damned,” and possibly his damnation was to set another stage.

5

Highbury Terrace stood like a cool and quiet cliff with the night at its feet, and its chimneys among the stars. Karl let himself in, closed the front door and hung up his hat and coat. He had walked all the way home, and the only hunger that remained in him was a healthy urge to raid his mother’s larder.

He found Rebecca sitting by the fire with a book in her lap. She had been dozing over the book, but her eyes were bright for her beloved.

“Early, my dear.”

Karl took up a position on the middle of the hearthrug, and lit a cigarette. Why was the lighting of a cigarette always supposed to suggest a nonchalant attitude

towards life?

“Yes.—By the way,—I’ve been making a damned fool of myself.”

His mother accepted the abrupt confession.

“Have you, my dear? But—not seriously?”

And Karl laughed.

“No, just not too seriously.”

Rebecca closed her book.

“How’s the house to-night?”

“As a matter of fact—pretty good. And that’s rather ironic. Sir Oscar is taking the play off.”

His mother protested.

“O, no dear, surely not?”

“Losing money, you know. Someone kicked me to-night, mater.”

“Kicked you, my dear!”

“Yes, quite good for me too. My reaction was excellent.”

Deliberately he bent down and kissed his mother on the forehead.

“You’ve never made a damned fool of me.”

“O, no, my dear, how could I?”

CHAPTER XVII

The British public proceeded to play one of its peculiar tricks upon Charles Kesteven. It can be a most difficult public to capture, but once pleased it can be the most loyal of publics and remain pleased for a generation, provided its idol does not attempt to educate it. Moreover, a picturesque piece of scandal had been passed by a certain person to a representative of the Press, and a journal which had to provide its public with a weekly savoury, made use of the information.

“THE GODS QUARREL IN THE PARTHENON.
FRACAS IN A STAR’S DRESSING-ROOM.”

Identities were veiled, but so thinly so that the spirits materialized in the world’s gossip-shop. The story went round the clubs and, as gossip will, it penetrated even into Suburbia, though how Suburbia comes to hear of such secret scuffles passes one’s understanding. It was mentioned in the first-class carriages of business trains running to Chislehurst and Woking. It was elaborated and adorned. A bright young dramatist had kicked the leading lady’s husband down the back-stairs.

Even Emily heard the news. Augustus picked it up in his Soho club, for a Parthenon stage-hand happened to be a member, and Augustus carried the scandal to Wimpole Street.

Emily sniffed.

“What goes on! Disgusting—I call it.”

Meanwhile, some mass suggestion took possession of the public. Having applauded “Golden Rain” for a month, it had put up its umbrellas and gone home, leaving the shower to become a diminishing drizzle. The weather prophets had assumed that “Golden Rain” was passing, and then—in the course of a single fortnight it became a deluge. Long queues waited at the pit and gallery doors. Stalls and circles were being booked a month ahead.

There was humour in the fact that Karl was one of the last persons to hear of the revival. He had cut himself off from all social affairs; the Parthenon might have been in Athens and an interesting ruin. He was at work on a new play, furiously and fanatically so. Highbury Fields saw him walking strenuously round and round for an hour each day. The house was kept like a mausoleum. Euphemia was told to remain below stairs, and not to think of making beds and emptying slops until Mr. Charles was out of the house. Even Rebecca had schooled herself to the careful closing of

doors. If she did indulge in occasional conversations on the telephone, the instrument lived in a recess off the hall, and could be used discreetly.

“Hallo,—is that the Parthenon box-office? Yes,—Mrs. Kesteven speaking. Have you a couple of stalls for Monday next? No? What, every stall booked for three weeks? No dress-circles? Well, ring me if you get any returns.”

Karl’s mother would hang up the receiver, and with an air of peculiar and sly satisfaction, run a finger and thumb up and down her broad and expressive nose.

Rebecca was becoming very “dressy.” Rebecca was very particular about her stockings and shoes. This craze for short skirts might be inconsiderate when your ankles were not what they had been. Karl’s mother had her hair waved and her face massaged. She knew that her secret sin was a passion for bright colours and precious stones, but that loud and obese old woman may cause a nice world to mock and to blaspheme. Rebecca rationed her colour sense. In her wisdom she confined herself to black.

One morning Sir Oscar Bloom rang up Mrs. Kesteven.

“Hallo, is that you, Becky? What’s become of the rain-maker? I haven’t seen him since—the deluge.”

Deluge! That was witty of him, and Rebecca laughed into the telephone.

“My dear, he’s attending to business.”

“Working?”

“I should say so. Hammering it out hot. But is it—really true, Oscar?”

“What, the deluge?”

“Yes.”

“Absolutely. A boom. There’s a big cheque working up for the author. Was he very sorrowful, my dear?”

“About what?”

“O, you know. The fair lady. The funny thing about it is—that the house began to recover after he smote the husband.—O, no, no connection. No. Well, tell him to come and lunch with me at the Garrick to-morrow. What? He doesn’t know—about the revival. Well, that—is—really—funny.”

Karl, given the great man’s message, went innocently to what he supposed to be his doom. “He is going to tell me as nicely as he can that I’m Jonah.” His mother kissed him and dissembled. Karl was a little shy of the Garrick Club, and not in a temper to be either patronized or pitied. He was early. He went quietly and unobtrusively into the smoking-room, possessed himself of an *Illustrated London News* and a vacant chair. He had no desire to be noticed. Like the youth in the fable he carried his failure concealed like a fox gnawing at his vitals.

Someone came and stood beside his chair, someone large and very consciously celebrated.

“Good morning, Mr. Kesteven.”

Karl, looking up moodily, recognized the gentleman, Mr. Harold Cadnam the novelist, oozing sugar and complacency like some over-ripe fruit. Mr. Cadnam had a high, bald forehead, very blue and staring eyes, a complexion like raw meat. An unctuous and rather greasy person with yellow teeth.

“Good morning, sir.”

Mr. Cadnam let the sir pass, though he was somewhat sensitive about being dated. Karl had been introduced to him one day before “Golden Rain” had been produced, and Mr. Cadnam had presented him with one forefinger and a mechanical smile. This morning his whole hand was very much extended.

“I saw your play last night. It intrigued me.”

Mr. Cadnam was so bland and set and beneficent that Karl stood up.

“Very good of you.”

“Amazing,” said the novelist, “your sense of the stage—for—one—so young. It really would interest me, Mr. Kesteven, to discuss——”

Karl smiled at him defensively. Sir Oscar’s large white face had appeared in the doorway, and Karl knew that his call had come. He apologized to Mr. Cadnam.

“Lunching with Sir Oscar Bloom. Sorry. I’m afraid you’ll have to excuse me.”

Mr. Cadnam showed two rows of orange peel teeth.

“Lunch with me to-morrow, Mr. Kesteven. One o’clock. Yes,—here.”

Karl accepted. He was caught without an excuse.

Sir Oscar took him by the arm. Sir Oscar had a sly, amused look.

“So,—the balloon has bumped up against you.”

Karl stared.

“Damned friendly. I don’t know why.”

And Sir Oscar laughed.

“Cadnam’s a prize opportunist. Never loses a chance of self-advertisement. Simply mad to have a play produced. Been trying for years. Well, don’t you get me?”

“No, sir.”

“Collaboration—with the young man of the moment. Lots of people are going to try and make you useful, my lad.”

“Me, sir?”

“Well, we are reserving stalls a month ahead. We are a Keith Prowse’s pet.”

They had reached their luncheon table, and Karl, sitting down with a young

man's gravity, very deliberately unfolded his table napkin.

"You don't mean to say, sir——?"

Sir Oscar smiled at him.

"Where—have—you been, my dear fellow? In retreat—or in Timbuctoo. "Golden Rain" is the rage. By the way, I have a cheque for you in my pocket."

Karl was strangely silent. This was one of those pleasant shocks which leave a man full of a voiceless, inward exultation. He had been feeling rather like a young man whom Miss Fortune had jilted. So, Mr. Harold Cadnam's sudden friendliness was explained. The author of "Golden Rain" had become even in the Garrick Club a young man who mattered.

"What about some oysters, Charles?"

"Thanks—awfully, sir. You know, I thought you had asked me here to tell me that the play was off."

Sir Oscar looked at him over the menu card.

"Yes,—there's humour in that. The world's an oyster, my lad, and yours contains pearls. Don't throw them to swine. I'm thinking of putting 'Captain Carter' on at Coventry. O, by the way, I'll let you into a secret, but you mustn't give me away."

"I won't, sir."

"One person persisted in believing in 'Golden Rain.' Guess."

"You, sir?"

"Try again."

"My mother?"

Sir Oscar nodded at him.

"She came to me and offered to put two thousand into the show. No, as it happened, it wasn't necessary. Now, keep that to yourself."

2

Various phenomena began to impress themselves upon Karl's attention.

His balance at the bank became considerable, and the politeness of the world most evident.

Fashionable photographers asked to be allowed to photograph him.

His portrait appeared in the Parthenon programmes.

Letters began to pour in upon him, redirected from the theatre to his private address. He had become a provocation, an inspirer of secret passion. Women cut his portrait out of the programme, and secreted it in their bedrooms. He had such a fascinating face. He was asked for autographs, signed photos. He was appealed to

by charities. He received cards of invitation from unexpected and distinguished ladies who were interested in self-advertisement and good works. Mr. Cadnam confided in him that he—Mr. Cadnam—had a brilliant idea and could they not dramatize it together?

Karl maintained the air of a young man who was a little embarrassed and amused by the compliments of some very eager lady. He was a mere boy, a wonderful boy, but he kept the head of a boxer who sparred and waited to discover the world's tricks.

Did he like all this froth and adulation? He did; but not so greatly that he was tempted to wallow in it. He was the son of his mother, and his mother was treating him and the triumph with jocund candour.

“Don't let them make a fool of you, my dear.”

She was a stimulating person. Karl knew that she was loving the whole sensational show even more than he was, but that her solid shape had not become a bubble. He showed her many of the strange letters he received, and they laughed over them together, especially over one anonymous postcard.

“You dirty young dog, your filthy play ought to be pushed off the stage.”

Karl looked whimsical.

“Well,—that's—that!”

But, he was discovering during these halcyon days that his mother was not only a very pleasant person to live with, but a pleasant person to go out with. She had such a shrewd appetite for life. She could delight in the show and laugh at it, and at herself. Sometimes she was like a large, delightful, mischievous child.

It was agreed between them that on the hundredth performance of “Golden Rain”—Kesteven & Co. should celebrate the occasion by giving a little dinner to Sir Oscar and Mr. Max Isenstein and a few friends. Rebecca selected the Ritz, and since it was to be a very special dinner, Karl and his mother went to interview the management. The Ritz was a long journey from the Essex Road, and Rebecca's knowledge of the nomenclature of a French cuisine hardly adequate, but she was equal to the occasion. She wore her furs and an air of sumptuous finality. She allowed a polite *maître d'hôtel* to make suggestions; she appeared to consider them; she admitted some, refused others, without committing herself to adventures in French.

When the thing was done they went out to lunch.

“O, my dear, one's education's been neglected!—That—was a bluff.—Did we order toothpicks? Let's go to Gatti's and have a good rump steak.”

Rebecca had her steak, and a bottle of Bass, followed by a jam omelette and a

Welsh rarebit. Afterwards, they strolled in Regent Street and Rebecca was lured to look into the window of a jeweller's shop. She and Karl were arm in arm. Messrs. Hamborough's was a very special window, and not for the million.

Rebecca had her joke. She squeezed her son's arm.

"Such fun—looking—and pretending, my dear."

Karl smiled at his mother.

"All right, let's pretend. What's the temptation?"

"Now, would you believe it, I've always dreamed of a diamond necklace. Just a little one. Silly old fool!"

"Why,—silly?" said her son.

"Why, my fat old neck! When you're young you don't get such things—or shouldn't do, and when you're old?——"

"You'll never be old," said Karl.

3

On the very morning of the day when they were to dine at the Ritz a cheque arrived for Karl. He looked at it gravely, put it in his wallet, and after an hour's work, went out upon adventure.

"Back to lunch, mother."

"Very well, my dear."

The atmosphere of Messrs. Hamborough's shop was almost pontifical. It was not quite Westminster Abbey on a coronation day, but very near it. Voices were velvet. A gentleman who might have been a cabinet minister—and not Labour—received Mr. Kesteven.

"Good morning, sir."

Karl put up a very good appearance.

"I'm interested in diamond necklaces.

"We have a very good selection, sir. But, of course—a diamond necklace——"

Karl was casual.

"Have you anything wearable—for five hundred?"

"Yes, sir,—I think at that figure."

"Please show me."

Karl did not know it, but he was being watched. Another gentleman came to assist in the ceremony. A safe was unlocked and trays produced. "This, sir, is a lovely thing, but of course, the price——" "How much?" "Three thousand guineas, sir."

Karl eyed it.

“Very nice,—but a little dear.”

But Messrs. Hamborough did produce him a necklace that was not a pledge to prejudice. Its price was five hundred guineas. Karl brought out a card.

“I’ll take it. I’m just going round to my bank. I’ll pay you in cash.”

Hamborough’s scrutinized his card.

*“Mr. Charles Kesteven.
The Garrick Club.”*

Hamborough’s was bright and urbane.

“The—Mr. Charles Kesteven, sir?”

“I suppose so.”

“You’ll excuse me, sir, but I had the pleasure of seeing your play last week.”

“I hope it was a pleasure?” smiled Karl.

“It was, sir. My wife cut your photograph out of the programme.”

Karl visited his bank, paid in his cheque, and drew a cheque to Self for five hundred pounds. The cashier looked at him a little anxiously.

“You want cash, Mr. Kesteven?”

“Please.”

“How will you take it?”

“I don’t mind,” said Karl, “provided it does not spoil my figure.”

The cashier simpered. Fortunate young bloods like Mr. Charles Kesteven could not be charged for applause. Five hundred pounds in cash! Well,—Mr. Kesteven must be going it, and the lady something particularly sumptuous. So thought the cashier.

Karl returned to Messrs. Hamborough’s, paid them in cash, and received his little parcel. A Hamborough parcel was not quite like any other parcel, being sealed with purple wax and stamped with the firm’s device. Karl took a taxi to Highbury Terrace. Rebecca had been trying on a new dress, with the fitter from her Upper Street shop in attendance, and hearing Karl below she came down the stairs in black velvet.

“How do you like it, my dear?”

“Absolutely right for you.”

“Doesn’t my neck look a little naked?”

Karl had been holding his little parcel behind his back, and he produced it.

“I think—this—will just make the difference.”

“Oh, my dear, what’s this?”

“Just a little present.”

She was looking at the purple seals.

“Hamborough’s?”

“Yes.”

“My dear, what have you been doing?”

Her hands trembled as she opened the parcel, for excitement and emotion were mingled. Karl watched her with a look of grave affection. He saw the glitter of the stones, and his mother’s right hand holding up the necklace. Her face had a strange, luminous pallor.

“Oh, my dear!”

“Try it on, mother.”

“No, you put it on, Karl.”

He fastened it round her plump, short neck, and was aware of her eyes looking up into his. There were tears in his mother’s eyes.

“Karl,—you shouldn’t——”

“It’s about—the happiest thing I have ever done, mother.”

“Oh, my dear,—I’m——”

Her arms went round his neck.

“What a lovely thing you’ve done, Karl. If I died to-morrow——”

He was deeply moved.

“You are not going to die, mother. You are going to dine at the Ritz. Why not look in the mirror.”

Rebecca stood on the hearth-rug, and almost with the air of a self-conscious and delighted young girl wearing her first piece of jewellery and her first party frock, surveyed herself.

“My dear, it’s—lovely.”

CHAPTER XVIII

Rebecca suggested to Karl that he needed a secretary. All celebrated persons employed secretaries, and Mr. Charles Kesteven was becoming a celebrated person.

“Have you noticed it?” said his mother.

Karl had a pile of letters by his breakfast-plate. For a season these letters had pleased him, but now he regarded the morning postman as his particular enemy.

“More than ever, if that is what you mean.”

“No, my dear, they have dropped the ‘Mr.’ ”

“The what?”

“You are Charles Kesteven in the papers, like G.B.S. And what’s more, you are news.”

Karl was not feeling friendly to the press, for the dramatic critics were becoming peevish and patronizing. They had attacked “Captain Carter” when that ex-officer had been transferred from Coventry to London. Moreover, the public instead of discovering itself disappointed in Charles Kesteven’s second play, was crowding to see “Captain Carter” even more tumultuously than it crowded to “Golden Rain.” And “Golden Rain” was still running. That a young dramatist should be able to boast of two successful plays running simultaneously—was not quite in good taste. If Karl, like Charles Dickens, was to be the beloved Abel, then—inevitably the critics would play the part of Cain. In plain language young Kesteven was altogether too grossly fortunate, too wealthy, too damned good looking, and too preposterously popular. Olympus was beginning to thunder at him.

Karl tossed a sheet of pink note-paper to his mother.

“I’ve had seventeen letters from women this morning, damn them. Read that.”

Rebecca read it.

“MY WONDERFUL BOY,

“For three nights I have been sitting in seat No. 7 in Row E of the stalls.”

Rebecca giggled.

“Poor dear!”

“Poor idiot!—Sir Oscar says I ought to reply to all these letters, that it’s

professionally—politic. Mental homes ought to be provided.”

“I’ve told you, my dear, you must have a secretary.”

“Another woman—on the skyline.”

“Why shouldn’t I be your secretary?”

“You?”

“Well,—I’m getting rid of the shop in Upper Street.—Fat old women with celebrated sons shouldn’t keep shops.”

Karl helped himself to marmalade.

“It’s an idea. It’s absurd,—but when I go upstairs to work—all these damned letters seem to be buzzing round like a swarm of flies.”

“I should make quite a good fly-paper, Karl.”

He looked at her with shrewd affection.

“Mother, you’re engaged. I’ll pay you a salary.”

“Don’t be silly, dear.”

“In the future—I want to be responsible for—this house and everything. But I loathe accounts.”

“I love them, my dear.”

“All right,—agent as well as secretary. Isn’t it going to be too much for you?”

“I think not, my dear.”

So, Rebecca became her son’s defender, and Karl made an arrangement with Sir Oscar Bloom for twenty per cent. of his royalties to be apportioned and paid to his mother. Rebecca took to her duties with enthusiasm; she was no mere jealous matriarch, and if Karl desired the golden apples of the Hesperides, well, let him go in quest of them. His mother absorbed all shocks, and dealt smilingly but ruthlessly with would-be exploiters, begging-letter writers and voracious young women who sought personal interviews with her son. She employed, when necessary, a little Jew lawyer recommended to her by Sir Oscar, and in the dramatic and cinematograph worlds Mr. Aarons was more cunning than the Canaanites. She could and did defend Karl from the flesh and the devil, but she could not protect him from the little, venomous sneers that began to appear in the press. It was she who subscribed to a Press-cutting Agency, and who censored the clippings and kept from her beloved those little poisoned paragraphs. These gentlemen of the press did not desire to help her son; they wanted to assassinate him. Having discovered the prodigy, labelled and dissected it, they were minded to see it buried.

Mary Arch was one of Rebecca’s discoveries.

The girl had walked into the Upper Street shop one day with a brown-paper parcel under her arm. Did they purchase furs? She had a set to sell.

Rebecca had dealt with the business in person. She had watched this pale, shy, reserved young woman unfasten her parcel, and Rebecca had been wise as to the crisis. The girl was selling furs, because, judging by her appearance, she had not enough to eat.

But that was only the beginning of things. Rebecca might be very shrewd in her summing up of a person or a situation, but in affairs of business she was not the creature of impulse. She had found something likeable in the stranger.

“Do you want a job, my dear?”

The girl had looked at her with concealed hunger.

“I do.”

“Can you sew?”

“Yes.”

So, Mary Arch had been taken into the business and in a little while Rebecca had come to know her history. That the girl was to become Mrs. Kesteven’s comforter and friend, though wearing the official dress of a house-servant, was an eventuality that was veiled in the future. Mary Arch was the daughter of a schoolmaster who had died blind and in poverty. She had been educated at a private school, but her education had been cut short before it could prove of social use to her. She had known privation. She had had to fend for herself, and not very successfully so, perhaps because sensitive and aloof natures are penalized in such a scramble. She had been a typist, a secretary, a shop-assistant, and in every attempt circumstance had treated her somewhat shabbily. She had come to a crisis in her life when any niche was to be welcomed, and any friend of her own sex blessed. There was a pale integrity in Mary Arch that impressed a woman like Rebecca. The girl sat quietly and calmly down to her job, with a philosophy that seemed determined to make the best of reality. And Rebecca, having observed and summed up her Mary, had put this other proposition to her. Would Mary cease from sewing and become the Kesteven companion and help about the house.

“I don’t want anyone who is ashamed to do things, my dear.”

Mary had accepted the proposition.

Rebecca was frank with Mary Arch.

“This isn’t an exciting job, Mary, but you’re no fool. I want you to make it your business to see that no one gets into this house and worries Mr. Karl.”

Mary Arch was a woman, who, having experienced some of life’s shoddy tricks, had been taught to appreciate certain things, a clean bed and good food, a fire to sit by, and a bedroom of her own. Essentially fastidious, she had inherited a secret

sensitiveness which she concealed. She liked her day to contain certain periods of solitude. Life had taught her to wear a uniform, and when she put on a black dress and lace apron, that too was a disguise. Mary Arch was a reader, and one of the first things that Rebecca noticed was that the girl's bedroom had a shelf of books. Even on a free evening she would prefer to sit at home and read.

Euphemia remained in the kitchen while Mary Arch functioned above stairs. She was admirable at the front door. No one was to be admitted who could not claim an appointment. Mary Arch could not be told a story; she knew who was expected and who was not. In action she was a quiet and rather graceful creature, her walk a kind of glide. Never familiar or conversational she seemed to understand that Karl was very much Mr. Charles Kesteven.

“How do you like Arch, my dear?”

Karl described Arch as an efficient ghost. She just glided about the house, and never made her presence obvious.

“Quiet and capable,” said his mother; “the young woman's got a head on her shoulders.”

Meanwhile, “Golden Rain” was to be produced in New York, and leaving No. 73 in charge of the capable Arch and Euphemia, Karl and his mother sailed for New York in the *Olympic*.

2

New York was very kind both to Karl and his play. It was perhaps a little less kind to his fat old mother, who appeared to make a habit of accompanying the dramatist everywhere. Rebecca found herself a little out of breath. New York was determined that Karl should be a social success, and it dragged him hither and thither like a nice child to see and to be seen. He was invited to lecture upon the drama and the tendencies of the English stage. He ate a series of elaborate dinners, and was introduced to hundreds of energetic women. The Americans are a very kind and a very hospitable people, but upon Karl's rather separative soul, too much kindness and food and smuggled liquor had a constipating effect. Moreover, it was his fate to be pursued by several serious women with urges towards uplift. They were acutely interested in Karl's play. Just what was its significance, its esoteric meaning? Also, one of the ladies became very interested in Karl.

In candid moments Charles Kesteven was describing New York as a human catastrophe. He was invited to see the whole of the city and to express his opinion before he had seen a part of it, and New York reminded him of the noise and

confusion of the great war. New York was so conversational, and after a month of squandering himself socially, Karl had a raw throat.

“They are too terribly kind, mother.”

“Feeling tired, my dear?”

“Sometimes—I could burst into tears—or bad language.”

Meanwhile, Mrs. Emery P. Chase pursued him. She was intelligently silly about Karl. Almost, she was ready to persuade him to run away with her, and produce plays upon the drink problem, or the mixing of chromosomes between black and white. She hustled him to meet This and to meet That. She was eager to show him Virginia.—To feast her young god she proposed to stage a public dinner, and she sent out invitations. Karl received his at the Hotel Amsterdam, where he was nine floors up. It bored him to have to enter the elevator whenever he wanted to go out.

Karl left Mrs. Chase’s invitation lying about on the parlour table, and Rebecca, having read the invitation, understood that she was not included in the party. Mrs. Chase was not pursuing a stout old Jewess, but on the evening of the particular day Karl came in tired, put on his slippers and proposed dinner *à deux* upstairs.

“Have you forgotten the Chases?”

“Not going,” said Karl.

“But, my dear, it’s the set piece.”

Karl had his reasons, and they were very good reasons. Mrs. Chase exhausted him, and she had not invited his mother.

“My dear, you must go.”

“I’m damned if I’m going,” said her son. “I’ve sent a note round to say that you are not feeling well.”

“Me?—But I never felt better.”

“If Mrs. Chase would stop running for a moment and reflect, she might see—the light.”

“I don’t mind not being invited, my dear. I do take up such a lot of room at a table.”

Karl got up and kissed her.

“I’m not going.”

And then he sat down, lit a cigarette, and let himself go.

“What about the next boat home? I can’t stand any more of this. It’s too terribly like a social Niagara, or the front page of one of their papers. I’m not going to Hollywood. I don’t want to see Niagara or the Rockies or the Blue Mountains, or Palm Beach. I’d rather walk down the Essex Road.”

Rebecca gave him a mother’s look.

“Yes, my dear.—But just a few more days.”

“I’ll hire an armoured car.”

“Just a few more days. Mr. Streuben is coming to New York. I want to see Mr. Streuben. He cabled us, you know.”

“Film rights?”

Rebecca nodded.

“Well, you can see Mr. Streuben, mother. I don’t want to see anybody, for a month. Not even that black fellow with the piano teeth who shoots me up and down that damned elevator.”

His mother laughed. Her beloved was receiving too much petting, and to Karl life was not all uplift and canned peaches. In the social sense he was ceasing to be ambitious, preferring, with the stark sincerity of youth, the desert to the humbug of floral shows. Some of his American friends were to say of him that he was too inhibited, but when a man has the soul of a craftsman he may not care greatly for chatter and bad champagne. What was more strange, he could not be persuaded to talk about his work. He was head up, aloof, watching faces, and waiting for the chatter to cease. New York did not quite understand him.

3

When Mr. Isaac Streuben called at the Hotel Amsterdam he was received by Mrs. Kesteven. She apologized for the absence of her son. Karl had been summoned to the theatre to give his opinion upon the recasting of an incident in his play, but he was expected back for lunch. Mr. Streuben would lunch with them, of course. Meanwhile, she sat Mr. Streuben down on a sofa, and gave him a cigar and all her geniality, and the information that she acted as her son’s agent. In appearance, Mr. Streuben was somewhat unexpected for so considerable a man, being a little, pale Jew, with eyes that were grey and watery, and watchful. His movements were finicking and stilted; he had a way of sniffing as though he suffered from chronic nasal catarrh; his voice was flat and tenuous.

Mr. Streuben’s references to “Golden Rain” were oblique and deliberate. He marched round Jericho, blowing a melancholy trumpet. No doubt the play was enjoying a remarkable success, but he explained to the dramatist’s mother that a successful stage play might not be equally inevitable as a film. He could assure Mrs. Kesteven that he was very interested in Karl’s play, but——. Rebecca sat and smiled at him, and her mural defences did not fall. She was becoming wise as to the business man’s passion for persuading the artist that he and his product were poor

things, and that to purchase a play or a book might be regarded as charity, or the act of a beneficent lunatic. Mr. Streuben had not the fierce mien of a Barabbas. He was a kindly if acquisitive little creature with a flair for pleasing the public, and an inbred capacity for getting the best of a bargain. Also, he had been extremely fortunate.

He snuffled sententiously at Rebecca. Almost, he exhibited Karl's play as a piece of stale fish. He sniffed at it. Yes, sir, the product would be a little stale by the time it reached the picture-houses. Rebecca sat and listened. She was waiting to have her joke with Mr. Streuben.

She said, "Didn't Pa Streuben come from Warsaw? I had an uncle in Warsaw,—Max Goldstein."

Mr. Streuben buttoned up his pale eyes. By the prophets, but how remote of him! Mrs. Kesteven was of the family of Judah. A Goldstein! The Goldsteins were universals. No; Papa Streuben had come from Cracow, and had begotten in "God's Own Country" Aaron and Solomon and Isaac. Mr. Streuben was the Isaac.

Rebecca crinkled up her nose at him.

"Say, that makes it almost a family affair. Everybody is after my boy. One of the world's plums."

Mr. Streuben's eyes were still buttoned up.

"He is very young,—I hear."

"There's a great picture in that play," said Rebecca.

Isaac prevaricated. Was he among the prophets? He went on to assure Mrs. Kesteven that the costs of producing a world picture were soaring. The "stars" demanded such preposterous salaries.

"And you pay them," said Rebecca.

Mr. Streuben smiled a little watery smile at her.

"Otherwise, they go elsewhere."

"So can the author."

"Oh, no, dear lady. I can buy scenarios by the truck-load, but a Charlie——"

Said Rebecca, "My son's a Charlie, and he is going to be dear."

Mr. Streuben's cigar had gone out. He knocked off the ash and relit it. His eyes seemed to close.

"Ten thousand dollars for the world rights is my idea."

Rebecca's retort came pat.

"Pounds, Mr. Streuben, not dollars."

Mr. Streuben unbuttoned his eyes at her.

"Dear lady!"

"Ten thousand pounds, and his next may cost someone twenty."

She had come to sit on the sofa beside him. She was frank and jocund and ruthless. She had been taught to appreciate the potency of an amiable ruthlessness. Her offer to Mr. Streuben was final. There were other people in a hurry to acquire the picture rights of "Golden Rain," the most successful play of the season. And suddenly, Mr. Streuben smiled a watery smile at her. He put out a little fat hand and patted her knee. He applauded and admired and surrendered to the Rebecca in her, but what a pity that she was not carving her slice from the body of a Gentile.

"O.K., my dear. You're some business woman."

"I'm a mother."

"If all agents were mothers," chuckled Mr. Streuben, "there would be no room in the world for me. Yes, m'am, I've got a contract with me."

Sucking his cigar he pointed a precise finger at some pencilled figures. Ten thousand dollars. Rebecca found him a pen and watched him transfer dollars into pounds.

"That looks much nicer, Mr. Streuben!"

He sniffed and smiled.

"You're a Goldstein!—sure."

4

Emily took a bus to Highbury station.

It was April, but there was no April in the mood of Emily. She was suffering from the shabbiness of things, and if Nature in her opulence could afford a new green frock, Emily could not, and if modern woman's pride is in her stockings, then Emily's pride did not fit her ankles. She had too little to wear and not enough to eat. Moreover, her husband was lying ill in a Soho basement, while his wife earned a few shillings a day by scrubbing and polishing in an Italian restaurant. Emily was feeling bitter—bitter and predatory. Either the old woman or that young plutocrat of a Charles ought to help Augustus.

Wimpole Street had extruded the Slopps. Dr. Massingbird had behaved disgracefully in exercising his rights as a capitalist to practise intolerance.—On Sundays, Augustus was one of those orators who addressed the world's workers in Hyde Park. Dr. Massingbird, the ideal bachelor, strolled out on Sundays. He was a contemplative creature who enjoyed observing the crowd and its ways, both as a physician and a philosopher, but like many philosophers he became prejudiced when mass movements or tendencies threatened to jostle him personally.

Dr. Massingbird, loitering on the outskirts of one of the human swarms, had been

surprised to see the figure of his male-servant bob up above the crowded heads. Was Slopp among the orators and the prophets? Certainly, the fellow had the gloom of a Jeremiah. Dr. Massingbird had stood to listen to the man who opened his front door. The son of Samuel had been in a bitter and sneering mood. Venom had dribbled from him.

Moreover, Augustus had been in a plausible and a personal mood. If he was to denounce the selfishness of the exploiting classes, why not pin upon the board his own experiences in the house of Æsculapius? The medical profession! Pah,—all this bilge about service and the sick, and the voluntary hospitals! What about Harley Street, and the gold bugs and their brass plates and their greedy, brazen faces? Fat fees. The doctors were even worse than the lawyers and the merchants and stock-brokers, for they played the hocus-pocus game and talked of their noble profession. “Ghouls, my lads, gold-hunting ghouls.” Now, Dr. Massingbird did not humbug himself; he had a liking for fat fees, and he did perform a considerable amount of work for nothing. Also, he had strong views upon eugenics and the social problem class, and the inevitableness of the unfit in a world that is politically sentimental and perspires in its haste to be plausible and popular. He had listened to Mr. Augustus Slopp with interest. Disgraceful and dangerous tripe?—Yes, but appetizing tripe for the multitude. Augustus avoided explaining to the have-nots just why the haves may happen to be haves. Dr. Massingbird might have asked him the vulgar question, “Why have some people more guts?” Mr. Slopp was not upon the rostrum to emphasize the brutal truth that there may be good, elemental reasons for things being as they are. Society should have grown otherwise, with the currants nicely distributed in a communal cake. So he was urging the have-nots to plunder the haves, and so, bring forth a new heaven upon earth, the communists’ *reductio ad absurdum*.

Dr. Massingbird had strolled home, feeling positively prejudiced against the orator. Keep that fellow in his house, a smug and funereal fellow who went out and blazed in Hyde Park! Dr. Massingbird had waited till the evening, and then, with cigar lit, and an Edgar Wallace in his hand, he had rung for Augustus.

“Oh,—by the way, Slopp, I did not know you were an orator. Yes, I was one of the audience to-day. Really, I don’t think your conscience should permit you to open my door.”

Augustus had stood pale and blinking, trapped in this servile situation.

“Do you doubt my sincerity, sir?”

“Let me ask you a question, my good man. Do you really believe all that disgraceful rubbish?”

Good man! Disgraceful rubbish! Augustus had trembled on his long shanks and dreamed of halters and lamp-posts.

“You cannot insult me, sir, because——”

“I’m not insulting you, Slopp. I’m asking you whether—as a communist—you consider it consistent to——”

“I don’t trade upon disease.”

Dr. Massingbird had reached for his Edgar Wallace.

“Oh, not Hyde Park, please, Slopp. You and your wife can find other employment.”

Emily came to Highbury Terrace. With her back to the gradual greenness of the year, and her thin face to the big blue door, she rang the Kesteven bell. This might be the House of Snobs, and she had come to it as a bitter suppliant, but if her House of Snobs did not open its door to her, she was ready for a resounding row.

Arch answered Emily’s challenge; Arch with her dark hair prettily waved, and her fine shape sheathed in black.

“Good morning,” said Emily, “I’m here to see your mistress.”

Emily had a genius for being offensive, but Mary Arch’s clean, calm pallor was ice to the redness of Emily.

“You want to see Mrs. Kesteven?”

Emily’s nose was in the air,—Hoity-toity! What price the pride of parlour-maids?

“Yes,—I do.”

Arch gazed steadily and with frank dislike at Emily.

“I’m afraid you cannot see Mrs. Kesteven.”

“Oh, and why not?”

“Because Mrs. Kesteven and Mr. Kesteven are in America.”

And Arch closed the blue door.

CHAPTER XIX

Looking out of the window of a Pullman car Karl saw England in the Spring, cherry trees in flower, lambs at play. Rebecca and her son had returned from the United States by way of Paris, and Paris and Rebecca had not agreed too well with each other. She had not felt happy in their very expensive hotel, and in its still more expensive restaurant. She had not liked the waiters, or the flunkeys, or the people in the shops, nor had her shrewdness been deceived by the polite insolence of Paris, its cold and ironic stare. Nothing could have been more excellent than the food, and possibly Karl's mother had eaten too much of it, but she had suffered from the conviction that Paris laughed at you behind your back. A fat old cow to be milked! Paris pandered to you, and made fun of you, and it was not nice fun.

"I don't like these people, Karl. They make me feel they are running a menagerie. Mrs. Hippo buys a hat!"

Karl had purchased her a very beautiful ring and paid a beautiful price for it. Also, he had been generous with his tips, while feeling that Paris could be quite inhumanly polite just so long as you tipped it exorbitantly.

"All right. Let's go home. We only know the Paris of the Americans."

"I don't want to know any more of it," said his mother.

The train was running along an embankment, and Karl, looking down into a wood saw the earth powdered with primroses. Pale gold and the bronze of last year's leaves. Could one buy primroses? But, of course, bunched up in flower shops. Yes, and the world had been too much flower-shop run by bright and sophisticated young women. For months Charles Kesteven had been able to purchase anything he pleased. He had explored to the full the extravagance of wealth. He had bought shirts of various colours, silk pyjamas, shoes, patent leather evening boots, cigars, cigarette-cases, ties, underclothing, socks for every mood, gloves, hats, a gold watch, books, a most expensive car, two gramophones, a pianola, jewellery and furs for his mother, beautiful glass, old china and silver, Georgian furniture, a picture or two, fur-lined slippers, an assortment of wines. He was tailored serenely by Savile Row. Head waiters hurried to greet him and to bow him to some particular table. His portrait could be seen in the cases and windows of West End photographers.

But those primroses, and the cherry blossom? Could money command the faces of flowers? Would they smirk like the commercialists and accord you unlimited

credit? Could one splash money over the green earth and discover some mystical unmetallic savour?

His mother had opened her eyes and was watching her son. He was man, yet somehow still the child exploring the world's sweetshop, but rather like a wise child gravely tasting reality. Rebecca had enjoyed the successful show; she was still enjoying it, riding on her triumphal car and throwing flowers and favours right and left. But her affection transcended the flesh, and being the mother of her son she too could gaze with ironical amusement at the crowd, and remember that day in Epping when she and her beloved had smelt the mayflower. She saw in her son that child creature the artist, absorbed in the great game of creating, and caring but superficially for the semblance of success. She too had her artistry, for the Essex Road had been more than a second-hand clothes shop. Did she wish her beloved to be rich and powerful and famous? Most certainly she did, but she desired more for him than riches. Consider the lilies of the field!

Karl, becoming conscious of her scrutiny, turned his face to her. That there was an unasked question in her eyes was somehow evident to him. He smiled, and glanced again at this England in the Spring, and almost his face was wistful. Was he remembering his Bavarian days?

"Why shouldn't we have a little place in the country?"

"Why not, my dear."

"I mean—as well as in town. Rather pleasant to disappear and get lost."

Lost? Just what did he mean by that? Was the child growing tired of being a public person, a popular prodigy? Was he wise in divining how poisonous too much publicity can become? To be applauded or spat upon, to be both an idol and a sneering-block, news, notorious. Had not Sir Oscar said to her, "The thing is to keep the fools from spoiling him."

He was looking out of the window.

"Did you see those primroses?"

She had seen them.

"If you had to choose between owning half Bond Street and a wood full of primroses, well—which?"

Had she reminded him that a man cannot live on primroses she would not have loved him, and just because she loved him and was wise, she could run wild with her child in a world of absurd make-believe, a fat old woman floating like a bubble into paradise, the child-man's world of sweet and strange simplicities.

"What a lovely idea. Let's go and look."

He gave her a quick, keen glance.

“You really mean it?”

She crinkled up her face at him with sparkles of light in her eyes.

“Fresh green peas, my dear, green peas and peace.”

He looked at her with laughing affection. Would he ever find a woman who could play with him as his mother played?

At Highbury Terrace the admirable Arch awaited them, cool and reassuring with her pretty pallor and her slightly husky voice. Yes, she had received Mrs. Kesteven’s telegram; both house and dinner were prepared for them, and there were flowers in the vases. Arch stood to help Rebecca off with her fur coat.

“I hope you have had a good time, madam?”

Karl’s mother assured her that everything had been wonderful. And had not Arch any untoward happenings to report? When one came home one expected to be assailed with bad news, that a frozen pipe had burst or that someone wished to give notice.

“No, nothing, madam.”

“Well, that’s a comfort.”

“I’m afraid there are a terrible lot of letters for Mr. Karl. I have them in the clothes basket.”

“Arch,” said Mrs. Kesteven, “why are women such silly fools? Have you ever written to a celebrity?”

Mary Arch had not.

Meanwhile, the taxi-man had left a little mountain of luggage in the hall, taken his tip and fare and disappeared. Rebecca’s trunk was one of those massive structures bound with metal, Karl’s of leather. Also, there were suit-cases and dressing-cases, and a kit-bag, and Mary Arch stood and contemplated the luggage.

“I’ll get Euphemia to help me with the trunks.”

She had picked up Karl’s kit-bag and was about to carry it up the stairs when Karl came back from hanging up his coat.

“I’ll take that, Mary.”

“I can manage, sir.”

“Leave it to me.”

He took the kit-bag from her and ran up the stairs with it. Returning, he met her with a suit-case, and she stood aside against the wall.

“I told you not to, Mary.”

“I’m stronger than you think, sir.”

He let her go, and went down to consider his mother’s trunk. If he could get the thing on his back he could manage to carry it upstairs, and turning the trunk on its

end, he tried to lift it and swing it up. The weight of the thing overbalanced him and drove him against the wall. A metal-bound corner scarred the wallpaper.

His mother had gone below to kiss Euphemia, and Karl heard a voice on the stairs.

“O, you mustn’t, sir. I can take one end.”

She seemed to pause for a moment, her eyes fixed on his, and then her lashes fell.

“Let me take one end.”

But Karl had been challenged by that rock of a trunk. Had he not seen a little French porter get the thing on his back and carry it into the hotel.

“Just give me a hand, Mary. On my back.”

“You mustn’t, sir.”

He was curt with her.

“I’m damned well going to.”

Coerced, she helped him to get the thing on his back, but she followed close behind with her hands helping to support the burden, her eyes anxious, her body braced to steady him should he falter.

2

On the borders of Surrey and Sussex, Karl and his mother discovered Burntshaw Place, a little old Queen Anne house with white window-frames, stone quoins and a pediment, set among cedars in a neglected garden. Parkland surrounded it, rolling country speared with clumps of beech and Scotch fir. There was a lake in a green hollow, with swans on it, an orchard full of daffodils, a walled garden, old red-brick outhouses and a stable with a cupola and clock whose hands stood still at twenty-eight minutes past seven. Karl’s mother was amused by the clock.

“Always—just dinner time here, my dear.”

But Karl was in a serious mood. He had left his light-blue speed car—the machine had raced at Brooklands—where the drive spread out before the house. He stood in the middle of a weedy space, and looked at the house. Its white shutters were closed in the lower windows, the brass knocker on the big white door was a greenish gold; a vine, wistaria and an old magnolia covered the brick-work. Somewhere in high trees rooks were cawing. Karl could see a flowery mass of fruit blossom above a red wall. The great cedar was immensely still, with the sunlight making patterns on the grass.

“Six thousand pounds,” said his mother; “I wonder what it is like inside?”

Karl produced a key. The agent had offered to come and show them over, but Karl had discouraged the gentleman.

“Let’s look. Three miles from a station.”

“Terrible trouble with servants, my dear.”

Karl did not seem to hear her. He had unlocked the door, and then turned to look again at that English landscape. Like the face of some predestined woman it had made itself desired by him instantly and strangely. You could not define beauty, or describe it adequately. It just was, like the look in the eyes of a lover.

“Fifty-three acres, mother, of that.”

“Yes, my dear.”

She did not ask him what he would do with it. What did a man do with beauty? If he was wise he left it alone in a world whose passion for progress can leave nothing alone.

His mother, being a woman, was prepared to find many ancient horrors in Burntshaw’s interior. Had not she and Karl been sent to explore scores of country houses, places full of dark tube-like passages and mouldy sculleries, vast stale cupboards, and grates that should have been scrap-iron? She had felt Karl’s passion to possess, for a man can be captured by a few daffodils and a mass of fruit blossom, and ignore such domestic elementals as kitchen ranges, but Burntshaw was not the antique horror she had feared. Actually it possessed two bathrooms, though the water had to be pumped from an estate well. It had an electric light installation of its own, and the kitchen quarters had been remodelled just before the war. Scullery, pantry and larder were not like damp dungeons. The old house had a soft and sunny serenity, and a dining-room that retained its painted and panelled walls and beautifully moulded ceiling.

“Not so bad, my dear.”

“I wonder what it would cost us to run?”

“Need you worry,” said his mother. “Offer them four thousand five hundred for the place. Probably, they’ll jump at it.”

Karl bought Burntshaw Place for five thousand pounds.

If Mr. Charles Kesteven wished to have a country house, well, he should have that house, and his mother proceeded to act as his agent. She had money of her own to spend, for Mr. Max Isenstein’s advice to her with regard to rubber and tea shares had been fortunate, and she had a happy habit of buying and selling at the right moment and taking her profit. The furnishing of Burntshaw was to be her affair, also—the painting and decorating, and Rebecca began to enjoy herself. Burntshaw had

three country towns and shopping centres at almost equal distance, and Rebecca selected a firm of decorators in each town and set them estimating. The difference in the three estimates amused her. Rebecca was a pawky person. She did not accept the cheapest estimate, but the middle one of the three.

Male labour was to be had for the winking of an eyelid, but what price the petticoats? When Burntshaw was in use, Highbury Terrace might be put to sleep, with Rebecca's diamond necklace and her rings deposited in the bank. But would the same staff serve? Would Arch and Euphemia object to being transported into the country and set to operate a second establishment? The solution was the most practical one, but Euphemia had an old mother in Holloway, and a passion for the "Pictures."

Rebecca experimented with Arch. She took Mary Arch down with her for a week-end and put up at a Dorking inn. Karl was camping out in Burntshaw Park and recapturing his Bavarian days. He had engaged a couple of gardeners; there were two cottages on the estate, and Karl had put the men and their wives into them. Burntshaw House was full of painters and paperhangers, and Karl's racing car reposed in the coach-house.

To these men Karl was something of a surprise packet. A consignment of garden tools had arrived from a Dorking ironmonger's, and among the tools was a scythe. The Burntshaw lawns were young hayfields, and needed scything before a mowing machine could shave them.

When Karl appeared with his scythe, Lavender, his senior man, a long, lanky, uncommunicative creature, was bluntly and unexpectedly candid.

"Do you think you'll get along with that, sir?"

Karl smiled at Lavender. He liked the man, his taciturnity, his attention to business, a frankness that was refreshing.

"I'll have a try."

Lavender did not wink at Jackson, his second. Both of them were hoeing the weedy drive, and they went on with their work as though the eccentricities of a young gentleman did not concern them. But they were interested. They exchanged looks and nods. The young boss would soon get tired and in a tangle. A couple of painters taking a rest, and lounging at a window, watched the figure in its blue stockings, brown plus fours and cream coloured shirt.

"Going to be a bit funny, Bill, what?"

But there was no humour in the exhibition. The English scythe was not like the Bavarian scythe, but Karl soon got the swing of it, and the grass began to fall steadily and sweetly. Lavender, leaning on his rake, his cap pushed back, watched

Karl with an air of sombre curiosity. Where had this young toff learnt to handle that most difficult of tools? Besides, there was not a country lad in a hundred who could swing a scythe in that fashion.

The joke was not against Karl. Jackson grimaced and spat.

“Well,—that’s a bit of unexpected.”

Said Lavender, “And he doesn’t poke about anyhow. He takes a swathe.”

The two painters went back to work.

“Well,—fancy a gent with a swank car like that sweating in his own garden.”

“It oughtn’t to be allowed,” said his mate.

“Tell you what, he must have wangled and got on the land in the war.”

On the Sunday morning when Mrs. Kesteven drove with Arch to Burntshaw the day was still and grey. Rebecca felt a little peeved with the weather; it might have helped to brighten up the morning and to persuade Arch that Burntshaw was not too dreadfully dull. They saw Karl’s tent, but no Karl. And if the day was grey and silent so was the girl. Never a great talker, Arch seemed to move as though she had wrapped herself in a sheath of silence. She followed her mistress about the place, looked calmly and consideringly into rooms and out of windows, and was provokingly mute. Karl’s mother became convinced that Mary Arch was not liking this country house and was preparing to oppose any suggestion that she should come and live in it.

“Go and look at the kitchen, Mary. I want to see what the men have been doing upstairs.”

She left Mary Arch in the hall. The hall had two long windows giving upon the garden and park, and Mary Arch walked to the right-hand window and stood at gaze. Her eyes were wide and tranquil, the eyes of a woman who lived secretly with herself, and could smile strangely upon flowers, a child, or a puppy. She liked the quiet breathing of the house, those old trees, the peaceful spaces, that water in the green hollow. And while she was standing there a young man appeared with a scythe on his shoulder, and began to mow the grass beyond the cedars. Mr. Karl! But how surprising, and yet here—how right.

Having been told to explore, Arch did so, and presently Rebecca heard the woman’s footsteps on the uncarpeted stairs. Karl’s mother had been making sure that her beloved’s particular upper-chamber where he was to work had had its walls coloured the proper tint of primrose. She looked over the carved balustrade of the old stair-case, and saw Arch’s wide pale face floating below her.

“Well, Mary?”

“I think it is lovely, madam.”

“A little quiet after Upper Street.”

“I like it quiet.”

Rebecca was pleasantly surprised. Was it possible that this efficient and reticent young woman would consent to do duty in this second house far from trams and motor-buses, and the shops with their elevenpenny-three-farthings distractions?

“I suppose it wouldn’t appeal to you, Mary, to come down here with us in the summer?”

Arch did not hesitate. “I’m quite ready to come, madam.”

“Of course—we will make it worth your while.”

“It’s not just wages, madam. I shall like being here.”

Admirable and unexpected creature! Rebecca, much relieved, began to take Arch into a capacious confidence. Burntshaw would be good for Mr. Karl’s work, yes,—London could burn you up. Now, what about a cook? Did Arch think that Euphemia would consent to live in the country for six months, or should they try to engage a local woman? After all, the matter did concern Mary Arch; she was not the sort of woman who would like to share life with some noisy, perspiring person.

“I’m quite sure Euphemia would come, madam, if she could see her mother once a week.”

“We could arrange that,” said Rebecca. “Now, do you think you two could manage? Probably, we could get in one of the gardeners’ wives to help.”

Arch, with one hand caressing the handrail, looked across at a landing window which was filled with green landscape and blue sky.

“I’m quite sure we can manage, madam.”

3

The quality which appeared to annoy Charles Kesteven’s critics was his unexpectedness. No doubt his youth, his good looks, his wealth, and his absurd popularity with the public were irritating to a number of obscure and shabby scribblers who lived mostly in a state of penury. Moreover, they had labelled him, and Karl would persist in casting his label. “Golden Rain” had gone on tour, and was continuing to be a deluge in the States. “Captain Carter” was crowding his house and expecting to appear in New York in the fall. Incidentally, Charles Kesteven was to accept £20,000 for the film rights of “Captain Carter.” “Thank God,—but the Inland Revenue took ten bob in the pound or so off the young blighter.” But when Sir Oscar Bloom staged “Harlequinade” at one of his London theatres, Olympus gave voice like a rookery. The critics cawed in chorus. It was a preposterous play.

Mr. Slattery of the *Sunday Tribune* said that Karl had gone “rustic.”

For, “Harlequinade” was fourth dimensional and fantastic, moonlight and stardust and strange blue glooms. It possessed such a quality of pure inspiration, was so rich in texture and so finely proportioned, that Karl’s enemies were exasperated. They had been shouting “Cheap Jack” at him, and here was this young devil producing work that was most damnably—it. Yet, though “Harlequinade” met with ridicule and abuse, the public poured to see it, a public that had crowded to “Dear Brutus” and “Mary Rose.” Karl had not out-Barried Barrie. He had soared into beautiful make-believe, carried all the world’s children with him, and left the critics—cawing below.

Karl read some of the critiques of “Harlequinade,” Mr. Osbert Slattery’s, and especially that of Mr. William Slade. Mr. Slade’s review was so brilliant and venomous that Karl was whipped momentarily to a white fierceness. Should he reply to Mr. William Slade? In the old days a gentleman would have sent his servants to give the scurrilous little wretch a drubbing. Karl pinned the cutting on his wall and went out to help Lavender who was cutting a path through the bracken in the wood behind the house. Rebecca was growing more noticeably stout, and since the tall ferns denied the beauty of the wood to her, Karl had ordered paths to be cut.

Swinging his scythe in the green glooms he forgot Mr. Slade, and listened to Lavender. Lavender had grown more communicative. He had been given to understand that his young employer was a great man. Evidently he was a rich one. But the fierce sensitiveness of Karl was somehow in accord with the dour and hidden sensitiveness of this peasant. Lavender had a world of his own and was wise in it, and what he knew was what he had seen and pondered upon. He was capable of teaching Karl many things,—this rustic.

“What’s that nest up there—in that fir tree?”

The tree was a larch, and not a fir.

“A grey squirrel’s.”

“Pretty little beasts.”

But Lavender had no good things to say of the grey squirrel. His scythe purred through the bracken.

Meanwhile, in Karl’s writing-room, Mary Arch, who had come in to dust, stood reading the paragraph Karl had pinned to the wall. Mary Arch had seen “Harlequinade” and Mr. Slade’s attempt at assassination shocked her. How was it possible for anyone to write of so beautiful and haunting a play as Mr. Slade had written of it? Mary Arch was innocent in the jealous world of men. She had not seen the little petulant face, and bitter mouth and eyes of William Slade, and she had not seen one of Mr. Slade’s plays. Nor had the public.

Mrs. Kesteven, slowly climbing the stairs, and somewhat out of breath, waddled across the heavily carpeted landing to surprise Arch in that spacious, sunny room. Rebecca's progress might be ponderous, but it was a silent shuffle, and she arrived in the doorway before the girl became aware of her nearness. Arch was reading Mr. Slade's criticism of "Harlequinade." Surprised, she gravely and silently resumed her dusting. It was Rebecca's turn to discover Mr. William Slade pinned to the wall. She left him there. No doubt her son had had reasons of his own for pinning up that poisonous thing like vermin in a gamekeeper's larder. So, Mary Arch had been reading the critique. Well, well! Might not a parlourmaid be among the prophets? Arch was a very intelligent young woman, and Rebecca liked talking to her.

"What do you think of that, Mary?"

Arch glanced at her swiftly.

"You mean—the thing on the wall, madam?"

"I do."

"It is terribly untrue," said Arch.

"My dear, they are very vexed with Mr. Karl, very vexed indeed."

Arch crossed the room for her carpet-sweeper and proceeded to run it to and fro over the blue pile carpet.

"Mr. Karl shouldn't have to see such things."

"He doesn't as a rule, Arch. That slipped past me. Well, we'll leave it there. When Mr. Karl is feeling a little bored, it may amuse him."

It is the general opinion that a hostile press can smother a play at birth, but Charles Kesteven's plays were to prove singular exceptions. His popularity was such that the critics did not matter, and his youth made it unlikely that the scandal of his success could be corrected by contemptuous obituary notices. Karl refused to be either eradicated or buried. He found defenders among his public, some of whom actually wrote to the press to protest against the prejudice of his critics. One *Daily* opened its pages to a public discussion of the Art of Charles Kesteven, a most unusual proceeding, but a popular one. Evidently, the man in the street and the woman from everywhere were on the side of the dramatist, and Karl's detractors, realizing that he was receiving added publicity, ceased cawing. They were to subject him in the future to a strangling silence. No new play by Charles Kesteven received serious attention. There was a shrugging of the shoulders. "I have never seen a Kesteven play, and I hope I may never see one." But the public crowded to see them. Cinematograph renderings went all over the world. The Rookery might assume that Charles Kesteven was the Charles Garvice of the stage, but a coming generation was to write more generously of the art of Rebecca's beloved.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Kesteven and her son shared in a delightful “incident.”

When “Harlequinade” reached its hundredth night, the Kestevens gave a champagne party on the stage after the evening’s performance. The gesture may have been ironical, but invitations were distributed to the press. “Let them All come,” and the most unexpected people did assemble. There was a magnificent crush. The charge could not be cast against Karl that by providing free champagne and kickshaws he expected to be rewarded with a free puff, but it did surprise him to see Mr. Oswald Slattery in the crowd. Mr. Slattery was a large, sallow, constipated, ominous fellow who cultivated a fine slovenliness and a reputation for ruthless banditry. His self-assurance was as thick as his sallow skin. Oswald Slattery had a queer, high-pitched voice, which, emerging in staccato spurts from his large person, suggested one of those toys that squeak when pressure is applied. Mr. Slattery had castigated Karl, but that was all in the day’s business, and as a pressman he had been invited to drink Karl’s champagne.

Mr. Slattery liked champagne, but that was not the point of the needle. It happened that Karl and his mother were brought close to Mr. Slattery in the crush. Mr. Slattery had listeners. He could be witty and scandalous, and his ominous, crapulent bulk overawed possible protests. People were afraid of this big bandit. Abruptly, above the burble of voices, Mr. Slattery was heard to say—“Harlequinade!—Bacon and eggs in paradise! It intrigues me that both play and playwright should be the by-product of that old hippopotamus.” Karl heard the remark. So did Mrs. Kesteven, and Charles Kesteven saw his mother wince. The spasm was momentary. She was able to smile at the world and say—“That’s me!” But Karl had his white, war face. As a host he should not have done the thing he did, but a world whose toes had been trodden on by Slattery forgave him.

He worked his way in front of Mr. Slattery, and standing in front of him, he put out a deliberate hand and took the glass from Slattery.

“My champagne,—I think.”

Karl emptied the glass and offered to return it to his guest.

Mr. Slattery stared at Karl, and then with slow, glutinous movements, made his way through the crowd. He had glanced back ominously and invitingly at Karl, and in passing his mother Karl left Mr. Slattery’s empty glass with her. Dramatist and critic found themselves more or less alone at the top of a flight of stone stairs.

“Thanks for your courtesy, Mr. Kesteven.”

Karl stood strung and ready, confronting this black bulk.

“You have every right to say what you like about me, Mr. Slattery, but you will not be impudent in public about a certain person.”

Mr. Slattery was unwise. He said something bright about smacking a small boy's swollen head, and Karl hit him. He knew that he should not have hit Mr. Oswald Slattery, though he had the classical case of Charles Kemble's clubbing of Westmacott to justify him. The blow remained with him as a luscious memory. Mr. Slattery went backwards down the stairs, a large, black, disorderly carcass, to gather himself up and come blundering back at Karl. Karl hit him again, and that second blow sufficed. Mr. Slattery was shepherded to the stage-door by a couple of attendants, and put into a taxi. He was sick in the taxi.

CHAPTER XX

The Kestevens said good-bye to Highbury.

The suggestion was Rebecca's. No. 73 Highbury Terrace had been a half-way house, and since Burntshaw was so much more in keeping with Karl's mood of the moment, his mother spoke of a flat in town. Highbury had ceased to be either practical or social. It lay on the wrong side of the metropolis in relation to Burntshaw, and it belonged to a phase of life that had passed. Moreover, by exchanging it for a flat the labours of Arch and Euphemia would be conserved.

The Kestevens found a flat in Marchmont Mansions, Marchmont Street, W. Some silence was essential, and the flat comprised the whole top floor. Marchmont Mansions possessed a lift, otherwise those flights of stairs would have made the place impossible for Rebecca. The lease of No. 73 was disposed of, and the furniture transferred either to the flat or to Burntshaw. It was not without some regret that Rebecca left Highbury Terrace, for she had enjoyed some of her happiest and most adventurous days in that house, but in a changing world, and especially in Karl's world, adaptations were necessary.

Burntshaw itself was in the midst of a world of adaptations. The revolution or evolution in Arcady was beginning, and though the particular landscape was not yet developing a spotty rash of bungalows and villas, the established order was in a state of flux. Old people were going; new people coming, just as the Kestevens had arrived. The petrol engine was taking control. Estates were being sold or split up. The Burntshaw country had ceased for a generation to be county. The city had spilled over into it, men of substance whose cult was cash, big business, and its women. It was a society that saluted success, especially so when success was financially obvious. Quite a number of people called upon the Kestevens. Karl was asked to play tennis. As yet he did not play that game.

His life at Burntshaw might have appeared paradoxical. It seemed to evolve neither from the Essex Road nor the theatrical world. It was a curious digression, especially for so young a man and so modern a man as Karl. But modernity is merely a phase. There were elements in Charles Kesteven that were not urban. He did not consciously observe that London is a furnace, and that the artist and his inspiration may be consumed in that furnace, nor would he have accepted the modern assumption that no man can be a great artist unless he is a blackguard. You could be in Babylon and yet not of it. You might wander in a world of strange

women, yet not have your locks shorn by a multitude of Delilahs. Karl had had a surfeit of sex. Every sort of woman had swarmed on him, not only because of the glamour of success, but because he was peculiarly attractive to women. And in Burntshaw he was discovering those secrets that are essential to some craftsmen. Like Conrad he could sail to many strange places and never find them sordid. To the peasant muck is more than muck. The urban mind can contemplate muck and in describing it make it more muckish, while missing the stuff's significance. That was the strange thing about Karl; he was half a Jew; he had been born and bred in the Essex Road; his father had been one of those sour products of the bitter streets, but Karl was country minded.

He seemed to begin his boyhood over again at Burntshaw, nor was it mere boyishness. His maturity was to shape itself in that green and lovely solitude. It had won him from the first like the face of some predestined woman, and Karl, who had been offered a world of promiscuity and sex adventure under every sort of flag, was tending towards idealism. It was not conscious idealism. He understood the saying that when a man is young he wants to be chaste and cannot, and that when he is old he wants to be wanton and cannot. The treacheries of sex! Had he not experienced them? And even if you tried to be progressive and to regard all sex expression as permissible, and loyalty to one woman as a species of repressive sin, was not the ideal of one-ness somehow splendid? You might never succeed in being faithful to one woman; and yet—you might call the lapse incidental, and strive with a kind of anguish towards that one-ness. You would look into the eyes of that one woman, grieve in secret and know that though in a moment of passion you have given a shred of raw flesh to some other, the essential self of you was hers.

But at this period his mother was the one woman in his life.

Karl loved the routine of Burntshaw.

He was up at six, and lighting his patent kettle for early morning tea. Mary Arch left in his room four slices of thin bread and butter covered by a plate. In pyjamas and a brilliant green and gold silk dressing-gown Karl sat down at his table in the window, and lit a pipe, and let himself look at the morning. This England was to him like some Shakespearean scene, green glades, and the stateliness of ancient trees, sunlight on grassy slopes, little mysterious vistas. Some other self seemed to emerge, and walk the earth, and a voice would say to him—"Write." Burntshaw breakfasted at 8.30, but Karl was out by half-past seven, running down to the lake for a plunge. From nine till ten he sat in his upper room, and all was peace. Arch never attempted to climb the stairs until she knew that Mr. Karl had finished work, and even the saturnine Lavender had realized that no activities were allowed in front of the house

until his employer had finished scribbling. Lavender had accepted the strangeness of such a repression.—Playing with words—on paper! And to grow rich on it!

But Karl was using his hands on other tasks. He liked to get into old clothes and work. Burntshaw wood had been neglected; it was full of dead and dying trees, and fallen timber, and Karl learnt to swing a felling-axe. It took him a month to make himself somewhat efficient, and to bring the head of the axe true to the mark, and cut a neat wedge instead of mauling the trunk. He learnt to throw a tree just where he pleased. He hoed weeds in the sun, mowed grass, learnt how to summer-prune fruit trees and to trim a hedge.—After lunch he would lie in a hammock under one of the cedars, read, fall asleep.

That such a life as this should be surprising to some of his contemporaries was understandable. Had not Mr. Slattery accused Karl of going rustic? Yet this contact with the earth and its elemental things seemed to refresh in Karl that other world of the imagination. He would come in feeling good. His body had a smoothness. Moreover, he was spending himself amid beautiful things, and absorbing the essence of their beauty. A thousand plants and creatures had strange ways of their own. You passed by them blindly until the country gave you eyes. Karl had wondered in the beginning why a man like Lavender saw so much more than he did. A mere peasant! Lavender could point out birds whom no townsman would ever discover. Lavender was wise as to the ways of insects, mostly his enemies. Had Karl ever studied the life history of the codlin moth and the way its grub got itself into the heart of an apple? Did Karl know how to track down a wasp's nest by watching the insect's line of flight? Could Karl set a mole trap? Why was it good policy to keep bees? Why did those gooseberry bushes need burning? A Victoria plum had developed silver leaf. What was silver leaf? Whence came the grub in the raspberry? That a young man should find himself interested in these phenomena—was significant.

Burntshaw had for him a strange beauty. He liked to be out in the early morning when the dew was on the grass, and in the twilight when there were strange scents as the dew fell. Sunsets and dawns, and the heat of summer noons, and sudden rushing rain. Burntshaw was full of pictures and strange pageantry, a world in which there was always something to watch, something to do.

His mother made jam, and even proposed to brew home-made wines. Lavender had a little cellar of his own, gooseberry, dandelion, rhubarb, beetroot, elderberry wine. Rebecca was making herself take exercise. She said to herself, "It ought to get rid of some of my fat." But it didn't. Sometimes she yawned just a little, but then when the ennui was merely incipient her beloved would emerge from Arcady.

"Let's go down to the sea."

Rebecca would echo him, "Yes, let's."

Or there would be those days in London. Rebecca would go up with an immense shopping list in a Daimler car hired from Dorking, and waddle through Harrods'. She had a passion for shopping.—There would be a theatre, or a lunch, or an afternoon spent behind the scenes at a Kesteven *matinée*, or before the scenes at somebody else's play. Sometimes, she and Karl took Arch with them and stayed in the flat. A dinner at Boulestin's. But Boulestin's was so exquisite. It persuaded Rebecca to eat too much.

Tragic discovery! She was finding it difficult to crowd herself into the bucket seat of Karl's sports-car. To confess that she overfilled it would be to allow that she was being left behind in the race.

2

They reconditioned the grass tennis-court at Burntshaw, and since some social gestures were necessary, their neighbours were invited to play. Karl's tennis was so rudimentary that he refrained on these public occasions, and played host and ball-boy. These guests of his were pleasant and unexciting people, and included the vicar of a neighbouring parish, who wore grey flannel trousers; a young doctor, a few business men and their wives or daughters. To begin with, the men were a little shy of Karl. This was a strange fellow who produced plays, and appeared to play no game.

"Don't you hit a ball, Kesteven?"

"Too badly."

The women thought him fascinating.

Karl liked all these people mildly, and especially the parson. The only person he did not like was a Mr. Bernard Nutting who lived at Chellwood Mill with a very horticultural mother. Mrs. Nutting was full of botany. Her son was a tall, pale, very well-informed young man who read all the dramatic criticism in *The Times*, and the whole of the *Times Literary Supplement*. He was a quoter of other people's opinions, while producing them as his own. He knew exactly what play should be seen and what book should be read, and he told you so. He was quite capable of patronizing Karl. During tea he would give little lectures on the plays of the moment.

Karl thought Nutting a pestilent prig, and as a matter of fact so did most of his fellow guests, but so far as Karl was concerned, Nutting's significance was vicarious. It was Nutting who produced Miss Corah Wilding. He brought her with him one afternoon without apology or explanation. He was that sort of young man. The only

possible conclusion to be drawn was that Miss Wilding was his fiancée, to be introduced anywhere and everywhere.

Karl had seen the girl before. Actually, he had exchanged a few words with her. A very shabby two-seater had been parked one morning behind his speed-model in Dorking High Street. A flat tyre had prompted Miss Wilding to borrow a tyre-pump. —“Thanks—so much.” Karl had offered to inflate the tyre for her, and in return she had thrust at him a cigarette-case. “Have one.—Thanks so much.” But when Karl’s mother set eyes upon this hungry, red-headed, restless young woman, she sat up and took notice.

Miss Wilding played a very good game of tennis. She appeared surprised that Karl did not play.

“Don’t you do this?”

Karl looked at her as though she was a long way off.

“Rather too badly.”

She was unexpectedly disinclined to play tennis that afternoon. She confessed that she had an “elbow,” and was wishing to rest it. This was the first time Mr. Nutting had heard of the elbow. He was piqued, and he was to be still more seriously piqued before the afternoon was over. Miss Wilding, having come in contact with the real thing, was regarding “Nutty,” as she called him, as the shopwalker. He had bowed her into the shop, and the shop was Karl. She had a curious, casual, intimate way with her. Her glances were oblique but unflinching.

“That’s a priceless car you’ve got.”

Karl told her that he had bought the car after he had seen it race at Brooklands. She said, “How perfectly thrilling! What do you do in her?” “O, just trundle about,” said Karl. Apparently, Corah Wilding thought this very pert and witty of him. Trundle about! She supposed that the blue racer could do seventy on a straight piece of road. Karl agreed with her. The speedometer had touched seventy on an occasion when his mother had not been with him.

The girl told him that she adored his plays. And she would love to see his car. She was interested in cars. So, he took her to the coach-house garage, and she sat in one of the bucket-seats and fiddled with the controls, and made amber eyes at Karl. She had shed Bernard Nutting, and Bernard Nutting had gone completely off his service, and was inco-ordinately jealous.

“My poor old crock won’t do forty.”

“Like speed?” asked Karl.

She laughed up at him.

“Suppose—I’m rapid. It’s the thrill.”

Most certainly she was capable of thrills. Karl had a feeling that she expected him to give her an experimental run. And then Mr. Nutting appeared, trying to assimilate perspiration and nonchalance. "Hallo, coveting Kesteven's swank-machine? Come on, you're wanted, Corah." Mr. Nutting squeezed the bulb of Karl's horn, and caused it to emit ironical honks. He looked with pale hostility at Karl. "That's a symbol of—popular—success, Kesteven." Karl caught the sneer, and smiled. He had no doubt that Bernard Nutting could refer to "Harlequinade" as strawberry jam for the suburbs, and Karl was sufficiently human to spoil Mr. Nutting's pastry and conserve. At the end of the afternoon he offered to drive Corah Wilding home. Mr. Nutting attempted to race him, and was left somewhere in last month's literary supplement. The blue car touched sixty-five, and the girl's arm touched—Karl's.

Very rarely did Rebecca criticize a particular woman to her son. Most men can be complete fools about women, but his mother had found Karl intuitive and shrewd. She was sitting in a basket-chair on the lawn, stroking the ears of their latest pet, a black spaniel, when she heard the blue car returning. Rebecca smiled to herself, and patted the dog. Karl's adventure had lasted less than thirty minutes, which suggested that he had dropped that young female at her house, and not been lured into it. Karl put the car away, and strolled down, hands in trouser pockets, to where his mother was sitting. The spaniel rushed to meet him.

Karl picked the dog up, and holding him like a baby in arms, had his chin licked. He and his mother smiled at each other.

"You haven't been long, my dear."

"O, we went the pace. I didn't go in."

He replaced the dog in his mother's lap.

"Rather a hectic young woman."

"Just about as—fast—as you make them, my dear. Attracted?"

"Not exactly."

"Don't be. Greedy, my dear, hot and greedy. Leave her to dear Bernard. She might be good for him."

Karl laughed.

"Well, as a matter of fact—I rather felt like giving that fellow my exhaust. And he had it. You look a bit tired, mater. What about a cocktail?"

Towards the end of September the Kestevens spent a long week-end in town.

There was the production of a new Kesteven play to be discussed, for Karl was developing ideas of his own upon production. He did not involve himself too intimately in the social psychology of the theatrical world, and for that very reason he retained his freshness, that innocence which is so necessary to the craftsman. He belonged to no school or clique, nor was he the culprit of any cult. Sir Oscar was ready to humour this rather aloof young man who copied nobody and was neither neo-this nor neo-that. Karl, too, had very definite notions on the casting of a play. Certain persons could not be permitted to express his characters, people whose insincerity and flashiness he disliked.

On the Saturday night Karl took his mother to dine at Boulestin's. He had called at Boulestin's earlier in the day and chosen a particular dinner. His mother liked oysters, and entrecote and Pêche Melba, quite unobtrusive subjects, but not as Boulestin's served them. Rebecca enjoyed herself, though she wondered whether her son noticed that it was becoming increasingly difficult for her to slip between a settee and a table. An observant and considerate waiter would enlarge the gap. What was near for her, might be far for Karl. She wore her diamonds. She allowed herself two glasses of dry champagne.

Afterwards she proposed walking back, at least as far as Piccadilly Circus. She had a wrap which would cover up her diamonds, and she was London minded for the moment, and in a mood for the fantasies of lights and of faces, and the strange sweet anguish of the great city at night. In the 'nineties Aubrey Beardsley would have drawn these two in black and white, the fat old Jewess and the young captive, but Aubrey Beardsley was dead and Satan tailless. If London was changing, so was its crowd. Rebecca would have said that it was a cleaner crowd, and the girls so much more attractive than the men.

In Shaftesbury Avenue they picked up a strolling taxi, and were driven to Marchmont Mansions. Karl took his mother up in the lift. Arch had lit the gas stove, for the September night was chilly, and Rebecca, sitting down on the sofa, unfastened her diamonds and held them out to her son.

"You had better look after these for me, dear."

Karl had a questioning face, and his mother made her confession.

"I am going into a nursing-home to-morrow."

Was she ill?—Why hadn't she told him?

"No, my dear, just a fast. And what better day to begin a fast than on the Sabbath. That's why I was a bad old woman to-night and let go at Boulestin's."

"Sure it is nothing else?"

"Quite. Just—slimming. Don't you remember that nice Mr. Slattery's remark?"

“Damn Slattery,” said Karl.

“Yes, damn him, my dear, by all means. But the last time I rode in your little car I nearly stuck in the seat. It is time to do something about it.”

Karl sat down beside her on the sofa, with her diamonds in the hollow of his hand.

“Why bother? I’ll buy another car. Do you think it is going to be good for you?”

“My dear doctor has a process. Besides, I get out of breath. I’ve tried dropping sugar and things. Of course—they are always the things one likes.”

“Why not go on liking them?”

His mother patted his shoulder.

“I don’t believe you’ve noticed——?”

“I haven’t. One doesn’t.—I suppose, when——”

“That’s one of the nicest things you have ever said to me, Karl. But I’m going to see if I can’t stop being a female Falstaff.”

CHAPTER XXI

Mary Arch was picking flowers for the house, Michaelmas daisies, perennial sunflowers, the second spikes of blue delphiniums. She had reached an understanding with Mr. Lavender with regard to her attacks upon his borders. They were—his—borders, and let there be no mistake about it, though Mr. Charles Kesteven had become a disciple of Miss Jekyll. Lavender had given Mary Arch a demonstration of how a border could be picked over without diminishing its splendour, and having found Mary neither destructive nor greedy, he let well alone. Lavender did allow that Arch was a very intelligent young woman. There was one peculiar thing about her, and Lavender, most observant of natural philosophers, had noticed it and drawn his own conclusions. Arch's voice did not vary. It did not suddenly go native when master and mistress were away, but remained quiet and controlled. You never heard Mary Arch break into slatternly laughter.

It was September, sunny and dry, save for heavy dews. Flowers, like fruit, should be gathered dry, and Arch had a sheaf of colour in the crook of her left arm, when she heard the sound of a car. She was at the back of the long border flanking the drive, and she stood to listen. This could not be Mr. Karl. She did not expect him back until six o'clock. Moreover, the engine's note was different.

The Wilding girl from Chellwood Place! Red hair blowing like some young Boadicea in a chariot, the car driven at speed, to be braked with squealing drums, and swung round in front of the house, leaving wheel scars on the gravel. Lavender would bless that young woman! Miss Wilding was out, and banging the door behind her. She had not seen Arch. She stood straddling on the Burntshaw doorstep, her tummy thrust out, waiting for someone to answer the bell.

Mary Arch came out of the great border, carrying her sheaf of many colours. She was sans cap and apron, and in black. She crossed the open space with that gliding walk of hers, a pale woman, cold to the casual eye. Miss Wilding, feet well apart, boldly staring, addressed her.

"Mr. Kesteven in?"

Arch stood straight and still, the colours of the flowers contrasting with her very black hair.

"Mr. Kesteven is in town."

The Wilding girl had an ugly lower lip.

"Aren't you the parlourmaid?"

“Yes.”

“When will Mr. Kesteven be back?”

They confronted each other, the wise and the unwise virgin, but Miss Wilding was determined to light her lamp and cadge oil from no one, thank you. Certainly not from this refined domestic with her uncomplaisant eyes and cool voice.

“We expect Mr. Kesteven back to dinner.”

We—indeed! The white door was open, and Miss Wilding flung round and walked into the house.

“Oh,—I’ll leave a note. Suppose I can scribble somewhere? Mrs. Kesteven not in?”

“Mrs. Kesteven is in a nursing-home.”

Arch, suddenly swift without seeming so, glided ahead and opened a door. “You will find paper—there.” Corah Wilding sauntered past her, sat down at Rebecca’s bureau, and turning a head, saw the parlourmaid posed in the doorway.

“You needn’t wait.”

Arch did not move. Damn the slut! Did she think that Miss Wilding would pinch some of the silver? But Arch was immovable, the sheaf of flowers in the hollow of her arm, her eyes steady. Red Head picked a sheet of paper from a pigeonhole, scribbled, found an envelope, addressed it, slipped the folded sheet in and licked the flap. There was a letter-weight, a slab of marble in the form of a book, in the bureau, and Arch saw Miss Wilding place the letter under the weight. So, she meant to be sure that the flap of the envelope would stick securely.

Miss Wilding’s chin jerked round.

“Right. I’ll leave that there. You’ll tell Mr. Kesteven. It’s important. I want him to play tennis.”

“Yes,” said Arch.

Miss Wilding rose, helped herself to one of Rebecca’s cigarettes, and a match from a cloisonné match-stand. She threw the spent match into the grate. Arch had come into the room, and Miss Wilding walked past her, the cigarette stuck in her sensual mouth. Arch, standing at a window, watched the girl bend down and give a pull to the starting-handle of her car. It was a desultory machine, over-driven and uncared for mechanically, and the engine seemed loth to fire. The girl wound angrily at the handle.

“Damn you, you bitch.”

So, might she have expressed herself to Arch. The engine started with an abrupt and ironic roar, and Miss Wilding, with the cigarette stuck in her mouth, slithered in, banged the door, and went off with a scattering of gravel.

Mary Arch carried her flowers to the pantry where the vases stood ready. Mr. Karl liked flowers about the house. Arch was laying the flowers gently on the draining-board when she heard the voice of Euphemia behind her.

“Who was that, dearie? I heard the bell, but my hands were all flour.”

Arch picked up a dark blue delphinium.

“Miss Wilding.”

Euphemia tittered.

“Coo, that young vamp! After the master.”

And Arch was silent. There were times when Euphemia’s criticisms of life were best left unanswered.

Mr. Kesteven reached Burntshaw shortly after six. Arch heard him drive the car into the garage. She was waiting for him in the hall, capped and aproned, ready to ask after her mistress and to tell him that a letter was waiting for him in his mother’s bureau. Karl liked Arch and her cool and impersonal efficiency, a woman who did her job and was never obviously woman.

“I’m afraid my mother is rather bored, Arch. Who was the caller?”

“Miss Wilding, sir.”

“Oh,—Miss Wilding!”

“Dinner as usual, sir?”

“Please.”

Karl’s treatment of the Wilding girl’s letter was not romantic. He read it, tore it up, and dropped the pieces in his mother’s wastepaper basket, and went out to see how certain work had progressed in the garden. He took a gun with him, for marauding rabbits from the park had broken bounds and were nibbling winter greens and young wallflowers and carnations. The coney population of Burntshaw had been allowed to propagate too freely by the previous tenants. They had been ferreted, dug out, shot at, but the rabbit is a pertinacious and prolific little beast, and there were burrows in the great rhododendron hedges where it was difficult to work with ferrets, and Karl would allow neither traps nor snares.

He was becoming quite a good shot, and he bowled over a two-third’s-grown buck in the rough grass below the walled garden. Lavender had been digging in wire along the old iron rail fences. Karl took the rabbit down to Lavender’s cottage and left it with Mrs. Lavender. By the time he had cleaned his gun and washed, Euphemia was serving dinner.

The dinner-table’s centrepiece, a blue vase full of flowers, attracted Karl’s attention. Roses, gypsophila, mauve scabious, blue verbena and the grey foliage of French lavender had been built into a beautiful lacework of colour.

“Who did that, Mary? You?”

She was removing his soup plate.

“Yes, sir.”

“It’s very lovely.—You have a hand for flowers.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He did not see her sudden colour, or the light in her eyes. She went so softly out of the room that he hardly knew that she had gone, to stand for a moment at one of the hall windows with a hand laid against her cheek. The park and its trees were all gold, and the water in the valley a mirror for the sunset. But there was a dish of fruit and cream waiting for him, Burntshaw fruit bottled by Euphemia. She went for it, and stood in the hall, waiting for the table-bell to ring.

She noticed that he was still looking at her flowers.

“Who taught you to do that, Mary? But how silly of me. You taught yourself.”

“Yes, sir.”

“One does.—Like painting a picture or writing a book.”

“Or a play, sir.”

He glanced up at her face, pale and strange. Something about it surprised him. He had always thought of Arch as a rather plain young woman, and his impression of her was subtly changed. This girl had some inward quality—and dignity. Yes, dignity.

He was standing at a window, lighting a pipe, and feeling that the house lacked something. Yes, his mother. He was missing that large, pleasant presence, that curious sense of comfort and security that had associated itself since childhood with a particular figure. Three hours ago he had been with his mother, and already he was missing her. He was missing her every day. With his pipe alight he wandered out into the twilight, a green gloom that was growing grey. Why was his mother vexing herself about superfluous bulk when the very bulk of her was consoling and familiar and somehow right? She wasn’t concealing anything? And suddenly he was conscious of a sharp, inward chill, a kind of contraction, fear. It had never occurred to him to consider his mother as mortal, or to regard her as anything else but a creature of infinite vitality.

He found himself walking down the drive under the high gloom of the tall beeches. The September dusk was slipping into a massive silence. It was almost too silent. He would go down and have a few words with Lavender about the work in the walled garden. He was within fifty yards of the cottage when he heard the sound of a car.

Her lights betrayed him to her in that dark tunnel under the trees. He was standing close to the trunk of one of the beeches. She had passed him before she

could pull up, but she backed the car, and hailed him.

“Hallo, is it you? Yes. Oh,—I left a note for you. I’m sorry—tennis is off. I thought I would blow up and warn you.”

“That’s all right. Very good of you.”

“The Hartleys failed, and that silly ass Bernard says he has to go to town.”

“I’m afraid my tennis wouldn’t have been much use to you.”

He came and stood beside the car, and she slipped from behind the wheel and along the seat.

“I hear your mother’s ill. So sorry.”

“Not ill—really. Just treatment.”

“So glad. She is such a sport, isn’t she? And I’m stopping you from going somewhere.”

“No,—just loafing.”

He saw her face pale in the dusk, the dark aureole of her hair, white teeth, dim eyes.

“I can’t turn here, can I?”

“Hardly.”

“I’ll have to turn up at the house. Get in. I’ll give you a lift.”

She opened the door and moved back behind the wheel, and like a man who had felt chilled and lonely he was tempted by the young warmth of her. Her hair had lost its colour in the darkness, and her pale face was somehow alluring.

“Why not?”

He slipped in beside her. She was a kind of shadow woman for the moment, sex etherealized. Her arm touched his. She put the car in motion, and they saw the windows of Burntshaw through the trees. It occurred to him suddenly that he ought to ask her in. Did he want to ask her in? Did it matter seriously?

“Funny old bus—this, after yours.”

“It goes.”

She laughed.

“That—does—sound patronizing.”

“Sorry.—Won’t you come in for five minutes?”

“My dear, is it quite proper?”

He had a feeling that she was making fun of him, of Mr. Charles Kesteven, a celebrated and most sophisticated young man. Or was this her idea of being bright and ironic and naughty? And suddenly he was provoked by her. He wanted to see her again in the light, that disturbing mouth, and those yellow-brown eyes and vivid hair.

“Quite proper, I think.”

“That depends, doesn’t it?”

She pulled up and switched off the engine. The two-seater had only one door, and it was on Karl’s side.

“You—have to emerge first.”

He could not find the catch, and she leaned across and dealt with it, and her hair brushed his face.

Mary Arch, having washed up and put her glass and silver away had taken to herself a book and an armchair in the staff sitting-room. Euphemia was writing a letter, her nose within three inches of the paper, pen firmly gripped. Calligraphy caused Euphemia heavy breathing. Arch opened her book where a piece of red thread marked the place. In the hands of a parlourmaid such a book might seem surprising, Maurice Hewlett’s “Forest Lovers,” yet the soul of Mary Arch might be sister to the soul of Isoult. And Arch was to behold her Malfry, but with wise eyes. The staff sitting-room lay at the back of the house, and neither Arch nor Euphemia heard Miss Wilding’s car.

A bell rang. Arch glanced up at the indicator which a thoughtful electrician had fixed above the sitting-room door. The drawing-room bell. Mr. Karl was not an inconsiderate ringer of bells, and Arch put her book aside on the table, and went to answer the bell. The drawing-room door hung open, and Arch beheld her Malfry sitting on the sofa, a figure in black and green with shining hair.

Karl, standing with his back to the fireplace saw the slim, pale girl in the doorway.

“Oh, Arch, bring in the whisky and a syphon, please.”

“Yes, sir.”

Arch’s lids drooped. She went to collect the whisky decanter and a syphon from the dining-room and glasses from her pantry. She arranged them on a silver tray, and with an air of dispassionate austerity she returned to the drawing-room. Cigarettes had been lit. Arch, carrying her tray to an occasional table, saw that a vase of flowers stood on the way—Karl saw it too, and coming forward, took the vase in his hands, and removed it to the top of a bureau.

“Thank you, sir.”

Eyes lowered, hands hanging, she walked out of the room, leaving the door as she had found it, open.

Emily had been nagging her husband. Had she not discovered by dipping into the telephone directory the new address of the Kestevens in town? Had not Augustus been ill? Was not his present occupation insufficiently remunerative, in spite of the fact that the salary attached to it came from abroad? Moreover, tragedy of tragedies, Augustus was losing his voice, and an agitator without a voice is of no more use than a mute dog. Augustus could not buy the moon. He was attending the Nose and Throat out-patient department of the Middlesex Hospital for a laryngitis that would not respond to treatment. Meanwhile, his particular Sabotage Society employed him on obscure clerical work.

“They—ought to do something,” said Emily, “they’re simply rolling.”

Emily always referred to the Kestevens as They. But having localized the Kestevens in Marchmont Mansions,—Mansions indeed—when the Slopp establishment was contained in a Soho basement! Emily did nag and jostle her husband into attempting a rapprochement. Young Karl might be incredibly and luxuriously it, but young Karl could be credited with a “pull.” If Mr. Charles Kesteven had the conscience of a louse, he should be capable of realizing that it was his social duty to slip a sick brother into some sinecure.

Emily took Augustus to Marchmont Street, and outside Marchmont Mansions a blue car was stationary, a small but sumptuous and meteoric car. Emily spotted it instantly.

“Bet you—that’s his swank machine.”

Augustus did not argue with her. He had to conserve that husky voice of his for possible future declamation, and not dissipate it in domestic arguments.

The Slopps were still on the pavement when Karl came out like a young man in a hurry, and got quickly into the blue car. He was not aware of those two shabby people on the pavement. Emily gave her husband a nudge, but before Augustus could decide to play suppliant, the blue car shot out from the pavement with sharp detonations from its exhaust.

“Why didn’t you stop him,—you fool?”

Augustus, distressed and ironic, watched the tail of the blue car disappearing. He answered her in a little, husky voice.

“What’s the use? Asking—that sort—for anything! We’ve got to take it.”

“Yes, you look like taking it!” said his wife.

Karl’s car, accelerating, slackening, swerving, threaded its swift way through the traffic to Bruton Street. He had driven up that morning from Burntshaw, and called at the flat for a couple of books. Karl did not ring bells, or wait upon official consent at Bruton Street; he walked in and up the stairs to his mother’s room. A nurse met him

in the passage, and smiled at him.

“Good morning, Mr. Kesteven.”

“Morning, nurse.”

Karl opened the door and went in. He saw his mother propped up in bed, wearing spectacles, and reading the morning paper. Certainly, Rebecca looked thinner, but not happily so. Her face had a sallowness, and it seemed to sag. She put down the paper, removed her spectacles and was kissed.

“My dear, when did you have breakfast?”

“Half-past seven?”

“I had—what they call breakfast here—only half an hour ago. Weak tea, no sugar or milk, and two biscuits.”

She looked plaintive and whimsical, and Karl observed her. He had sat down on the chair beside the bed.

“Is it doing any good, mother?”

“My dear, I’ve lost thirteen pounds, seven ounces, already.”

Karl’s eyes were affectionate and sceptical.

“Well, I don’t know. Denying nature, upsetting the balance! I wish you would _____”

“What, my dear?”

But Karl repressed himself. He might be wanting his mother back in spite of—and perhaps because of—certain disturbing excitements. Sex could be so devastating, especially that brand of sex. It kept you in a state of restlessness, and played the devil with your work.

He said—“Then—I shall come up to the flat. How much longer are they going to keep you here?”

Rebecca looked at the flowers on the dressing-table in the window. She did not look at her son, but the inward eyes of Rebecca were fixed upon him appraisingly. She seemed to respond to significant vibrations. Karl was not quite—Karl. O, certainly not! Now, what exactly was it that was making him fidgety and tense? Could she be egotistical and claim the trophy, the sweet strangeness of his missing her, a void left by the absence of a fat old woman?

“Well, why not come up to the flat, my dear? Are they looking after you properly?”

“Oh,—absolutely.”

He left his chair, and walking round the bed, put his nose to the flowers on the dressing-table.

“I’m off work. Can’t settle. I think I’ll come up to-morrow.”

His mother observed him.

“Well, come up, my dear. Send Arch and Euphemia up early to get things straight. But it does seem rather a pity.”

“Pity?”

“Well, you and Lavender were so busy——”

Karl stood head up.

“Oh,—I can leave all that to Lavender.”

3

Mrs. Kesteven received a second visitor that same morning, and one who was much more unexpected than Karl. But the licence allowed to Charles Kesteven was not extended to Mary Arch, and she was received with hauteur, and shown into a waiting-room in which a worried and restless man was walking up and down. He glared at Mary Arch as though she had been sent in to spy upon his suspense, and sitting down, began to turn the pages of *Punch*.

Said the maid to the nurse on duty on Rebecca’s floor—

“Someone to see Mrs. Kesteven.”

“Who?”

“A young woman.”

“Well, she can’t. I’ve got to massage the old lady.”

So, Arch was left to meditate and look at the picture papers until such a time as it suited the powers to remember her. She had a great posy of flowers with her, and they lay on a vacant chair. The restless man with the frightened eyes, becoming accustomed to this quiet presence, again began to walk up and down until a door opened and a woman’s voice said “Mr. Wontner.” Mr. Wontner disappeared.

In due course Mrs. Kesteven was told that she had a visitor waiting below, a young person of the name of Arch. Did Mrs. Kesteven wish to see Miss Arch? Karl’s mother, who had been feeling rather drowsy after her massage, became very wide awake. Most certainly she would see Arch; let her be shown up.

Arch came into the room with her flowers, and an air of watchfulness that vanished when she found that her mistress was alone.

“Well,—Mary, this is a surprise!”

Arch closed the door.

“It is my day off, madam, and since Mr. Kesteven said he would be away till the evening, I thought I would like to see you.”

She came to the bedside with her flowers, and Rebecca, having studied Mary’s

face, gave her superficial attention to the flowers.

“From the garden, Mary?”

“Yes, madam.”

“Sit down, my dear.”

Arch sat down and looked at her mistress. How was Mrs. Kesteven feeling? Arch’s eyes were deep and steady; she sat very straight in her chair, quiet hands in her lap. Really, Arch was a singular and precious person who carried about with her an aura of pale, sweet sanity.

“Oh—Arch, I’m so hungry.”

“Are you, madam?”

“Yes, I just lie here and feel like a greedy child. Oysters, Mary, and whitebait and salmon and pork chops and baked jam roll, and mushrooms on toast! Simply disgusting, isn’t it?”

Arch’s face wore a little brooding smile.

“Euphemia’s writing out menus, madam. We shall be so glad to have you back.”

Rebecca gave the girl one searching look. Her impulse to believe in Arch’s integrity was somehow elemental.

“No one will be gladder than—me. I’ve been so bored, Arch. I could throw the plates at these bright professional faces. I want to—swear, Mary. Well, any news, my dear, any visitors?”

Mary Arch appeared to be looking at her own hands lying in her lap.

“The vicar called to inquire. And Miss Wilding.”

There was a short pause between them, like the silence when a stone has been dropped into a deep well, and people wait to listen.

“Oh, Miss Wilding! To see me—Mary?”

Arch’s eyes were wide and clear for Rebecca’s scrutiny.

“No,—I don’t think so, madam.”

And that was all that was said between them upon that particular subject, but Rebecca had a feeling that she could say “Thank you, Mary,” and that Arch had brought her a secret warning concealed in her bunch of Burntshaw flowers.

If Corah Wilding was notorious in the neighbourhood, her reputation was a product of the war. She had served in a woman’s corps in France, and having attained to a new sense of freedom which transcended all notions of discipline, she had neither attempted nor been able to demobilize herself. She lived with and on a

rather foolish old mother who—in her day—had been a militant feminist, and who, when the suffrage had become universal and vulgar, had sought other tumults. Mrs. Wilding was anti-this and anti-that, and a member of several societies for the prevention of this and that, yet she had not attempted to prevent her daughter from doing what she pleased, and Corah, like the red-headed fury of a revolutionary generation, did what pleased her.

Miss Wilding was not so young as she appeared. She had had her adventures. This funny business might be emancipated and exciting, but it had developed in the young thing a feeling for finance. What could a woman do on an allowance of a hundred pounds a year? Mrs. Kesteven had described Miss Wilding as hot and greedy, and had seen in her a second Emily. Karl might attract her physically, but Karl was a very wealthy young man who could provide a wife with many facilities for self-expression. Corah wanted a flat in town, and Monte Carlo, and the multicoloured multiplicities of urban life, much ready cash, clothes, caviar. Corah wanted a fast car. Corah wanted to fly. Corah coveted things that were not domestic and Biblical and sottish.

And while Mrs. Kesteven was tucked away in a nursing-home, her son was reacting to the provocation.—But, no, sir, no promiscuous business before the completion of the contract! Corah was careful. Catch your fly before it has been in the honey pot. Men have a way of cooling off when the fortress has surrendered. Even Lavender could have uttered warnings; so could Mary Arch, and for that matter so could Mr. Bernard Nutting. Fortunately, Karl had at that period of his life a very poor opinion of women. They had plagued him. They had attempted his seduction; but how was Rebecca, losing fat and absorbing anxiety in a nursing-home, to be completely wise as to her son's wisdom? He was remaining at Burntshaw, though he drove up to see her every other day.

Rebecca did not feel that she could use Arch as a confidential informer. Arch was not that sort of woman, though Mrs. Kesteven was convinced that Mary Arch had consciously given her that warning. Karl's mother came to the conclusion that a little superfluous adipose tissue would be preferable to the prospect of possessing Miss Wilding as a daughter-in-law.

Rebecca made her decision. She announced it abruptly to her doctor and the matron. She was getting up and going out, yes—back to the country. Professional persuasion was useless. She 'phoned for a Daimler service-car, and bribed a nurse to pack for her.

She arrived unannounced at Burntshaw about half-past three on a brilliant October afternoon. Burntshaw looked beautiful. The beeches and the bracken were

changing colour, but even the splendour of the trees suggested a certain hectic head. Karl's mother was in the house before Arch discovered her arrival.

"Oh,—madam!"

"I couldn't stand—or rather lie any more of that, Mary. My dear, I've no legs."

Arch was more than kind to her, for this seemed to be an intervention of Providence.

"Do come and sit down, madam."

She shepherded Rebecca to the drawing-room sofa.

"Mr. Karl in, Mary?"

"I think not, madam."

Rebecca gave Mary Arch one searching look.

"I see.—Get the Daimler man to carry my luggage up."

"Would you like tea, madam?"

"Not yet, my dear."

"I'll light a fire in your room."

Rebecca blessed her. Arch was such a capable, consoling, and sane creature. Mrs. Kesteven put her feet up on the sofa. Yes, three weeks in bed had left her with no legs, though it may have quickened her understanding.

Was she glad to be back? Well, that would depend——? Almost she felt that she could hate Burntshaw, even the beauty and buxomness of Burntshaw. Burntshaw had deceived her. Burntshaw had produced a little, seductive, pestilent Eve. And where was her beloved on this October afternoon? Rebecca wanted to smoke. She found a cigarette, and lit it. Flimsy, futile things, cigarettes! Something to bite, a large bulldog pipe would have been more adequate.

Mrs. Kesteven heard footsteps on the gravel, and saw Karl pass one of the windows. The Daimler car had gone, and the Karl who walked into the house had the face of a young man who was somewhat seriously alone with himself. Arch had left the drawing-room door open, and Karl discovered that unexpected figure on the sofa.

"Mother!"

"Yes, my dear. Fed up with not being fed. I could not stand any more of it."

As he came into the room she was aware of his face opening out to her, and in that moment of time she knew that he was unfeignedly glad. Rebecca's large bosom heaved.

He bent to kiss her, and she held his head between her hands.

"I ought to have 'phoned you, Karl."

"Why?"

She kissed him again.

“Oh, my dear, that’s precious of you.”

“Is it?”

He stood and looked at her with affection.

“Fact is, mother, we’ll have to feed you up. No more nursing-home.”

“How do I look, my dear?”

“Yourself,—but a little starved. I shall have to take you to Boulestin’s.”

She assumed an air of protest. She was feeling absurdly happy.

“Now, now, no Boulestin! I’m going to diet myself.”

Karl took a cushion and threw it on the floor. He sat down on the cushion.

“All right, no Boulestin. What about a little trip abroad? I want to see what the Germans are doing. We could go on to Vienna, and then by Innsbruck and the Brenner to Italy.”

“Mr. Charles Kesteven and his agent?”

“Who else?”

Karl had his back to the doorway and he did not see what Rebecca saw, the sudden appearance in the hall of a hatless and rather breathless young woman. Miss Wilding! She stood there for perhaps five seconds staring at the stout person on the sofa and the young man at her feet. A disconcerting resurrection! Oh, very! Rebecca, observing Miss Wilding over her son’s head, saw her turn quickly and make her exit like some tumultuous and angry actress rushing off the stage.

Karl, after watching his mother’s face for a moment, swung round on his cushion, but the ghost had vanished. He saw nothing but a strip of parquet floor, half a Persian rug and a slice of yellow wall. He turned again to his mother.

“Somebody?”

Rebecca, solid and smiling, sat with hands folded in her lap.

“Was I in the way, my dear?”

But Karl was up, and at one of the windows, in time to see Eve taking a short cut over an iron rail fence. He stood very still, watching her.

“So that was what you saw?”

“I’m afraid—I was a little unexpected, my dear.”

“All the better for that.”

He put his hands in his pockets, and Rebecca saw that he was smiling.

“Damn her—effrontery.”

“Are you quite sure about that, my dear?”

“Quite.”

He came back to his cushion, knees drawn up, arms crossed over them.

Rebecca saw him in profile. He was still smiling at some inward occasion.

“What about tea, mother?”

Said Rebecca—“I think I’ll allow myself sugar to-day.”

It was she who went and rang the bell, and stood waiting for Arch. She smiled at Mary Arch.

“Tea now, please, Mary.”

Arch closed the door on them, and Mrs. Kesteven returned to the sofa.

“Well,—I suppose that’s final, my dear?”

Karl came out of his stare. “Like the sugar for tea! Quite final. We had a fearsome row. Playing with Venus on Ætna!”

“A little clash of tempers?”

“That’s putting it *sotto voce*. She smacked my face.”

“And what did you do, my dear?”

“I’m afraid I smacked her face—and rather harder.”

“Sorry?”

“Not a bit—really. I seemed to be cured so utterly and instantly. After all, mother, one doesn’t smack the face.”

He hesitated, and his mother finished the sentence for him.

“Not the face of the woman it’s good to marry.”

CHAPTER XXII

This Continental diversion introduced a new rhythm into the life of Charles Kesteven. He was to learn to space out his contrasts and to interpolate moods of movement between his productive pauses. If he was provoked creatively by great cities, it suited him to retreat with the provocation into the country, and let it flower at its leisure. So Lavender and his wife went into Burntshaw as caretakers; the London flat was shut up, and Euphemia given a holiday on board wages. Rebecca took Mary Arch with her as her maid, and Arch was to keep a diary during that wonderful winter. Arch took her travelling very seriously, with guide-book, and grave, observant eyes.

Karl wanted to see what the Germans were doing in the world of the drama. The Kestevens visited Berlin, Dresden, Leipzig and Munich, and from Munich they drove by car to visit the Müllers of Mutzig. Bavarian Karl had married, and become a father and a member of an anti-communist organization. The Kestevens took presents to the Müllers, and Karl climbed to his old bedroom and saw the sunset again through the bare branches of the linden tree.

He might have written of Mutzig. "Here—I learnt to be country-minded," but Mary Arch who drove with them made a note in her diary, "Here Mr. Karl wrote 'Golden Rain.'" Possibly, Arch supposed that Mr. Karl had made Mutzig famous. Mary had a German conversation book, and she studied it assiduously.

They passed on to Vienna. Vienna was a sad city, and not yet the cause of colour, music and comedy. The weather was atrocious, faces disillusioned. The Kestevens took the Brenner route into Italy and paused at Venice. Mary Arch stood on the Bridge of Sighs and thought how wonderful the world was. She went with the Kestevens in a gondola at night over water that was black velvet streaked and powdered with lights. Mysterious churches and palaces, Venetians singing rather raucously to the mandolin under hotel windows. Mrs. Kesteven approved of the gondola as a method of progression. "My dear, I make such splendid ballast!"

Florence pleased Karl less than Rome. Florence had a pale, cold forehead, an exquisite chilliness; Florence was a Mary Arch of a city, but Rome was Titian. With regard to picture galleries Rebecca emulated Balaam's ass. "My dear, my legs go on strike!" She refused to enter any more galleries. The Uffizi had finished her. She was eager to see the Pope, but not the Vatican statuary, and when earnest women assured her that she ought to see this and she ought to see that, she refused to make

culture a curse. She preferred to drive up to the Pincio, watch the children playing and listen to the band. The dome of St. Peter's should be the dome of St. Peter's. Karl exulted in Rome. He wanted to write a play with a Roman setting.—They took Arch with them to Tivoli and Hadrian's Villa and Arch played priestess at an *al fresco* lunch under the olives. Arch had a Botticelli face that day, and Mrs. Kesteven observed her. The girl looked luminous; she was becoming quite an attractive creature. Arch plucked a sprig from a Tivoli cypress, and put it between the pages of her diary. It spoke of sunlight and splashing water, and Mr. Karl, brown and bare-headed, drinking purple wine.

In Rome somebody's English chauffeur tried to make love to Mary Arch. The chauffeur had a wife and three children in England, but a man must amuse himself. He walked with Arch in the Borghese Gardens, and sat with her on a seat, but Arch was ice. Not that she was more moral than the average woman. She was fastidious, and since she wished to be desired by a particular person—if she was to be desired at all, other men were dust.

“No funny business, Mr. Thomas, please.”

Mr. Thomas had always understood that when a woman said no she was provoking you to insist upon yes.

“Now—come along, my girl. Let's enjoy ourselves.”

Arch was no coward. She sat on the seat with this self-complacent Juan and subdued him. Crude creatures—men. When a woman was about, most of them could not look at the world dispassionately or see anything but sex. Mary Arch was finding the world so full of many beautiful things. Had Mr. Thomas visited the Baths of Diocletian?

No, he—had—not.

He grew sulky, and Arch left him sulky. Early vicissitudes had taught her that love—so called—could be a messy business, and Arch wanted her world to be secure and kind and clean.

In Rome, Karl was inspired to prolong the pilgrimage. Why not visit Egypt? They could pick up a Lloyd boat at Brindisi. They sailed to Egypt in rough weather, and Rebecca was deplorably sick, Arch not at all so. Karl, himself considerably squeamish, was worried about his mother, and grateful to Arch. This pale slip of a woman seemed to stand between him and his own crisis, sudden uncontrollable nausea.

“Please don't worry, sir. I have had the doctor to see her.”

Arch was able to retain her dignity in that rolling, plunging vessel, poised with one shoulder resting against the panelling of the corridor. Karl felt giddy. Something

in the back of his head seemed to be turning over and over.

“So glad you are here to look after her.”

He fled to his cabin and lay down. Everything jangled and swayed and creaked. Blessed be Mary with her calm face and tranquil interior! If only the damned sea would take a hint from Mary. It did. Beyond Crete the Mediterranean grew much gentler, and Karl was able to shave and go and sit at a table. He found himself associated with a gentleman and a lady from Yorkshire. The gentleman was in wool, a fat, facetious and hungry person who almost cracked his knuckles when he made a joke. He appeared to regard Karl’s rather yellow face as funny.

“One’s legs take a bit of finding, sir. Reminds me of that tale about the clergyman.”

Karl eyed him malevolently.

“Fact is—I have ’flu. Hope you’re not nervous?”

At the next meal he found himself comfortably alone at the table.

But he was well enough to go and sympathize with his mother. He had made the discovery that sea-sickness could turn you into the most self-centred of introverts. Mrs. Kesteven was enjoying the ecstasy of not feeling sick.

“My dear, Mary has been a perfect angel to me.—Really, I don’t know what I should have done without her.”

“Arch is a good woman,” said Karl.

“She’s rather more than that, my lad. She’s got a head and wonderful hands. She’s growing quite attractive.”

Karl examined his face in his mother’s mirror. Shaving had been rather sketchy.

“Is she?”

He ran his fingers tentatively over his chin.

The Kestevens trained direct to Cairo, and put up at Mena House. Karl, who had read some of the gushing things literary gentlemen had had to say about the Sphinx and the Pyramids and the mysterious Nile, found himself in a perplexity; he would have appreciated the marvels of Egypt more sensitively had there been no Egyptians. Unfortunately, he was a tourist. He could not be allowed to sit alone in silence and stare. Even if he took a guide with him the fellow chattered all the time or was busy hurling chunks of sandstone at irrepressible urchins and sellers of junk. His mother was ready to agree with her son; much of Egypt was a vast chicken run; it made you feel that you wanted to scratch. Egypt—as a panorama—was much more impressive on the posters.

“My dear, these people haven’t any sense!”

For, Egypt would not refrain from trying to persuade Rebecca to ride on a

camel.

“Me—on a camel! I ask you!”

Yes, even though the beast sat down for you to mount. It was all very marvellous and archæological, but somehow suggesting a cinema studio, especially so that trashy bazaar. The Kestevens travelled on a Nile boat to Luxor and Assouan, and Karl was fiercely bored. It was impossible to get away from people. An American girl tried to talk Egypt to him, and he would not flirt with her. At Luxor a high wind was blowing, and all the rubbish in the world seemed to be on the loose. Patriarchs blew their noses on their robes. Karnak by moonlight, and the American girl at his elbow. He rode on a donkey to visit temples and tombs, and those rides were some fun, especially when the little devils of boys made the donkeys race. Occidental dignity suffered. His mother would not ride a donkey; she had pity on the beast, but she sent Arch on one of these expeditions, and since Arch had no riding kit, she felt careful. Her boy tried to play tricks with Mary’s donkey.

“Oh,—sir, do stop him, please.”

Karl had a switch with him. He laid it across the boy’s shoulders, and there was peace.

He and Mary Arch formed part of a crowd that trailed in the sunlight through those dead immensities. The dragoman lectured them and cracked jokes, and Arch gazed with wide and mysterious eyes at pylons and pictographs and vast pillars, and more than once Charles Kesteven looked at Arch. The girl had the face of—Well, anyway, she could be silent. And on this particular day she kept Miss America away from him.

Rebecca was able to visit the Valley of the Kings. Karl rode a donkey, and his mother and Arch occupied a carriage. The harness fell off on the road, and had to be tied up with string, and Mrs. Kesteven became ironical. “Tombs, Mary.—We may find our graves here.” Undoubtedly, Rebecca was impressed by those vast tunnels and subterranean chambers until she heard a man’s voice exclaim—“By Jove, what wine cellars, old man!” Rebecca heard Arch laughing, and someone looked shocked. “One ought to remember that people were buried here.” “Yes, dry storage,” said Rebecca, and coming to the place where three slaves lay in desiccated strangeness behind a kind of glass window she began to feel that the mystery was too airless.—“I think I would like to go back, Mary. One has a horrid feeling that one might be left behind here.”

On the Nile boat Karl slept in a kind of matchboard rabbit-hutch, and on the other side of the partition lay an old gentleman who had come to Egypt hoping to be cured of sciatica. Karl’s neighbour heaved and groaned, and the whole boat seemed

to creak with him.

Karl heard him monologuing at night.

“My God,—I can’t sleep!”

And one night Karl took up the chant.

“My God, neither can I.”

But at Assouan the boat’s cuisine presented Mrs. Kesteven with an attack of acute gastro-enteritis, and Karl sacrificed his return tickets and took his mother back by train to Cairo. Poor Rebecca was feeling very sorry for herself. “I don’t think I want any more Egypt, dear.” So, there was a second Exodus, and a calm and kindly sea floated them back to Venice.

Switzerland in the spring. Karl, having taken the train up to Caux, found the green slopes full of crocus, primrose, and blue squill. Lake Lemman lay far below, and in that mountain air Karl understood why the Swiss yodelled. Joy, joy in a clean country, and in those upland flowers. His mother, pleasantly recovering in the Grand Hotel, Territet, from Egyptian upheavals, nursed by Mary Arch, and attended by a Swiss doctor, blessed this country. Its taste in architecture might be questionable, but its cooking and hygiene were enlightened. Rebecca sat and looked at the mountains and the lake. She could waddle forth and walk by the lake and feed the water-fowl under green weeping-willows, and no one jabbered at her, or tried to sell her antiques made in Birmingham.

Arch was never tired of looking at the mountains. She liked to climb the Glion road and watch the sunset. She came back one evening with a bunch of wild flowers, and presented them to her mistress.

“Dear things.”

Karl, having smelt the spring, was moved to sudden restlessness. He had a new play seething inside him, and he was haunted by thoughts of the spring in England, blackbirds singing, the strange, sweet anguish of April. Even the Swiss primroses were not English primroses.

“Do you think you can travel, mother?”

“Feeling like Burntshaw, Karl?”

He smiled at her.

“I am.”

Karl entered upon a more social period. He might bury himself at Burntshaw when he had creative work to do, but new forces and tendencies provoked him. He

was much about town, meeting all sorts of people, disliking most of them, but interested in all. For six months he became the passionate protégé of Lydia Petrofka, whose marvellous maturity fascinated him. Lydia was like a dish of magic fruit eternally consumed and as eternally renewed, and of a wonderful bitter sweetness, but Lydia was kind to Karl. She feasted upon his youth, and then released him without obligations. "My dear, I have to shorten my season. For a month I shall see no one but my pet priest, and my masseuse." Lydia was like the great Catherine, and about Karl's head the brilliant leaves of an autumn tree had fallen. There were other sublimations. He lived much in the theatrical world, without being of it. He met Julian Dare and a number of new and impertinent young men, artists, scribblers, scientists. He passed through his own phase of impenitent impertinence.

He became one of the founders of the Emetic Club.

Each member, before election, had to produce good evidence of having acted medicinally upon society. Julian's cachet had been his book—"Sons and Fathers." Karl claimed justification at the expense of the critics.

"I appear to have caused them so much nausea. Will that suffice?"

The Emetic Club set out to establish a higher criticism of its own. It was to swear by men like Eddington, Haldane and the Huxleys. It made dreadful fun of the Slades and the Slatterys. It met weekly at various addresses. Snaith the bacteriologist set the brethren down to cocktails and conversation in his lab. He offered to inoculate them against any form of social sepsis, collectivism or costiveness. The club produced a journal which was circulated at a loss. Eckstein did a cartoon for each number—"Up—the Workers"—"Histrionic Man"—"Miss Frilly Head gets Married"—"The Bishop of London plays Hockey." Julian Dare's devilry involved them on one occasion in a conflict with the censor. Karl wrote articles on "High-browism and Humbug" and "The Subconscious Craftsman." He argued that Fleet Street was so sottishly self-conscious that it was incapable of understanding that art was subconscious.

The Club gave a series of original dinners to which celebrities were to be invited on the understanding that they were to be put in the pillory. Mr. Bernard Shaw refused their invitation. Joseph Conrad and Mr. J. H. Thomas endured successful evenings. Harold Cadnam lost his temper, and as Dare put it—"Almost—his teeth." Victims became shy, and the Club had to put up its own members seriatim to take punishment.

Karl, set in the pillory, was challenged to produce any evidence to justify his preposterous popularity.

"Why Kesteven at all?—Why Charles? What do you do, young man, but

seduce suburbia?”

Karl, laughing and driven into a corner, found only one adequate retort.

“Well, I can punch any of your heads.”

Barbarian! Or was it Byronic? And let Mr. Kesteven remember that the hero’s corpse was brought back to England preserved in a barrel of spirits. What was more, noble British sailors had tapped the barrel and stolen most of the rum.

Two more Kesteven plays were floated successfully, one of them produced by the dramatist. And Karl was beginning his war with the film world as it was then. Having experienced the banalities and the dishonesty of portions of the industry, and its butcherly ideas on autocracy, Karl played the autocrat. Not only did he demand much money, but stringent clauses in the contract, giving him the right to deny and educate the producers. Sir Oscar gave him a friendly warning.

“My lad, in a week you will be committing murder. This is not your *métier*. Insist on being the god behind the gods,—if it pleases you, but for heaven’s sake don’t go and sit in a chair and shout ‘Camera.’”

Karl took Sir Oscar’s advice, and told the Industry to go to school for five more years and then come up again for examination. They were so much in the snotty stage. Meanwhile he met Max Sartoris in town, and he and the musician fell for each other. Sartoris had suffered starvation, yet—in Karl’s experience Sartoris was the one man of whom it could be said that he did not care one peapod for money or the conventions. He lived naked and unashamed with his music. Sartoris was unbribable; Sartoris had an extraordinary sweetness of temper. He and Karl shared the inspiration of proposing to do something musical together, hence “Fifinella,” a fantasia in music and colour. The critics called it an orgy of nerves and nougat. They praised some of Sartoris’ music, and damned Karl’s lyrics. They accused Charles Kesteven of having his tongue in his cheek. Karl retorted by accusing them of having their brains in their boots.

About that time an anonymous article appeared, headed “The Impertinence of the Slop Shop.” Some very dilatory gentleman had discovered Karl’s origin. Did the world know that the dramatist’s mother had kept—under the name of Slopp—a second-hand clothes shop in Islington? Such an atmosphere would—of course—explain some of Mr. Kesteven’s crudities. The Emetic Club joined in the controversy. It was presumed that the masked assailant was Slatterly. The Club did not mention names, but it was candid.

Since origins were being debated would Olympus deny that one of the gods had:

1. Ascended from a fried-fish shop.
2. Specialized in chips.

3. Produced three unstaged plays and one dud novel.
4. Borrowed money on many occasions, and salvaged his soul by paying back his benefactors with abuse.
5. Reviewed books while acting as a publisher's reader.
6. Boosted the books of that particular publisher.
7. Provoked a libel action, and had his candour questioned by the court.

But to revert. The creating of "Fifinella" was a joyous and irresponsible affair. Max Sartoris was almost birdlike in some of his movements, especially so when he was composing. A very fair and tall young man with a blond mane swept back from his forehead, he could act to his own music or dance to it with attractive composure and blue eyes that were utterly serious. He could dance you the can-can, while wearing the face of a young Jupiter. A great part of the "Fifinella" music was written during the summer at Burntshaw. Max had borrowed Karl's tent, and early in the morning, disguised in a very old brown overcoat, he would rush into the house to shave and bathe. He liked lying or sitting on the floor. Objective people thought him the prince of posers, which he was not. Rebecca loved him, and Max delighted in Rebecca. He would address her as Dea Mater. He allowed her to censor and repair his deplorable wardrobe. He was the sort of man who forgot his tie or his socks, and had to be told when to change his shirt.

He was capable of delightful impetuositities. He would ask for the Kesteven piano to be carried out into the garden, and it was carried out by Karl, and the gardeners, and Mrs. Kesteven's new chauffeur. Or, it had to be placed in the punt and set afloat on the lake. "Quite Wagnerish and Mad Ludwigish, my dear!" Karl had a tenor voice, Max a bass, and they would sing their lyrics together, Max playing a guitar or piano. The Burntshaw staff thought Mr. Sartoris quite mad, but nicely so, even though he forgot to tip them.

The musician was visual as well as auditory.

"Carlo,—I want a woman."

Karl laughed, though he knew that Max was being symbolical.

"What for?"

"I want Fifinella to come up from the park and walk up and down under the cedars. I want to get the music to that walk."

"Afraid we can't oblige you, Max. Shall I 'phone the agents and ask them to supply?"

"And they would send us down a Goldilocks. No, there's the parlourmaid."

"Arch?"

"Sure. Haven't you seen her—walk? She's classic."

Karl was intrigued.

“Do you mean—you want Mary to come and pose?”

“I just want her to walk, Carlo. She’s Cassandra and Proserpine and Queen Elizabeth.”

Fantastic fellow, Max. Karl went into the house and rang for Mary.

“Oh,—Mary, Mr. Sartoris wants you to walk for him.”

“Walk, sir?”

“Yes, he says your walking is—musical. Would you mind?”

Arch looked very serious.

“I’ll try, sir.”

So, Mary Arch with her pretty, shingled head black as a crow’s wing, and her pallor and her slimness, walked to and fro under the cedars while Sartoris lay on his tummy and nibbled the end of a pencil. Karl was at one of the drawing-room windows with his mother.

“Queer ways people have of getting their inspiration.” Rebecca was silently watching her parlourmaid.

“Max is quite right, my dear.”

“You mean——?”

“There is something of Max’s Fifinella in Mary.”

But, as yet, Karl had not seen it.

“Fifinella” was a great jest, luscious and romantic and playful. It contained sudden, unexpected poignancies that caused the public to catch its breath. It annoyed Olympus considerably. These two young devils had dared to be sentimental, and London loved it, a London that was beginning to weary of the Freudians and the alienists. “Fifinella” even captured the dear old things who loved Gilbert and Sullivan. It ran and it ran and it ran, and it enraptured America. It pleased even the Germans, though the French would have none of it. Paris said that it was too expensive to stage. Moreover, it was the product of two Englishmen, and the English always love a xylophone solo.

Black trees, wet black asphalt, a smirched November sky, and above the heads of a somewhat ironic crowd a little black figure jerking and twisting. Karl, strolling like Dr. Massingbird, had happened upon these orators, and had stood to watch a representative of the Middle Class Union being heckled. The badinage was good humoured and English, but what clap-trap! Karl supposed that the Middle Class Union was afraid of Labour, and dared not deal in those elementals that are obvious to the biologist.

Thus, Karl's discovery of Brother Augustus was fortuitous. He was strolling away when he sighted that other figure jerking and twisting like a man on a rope. "Workers of the World,—unite." Augustus' voice was a tattered and tragic voice fluttering in the wind. Karl joined this other crowd, and in watching and listening to his brother, was reminded of the Essex Road and the dreary figure of the man—his father. The pallor, the weak black beard, the high and rather futile forehead, the blubbery and emotional mouth, were Slopp. Poor Augustus was doing his damndest, crying up the new paradise that should arrive with the clash of a cataclysm.

Augustus, like his father, was bitter and dreary. Karl had a feeling that Augustus was boring his audience. Abruptly that tattered voice lost itself in a spasm of coughing. There was a pause, a fidgeting of feet, and Augustus disappeared from the rostrum as though someone had plucked him down by the coat-tails. A little, hard-faced, red-headed man bobbed up. Red Head was a very different proposition, with his glittering grin and truculent assurance. Almost he brandished a bloody knife. He knew how to plunge a hot iron into the bowels of unhappy humanity. Karl, who had no love for crowds, felt a kind of elemental, ugly anger bristling about him. He heard a man snarl—"That's the stuff. Up—the Reds, up—the workers."

Karl listened for three minutes, and then left Red Head ranting. Democracy could be so fine and so fatuous. Would he live to see England remodelled on the lines of a vast municipal housing-scheme? And when the crowd had become bored with socialized safety, what would it do with it? Rediscover a King, and war and brass bands and some new enemy in Asia? Meanwhile, the exploiters would have deified a Red Boss instead of a White One. Karl, crossing the road, sighted a familiar figure ahead of him, Augustus in retreat with a bright red scarf wound round his throat. Even as a demagogue, Brother Augustus was inadequate. He could be out-shouted by Brother Red Head.

Karl shadowed his brother. He followed him along Oxford Street as far as Wardour Street. Augustus' long black legs were the legs of his father. They carried him into Brewer Street and up an alley. Augustus disappeared into a house, and there, Karl had to leave him. The voice of a woman was greeting Augustus at the top of a flight of dirty stairs.

"What, you—back already?"

Emily was preparing what passed for their Sunday dinner, and her husband went to warm his poor hands at the very small fire.

"Here, get out of my way.—Wasn't there a meeting?"

Augustus could not cope with his wife. He sat down drearily on a kitchen chair.

“My voice gave out.”

His wife flared at him.

“It would! Lot of use you are. Can’t even shout at a crowd. I’m fed up; yes, fed up.”

CHAPTER XXIII

The respective incomes of Noel Coward, Edgar Wallace, and Charles Kesteven were to become matters of controversy in the Clubs, a mysterious and fascinating subject, quick to make man's mouth water, and to inspire moral ardour. It was said by a very eminent civil servant that such inflated incomes should not be enjoyed; in fact, the future State would see to it that they were not enjoyed. The rewards were out of all proportion to the social service rendered. Someone chuckled, and reminded a neighbour that the official salary was fifteen hundred pounds a year. "They keep 'em hungry—so that they may hunt the better."

Coward and Kesteven were prodigies and the public paid them prodigiously. Edgar had both his plays and his novels to produce wealth for him, but Edgar was extremely munificent. Charles Kesteven was not credited with munificence.

"The fellow's half a Jew, you know."

"What—does—the young blighter do with his money?"

"The tax-gatherers take more than half of it."

"Yes; but even then!"

Karl's income was estimated by the wiseacres at anything between thirty-thousand and eighty-thousand pounds a year. To be precise, it averaged for a number of years some fifty-thousand pounds, but above and beyond this professional income there were etceteras. Karl, like his mother, had invested considerably in Rubber before one of the booms, and he had the wisdom to sell out and take his profits and reinvest them in gilt-edged securities. When Karl was thirty years old his private fortune amounted to £175,000. Moreover, he had made the acquaintance of an ambitious young man who had begun life as a clerk in an Estate Office. Mr. Jennings had ideas, audacity and no capital. Exploiting his audacity he had put a proposal to Mr. Kesteven. Would he care to finance an adventure in bricks and mortar. The proposition piqued Karl, and he placed ten thousand pounds at the disposal of Mr. Jennings, and Mr. Jennings, greatly daring and knowing his figures, set forth and floated villa properties in the northern suburbs. Karl had backed his man still further, and Mr. Jennings prospered amazingly. He worked fourteen hours a day, was the inspiration of no less than five companies, and on his outlay Karl drew twenty per cent.

What did this young Midas do with his money?

Less fortunate people were eager to spend it for him, or to arrange for its

distribution in the cause of charity. Yet it occurs but rarely to the average man that wealth may be a calamity. Despite the idealists and Biblical admonitions he will continue to covet it and to dream dreams about it. Was it possible for a young man to be afraid of money, and of the insincerities and sottishness it can produce? Karl was experiencing that fear. Many men when they grow rich, suffer from absurd terrors, and live in panic lest they should once more be poor. With Karl this dread was of a more subtle quality. Had he inherited some memory of Israel and the Golden Calf?

Snaith the Bug-man would say to him, "What are you going to do with all your filthy money, Carlo?"

"Want any of it?"

"Yes, some new gadgets in my lab."

The bacteriologist had his gadgets. Incidentally, he would explain to Karl that there is vanity or thwarted vanity even in biology. The individualist—when he prospered—cracked up heredity; your starving collectivist was all for environment. Humbug on both sides. Yes, the eugenists might have the better case, but they were rather priggish about it. You could not expect the crowd to look pleased when you referred to them as a sort of scum on the surface of life's pond. No, sir, that might provoke unpleasant fermentation.

Karl had begun to suffer from the insincerities that afflict the rich. He saw in the smile and in the outstretched hand the blandishments of the suppliant. His world was so much in danger of becoming too like Agag. To distribute cheques and to salve your conscience with a subscription, yes, that could be so easy. Charity? The subsidizing of failures and of spongers? Karl was ten years older than his age, and he was beginning to understand that wealth has to be straddled and mastered like an ugly tempered horse. The stuff could not be just given away or splashed about. Karl had enjoyed the experience of being able to purchase all the toys that pleased him. Why was he not the owner of a yacht, and a villa at Cannes, with a private aeroplane and pilot? A sensitive soul is soon satiated, and will recoil from the mere sensation of spending. Karl, as the capitalist, stood on his cliff edge and reflected. He wanted beauty, movement, quick contrasts, silence when he worked. Older men may have asked the question—"A mere boy? To arrive at the sensational summit before you are thirty? What the devil will he do with life after thirty?" That was the very question Karl was asking himself, and as yet he was unable to answer it.

So, for the time being he put this mass of money away like some problem to be digested by his subconscious self. If other creative work was to be his in the future, it should not waste itself in a series of dribbling assuagements. Behind the

consciousness of power a creative generosity might brood upon some project that could be adequate and human. Incidentally, Karl and his mother drew up a subscription list. Hospitals, most certainly. Propaganda and politics—no. Pensioners, yes, old tired men and women. But even the distribution of alms, conscientiously undertaken, demands time and care, and Karl found it necessary to employ a private inquiry agent, an ex-inspector of police who had much good nature and few illusions. Mr. Banyard explored and reported, and Karl personally followed up some of the cases. He did lay bare many obscure tragedies and much humbug.

Meanwhile, his mother surprised him.

Did she wish to go abroad this winter?—She did.

“I’d like to see Monte Carlo, my dear.”

Monte Carlo! Mons Caroleus! Karl was surprised, and not yet wise as to the inwardness of his mother’s choice. Had she selected some famous sanctuary, some saint’s eerie, he might have felt more consenting, though Rebecca, in her wisdom, was choosing one of the High Places of Mammon. Was this—symbolism, or was Karl’s mother enjoying one of her last jests with life? Monte Carlo! But the mystical Dea Mater in Mrs. Kesteven could be jocund and debonair. Her pilgrimage would not be without its sense of humour.

2

“Let’s pretend, my dear.”

Rebecca’s suggestion was that they should cease for a season from being rich and public, and pretend to be people who had saved up just enough money for this great adventure. “Just a little extra to gamble with, my dear.” They would travel second-class, stay at second-class hotels, and enjoy sunlight that was not classified. What did Karl think of the idea?

“Second-class food, mother, and you might have a first-class doctor’s bill. Wouldn’t it spoil the picture?”

Rebecca laughed.

“Yes, but not *de luxe*. I do hate flunkeys. Let’s be ordinary people, and just pretend.”

“And assume that the finances are limited?”

“Yes. Having to manage. What fun!”

So, there was no Blue Train and no superheated luxury, and Karl and his mother slept quite adequately in the corners of a second-class carriage. They bought luncheon baskets, hired pillows, and carried their own tea and coffee in vacuum

flasks. On the Côte d'Azur the mistral was blowing, and the sea was lapis lazuli flecked with foam. The Hôtel Hesperides possessed no bus, and Karl and his mother sought Apples of Gold in a taxi. Where was the Kesteven Rolls-Royce? The Hôtel Hesperides was tucked away in a rather obscure cleft on Mons Mammonis, and it needed paint. Its apples were not Cox's Orange, and Karl was to discover that he had been educated out of second-class atmospheres. Let there be honest thirds or superfine firsts. He did not like his bedroom or the food, or the people, or the noise, or the competition for the bath. Morning coffee arrived late, and the butter was rationed. Obviously he had developed into a young emperor in his demands upon mere matter.

"I don't like this place, mother."

"The hotel, my dear, or Monte Carlo?"

"Perhaps—both."

But they were agreed that they could not surrender so cravenly to reality. Had they not proposed to enjoy a world of make-believe? Artifice! Could anything be more artificial than this pleasure town? It was a bunch of carnations and a bottle of scent, and floral effects laid down like pile carpets, and palms, and intelligent prostitution. You could procure yourself some of the best food and music in Europe, though the Tête de Chien might be the brow of a brooding cynic. Then, it began to rain and to blow, and the weather said—"Go and gamble." The Kestevens passed through the ritual of admission, and Rebecca found a seat at one of the tables. As second-class tourists they could not be expected to penetrate into the Holy of Holies. It was a rather shabby crowd, and Karl stood behind his mother's chair and watched the play. Rebecca began carefully. Were they not pretending that they had just two-thousand francs to hazard? But it appeared that Fortune and the Kestevens were not to be parted. She might put her stake on red or on odd numbers, but on five occasions out of six she won.

She turned and smiled at her son.

"Quite absurd!"

"Try a lucky number."

"I'm going to plunge."

She put all her resources *en plein* on 13, and the number turned up. Rebecca, with an air of ironic amusement, gathered her plunder, and tipped it into her bag. Karl, meanwhile, was watching a particular person on the other side of the table, a man sitting next a croupier.

"I think that's enough, my dear. It's too silly."

"Not going on?"

“Not to-day.—I wonder if it is still raining. So stuffy in here.”

Karl helped to draw back his mother’s chair. It had been a lucky chair, and almost before she had vacated it, a middle-aged woman had slipped into the place. Karl took charge of his mother’s bag, and they went out to find blue rents in the sky, and a fresh wind coming over the sea. They strolled towards Monaco, and Karl took off his hat and let the wind into his hair.

“Better out here. Did you see somebody from the hotel on the other side of the table?”

“No, my dear.”

“That Russian fellow who sits in the corner with a woman. He looked sick when you gave up. He was shadowing you.”

“Some poor exile.”

Karl looked cynical.

“Poor—blackguard.”

That same evening, Karl, having gone upstairs to fetch a book, returned to find that his poor blackguard had slipped into his chair. Russia was being very charming to Rebecca; Russia had come to compliment and congratulate madame on her play. Russia had an oily black head, voluminous dress trousers, rings upon his fingers, and a kind of succulent, fungoid face. He rose and smiled upon Karl.

“Please—excuse.”

Rebecca explained.

“This gentleman came to congratulate me, my dear. Most kind of him. My son,—Prince Dombrowski.”

Karl gave the gentleman a cold little smile.

“Delighted. Please sit down, sir. I’ll get another chair.”

The fellow had some English and more assurance, but he smelt like a lily. Karl was making mental notes of the points he disliked about the Russian. He had haunches and a waist and too many teeth, and far too much manner. He was too filthily friendly.

“Madame is lucky.”

“O, my mother has a system.”

“I have tried seven systems.—But to-morrow, if madame will play—I shall watch madame.”

Almost, he ogled Rebecca, and Karl was quite content to leave him to his mother. This Continental cad, Russian refugee or ex-imperial hanger-on, chattered and oiled himself in his chair, and was charming. Yes, charming was the conventional word. And Karl became more and more silent, watching his mother’s handling of

this rotten egg, and she handled it delicately, as though wise as to the thing's interior.

"Madame has a most beautiful ring."

He produced a monocle. He, too, had rings and was ready to exhibit them. He could assure madame that in his happier days before that infamous Lenin had destroyed his dear country's culture, no Paris jeweller had come to Petersburg without visiting the Dombrowski palace. Karl watched his mother remove the particular ring and pass it to the Russian. "My son gave me this." Karl's eyes were on the ring. Dombrowski smiled all over his fungoid face at Rebecca. He did not believe her. The old woman had come abroad with a good looking Ganymede. Yes, no doubt she was more than a mother to him! "Exquisite, madame. The emerald is magnificent." With the ring laying in his palm he extended his hand to Rebecca, and here—Karl intervened. He picked the ring out of the Russian's palm, and slipped it on to his own left third finger.

"It fits me very well, sir."

The Russian's flat eyes met Karl's. Karl stuffed hand and ring into a trouser pocket. He was aware of the gentleman's sudden unpleasant smile, a smile that somehow suggested the tucking in of a shirt. But he continued to make charming conversation. Madame must certainly repeat her triumph at the tables. There was an interruption. A lady was tapping Mr. Dombrowski on the back of the head. The lady had no eyebrows, and a face like that of a decorated corpse.

"Ah,—excuse—please."

Dombrowski took himself off with the woman who had been observing the experiment from a corner of the lounge.

"Imbecile," said she, "do you expect to conquer Canaan? The son was watching you."

Monsieur showed himself peevish.

"Son!—The fellow behaved to me like a policeman."

"Buttinski," said the lady, "the idea's addled. And he is twenty years younger than you are."

Unpleasant people. In the presence of the surreptitious and the shabby Rebecca advanced to the conviction that man—and woman should belong either to the complacent thirds or the predestined firsts. Also, she was missing Arch. Ladies' maids were not included in an itinerary that was second-class, but—all the same—Mrs. Kesteven was missing Mary. Probably, she had not understood how Arch had

permeated the Kesteven world and filled it with her noiseless efficiency. Remarkable woman, Arch. If she suffered from moods, she concealed her emotional hyperæsthesia. She appeared to be satisfied with a vernal celibacy. Rebecca was made to realize how many pleasant and useful things Arch did for her in the day, things no man would ever think of. Arch had compassion upon her mistress's bulk, and saved a pair of overweighted legs. Arch had an excellent memory and a nice touch. Arch could massage; Arch had a sweet savour. Rebecca liked Arch to brush her hair.

"My dear," said Rebecca, "I've come to the conclusion that second-rate things are lousy."

But before renouncing the hypocrisy of the second-rate, Mrs. Kesteven insisted upon another afternoon at the casino. Let this make-believe have its final splurge. Karl had said—"I'll go down to Smiths and get them to put a cheque through," but he accompanied his mother to the House of Mammon. Again, the Jewess won. She had on her right a little, shrivelled, shabby person in black whose hands carefully offered the minimum stake, and that—but occasionally. The eyes of Rebecca's neighbour, bright but ungreedy, watched with a kind of rapture this flouting of fortune. The shrivelled lady was urgently interested in playing for funds with which to keep some other soul alive.

Karl, standing behind his mother's chair, heard her sudden laugh.

"No use, my dear. It's our—fate."

Rebecca had not been so absorbed in the play as not to notice her neighbour, and with a sudden movement of the hand she swept her winnings into the other's lap. Karl supposed that had he reproduced such an incident in a play, his critics would have accused him of fooling the public with a facile and shoddy piece of sentiment.

"Excuse me, madame,—but I pass you my luck. Yes, it is yours."

The old lady said something in French. The thing was incredible. She did not understand why. She looked flushed and emotional.

"But, madame!"

"It's a present," said Rebecca, getting up laboriously, and patting a black shoulder. "You're welcome to it. I'm going for a walk."

Karl managed to explain to the old lady that his mother was serious, and that the money was hers. His mother had been so fortunate that she could indulge in so happy a gesture. He did wonder whether Rebecca's unorthodox behaviour would provoke official interference, but there lay Rebecca's winnings in that rusty lap, and who was to prevent her leaving them there? The Kestevens had reached the vestibule, and Rebecca sat down on a sofa while Karl went for his hat and overcoat.

Rebecca saw her protégé pass by and hurry through the doors. Might not the eccentric Englishwoman change her mind?—so the little person had stuffed notes into her bag and fled.

“Poor old soul,” thought Karl’s mother, and found herself looking up into the eyes of her son.

As they made their way to the terraces Rebecca said—“It’s no use, my dear. It may seem perfectly ridiculous, but this golden rain of ours won’t stop.”

Karl smiled down at her.

“Do you want it to stop?”

His mother appeared to reflect. Here was this deluge running off their umbrellas, while other umbrellas were dry. Yet, could any blame be attached to such social favouritism. In Karl’s case grave economic platitudes did not seem to apply. He was one of the world’s beloveds, and society persisted in pelting him with favours. He had stood behind her chair, and even the roulette wheel had humoured him. Rebecca had heard of famous cocottes bathing in milk or champagne, and remembering her husband’s Marxian ranting she could suppose that her son was soused in surplus value! Surplus value? And who decided whether the artist was mud or milk? You might tabulate all your statistics, and find some young Phoebus Apollo driving his sun-chariot through them. What about the old story of a child being born with a golden spoon in his mouth? Should a committee of elders decide that such a child was unsocial, and have it strangled at birth? Besides, were the wise men capable of distinguishing between a potential Hercules and the village idiot?

“My dear, we had better give it up.”

“What, mother?”

“Pretending. You are not just a man in the street who has scraped up a hundred pounds. You are one of Mr. Darwin’s sports.—Well,—what about the Victoria?”

“You mean the hotel?”

“I do, my dear. It sounds—solid.”

Karl laughed.

“Yes, Vicky wouldn’t countenance Continental cads.”

So, to the Victoria they transferred themselves, and engaged a suite, and Mary Arch was wired for, and Rebecca’s London bank warned to provide Miss Arch with travelling funds. A week more of Monte Carlo satisfied the Kestevens. They moved to the Beau Site at Cannes, and Karl took tennis lessons from the pro. Also, he hired a car, and the Kestevens explored; they visited Grasse, Gourdon, and San Remo. Mary Arch accompanied them on some of their drives, sitting quietly on one of the squab seats, and watching her world with her wise-virgin eyes.

CHAPTER XXIV

In the spring of the year Karl sat down at Burntshaw to work at a new play. Its title was "Chaos," and on paper the word looked round and rich and resonant, and there it remained like the name painted across the front of an empty hotel. But, Burntshaw was not chaos in the ordered beauty of its burgeoning. Each tree had a rhythm of its own, and with gradual stealth unfolded its greenness. The larches were emerald spires; beech buds flashed gold in the wind. True, there were grey days when spring seemed to pause and wait upon the sun, but Karl, restless and perplexed, wondered at the inevitableness of growth, and envied it.

Strange, beautiful rhythm, like the pages of a book turned by a hidden hand. Red Artus before Red Cardinal. The oaks loitering in filigree of gold and bronze. Plum blossom, pear blossom, apple blossom, yet not every apple tree blushed on the same day. With Karl the creative urge would not spill itself on paper. "Chaos" was a wilful play, and it refused to cease from chaos. He had proposed to express in it the contemporary spirit as he divined it, and the canvas was too large for him, and remained like an unfinished picture by Turner.—Blind Samson groping for the pillars of the temple, and bringing it crashing. Society, confused and discordant, new verities, new nudities, sex and youth insurgent, Brother Augustus buying the moon.

"Chaos" eluded him. He could thread no theme of action into the play. People just talked, and there was no end to their talking. Frustrated, struggling with a complexity that kept him groping as in a fog, he became moody and preoccupied, and blind to the immediate things about him. The play simply would not shape. He wrote and tore up, wrote and tore up again. As a successful young man he would not admit that he had not the cunning to compress so much upon his canvas. "Chaos" was as complex as the world outside his window, but into it he could not bring the rhythm and the inevitableness of the trees and flowers and grasses. "Chaos" was like a traffic jam which would not be disentangled.

Karl did not talk to his mother about this play. It was to be his most ambitious effort, and he had thought to surprise her with it, but when chaos continued to brood upon the waters he did not like to confess that he was baffled. To be thwarted by a theme was a new experience for him, and instead of putting the play aside, he laboured and fretted at it.

Rebecca asked no such question as—"How's work going, my dear?" That it wasn't going was obvious, for the face of her beloved was unhappy. Frustrated, he

could not retreat from a creative cul-de-sac, and walk round the corner to find some easier inspiration. His self-confidence had been challenged, a self-confidence that had become rather head in air. He was excessively restless, as though the spring and woman had got into his blood, but his mother did not postulate woman.

His waste-paper basket was her weather-glass. Mary Arch had received instructions not to touch the basket until her mistress had seen its contents, and with Karl out of the house his mother would climb the stairs, helping herself up by the handrail. Something was failing in Rebecca during those spring days, but youth, absorbed in its own fierce frustrations, was blind to immediate things.

His mother would sit down in his chair and examine the contents of the waste-paper basket. Karl had never been a great tearer up of paper. He had been blessed or cursed with a happy facility, but this summer-ship would not sail the sea.

On his writing-table there accumulated slowly the pages of the first act, but there were days when Rebecca realized that he was becalmed.

“Chaos.”

He had written in that title with a suggestion of swagger. It challenged. It was intended to show the world that a young man could teach it something. Thunder and lightning and the young Jove! Rebecca had felt a little thrill of pride and excitement at her first sighting of that striding title. Was not her beloved going from strength to strength? And then with gradual compassion and secret pangs she had realized that her man-child was groping. He was still so young, and perhaps a little too sure that he could be prodigious. Sitting in his chair, and reading those pages of manuscript, she—as a mother—did divine why he was not succeeding. He was not letting life express itself through him; he was trying to be clever, to show off, and “Chaos” like the edge of a rucked-up carpet, had brought him flat.

But that waste-paper basket full of the débris of defeat moved her most strangely. It gave her actual, physical qualms. Did life fool you like this? Did it suffer you to climb just so high, and then shake the beanstalk? Did every man who set forth upon adventure meet the occasion that was too great for him? A new phase, new problems, the larger provocations, the creative urge beating its wings against a cliff! How could she help? To ask herself that question was to realize that she could not help. Work such as this was not the Essex Road or the old Fur Co. Rebecca might sit and ponder, and make profound discoveries of her own. Surely your creative artist was the most lonely of creatures, daring in solitude the hazards of his pilgrimage. No one could help him—save in the solace of sympathy. No one could say—“Do this or that.” Nor could she say to Karl “My dear, if the thing is too difficult, turn back.” As a mother who had watched a child learning to walk she was

wise as to the inevitableness of certain wanderings in the desert. The man who mattered had to teach himself.

Then, one morning, coming back for a forgotten pipe, he caught her there, sitting at his table.

“You here, mother.”

Obviously so! She was caught, but she put a casual face upon it, though she saw him glance almost furtively at his manuscript. Had she been reading that dreadful and declamatory rubbish?—for that was what his genius had declared it to be.

“I thought you had gone, my dear. I just came up to see that Mary. Yes,—and I just sat down.”

Had he been less sensitive about that wretched manuscript he might have divined other reasons for her wanting to sit down. He found the pipe, and with a face of frustration, stood patting his pockets as though to be sure that he had pouch and matches with him.

“Going to run over to the downs, Chanctonbury way. Care to come?”

One of her hands was resting on his manuscript rather like a large paper-weight. She wanted to speak to him about this play, because “Chaos” had come between them, and because there were other things she might have to tell him.

“No, dear.—I’m not quite feeling like it.”

She looked up over a shoulder at his face. How dreadfully serious youth could be, and how sensitive! He was like a child thwarted by some jig-saw puzzle, and running away from it in deep dudgeon. Was it vanity that would not allow him to say “I’m stuck.”

“Sorry. You won’t mind if I’m not back to lunch?”

“No, dear.”

She was alone again, and she sat and smiled a little whimsically over that almost formal occasion. He had been the polite son. He had been unable to confess that he was floundering. But did he know it? O, yes, she was sure of that. He was possessed by a kind of fierce and sensitive reticence.

2

Behind youth’s preoccupations and creative frettings—woman’s talk.

“Things—aren’t quite as they should be with me, Mary.”

“Oughtn’t you to see a doctor?”

These intimacies were not concerned with “Chaos.” Mary Arch might be almost as wise as her mistress in the matter of the young hero’s frustration, but there were

other and more urgent ills in the house. Arch had become so much part of it, and so accepted for what she was and could be that when the incubus arrived, Karl's mother found herself leaning upon this pale, quiet-eyed young woman.

"It shouldn't be like that, should it, Mary?"

Mary was sure that it should not be so, and most certainly not so at her mistress's age. Mary was no gossip. Euphemia might assert that Mrs. Kesteven was not looking herself, but Arch did not encourage Euphemia in pathological discussions. Mary had observed certain things, the intimate trifles of another woman's bedroom, and Mary was concerned. She had so accustomed herself to Mrs. Kesteven's robust enjoyment of life, that when the large, strong frame began to sag and the confident voice to grow hesitant, Mary Arch was moved. Self-contained she might be, there was in her the essence of her sex when that sex had not been exploited or emancipated.

"You must see a doctor, madam."

Rebecca, a little frightened, was glad of Mary. Need Mary call her madam?—But you could talk to a woman, and especially so to Mary Arch. She was sensitive about things; she was not red flannel. And Rebecca, who for years had stood solidly upon her large feet, was feeling suddenly like a child threatened with life's dark cupboard.

"It can't be the change, my dear. I had that years ago. And blood——"

Arch mothered her.

"You ought to go at once."

"Do you think I have been getting thinner?"

Why ask such a question when it was self-evident? Arch was light-handed.

"Perhaps—a little."

But there was no doubt about the change in her mistress. Mrs. Kesteven's face and neck reminded Mary of her visit to the nursing-home. There was a flabbiness, a sagging of the skin, a faint, earthy tinge.

"You ought to go at once. Let me ring up Dr. Bentley and make an appointment."

Said her mistress—"I don't want Mr. Karl to know. He's rather worried."

Mary had feelings of her own about Mr. Karl's preoccupations. Strange creatures—men, so absorbed in some inward urge that they could be blind to more immediate things.

"We could go shopping, madam."

"Yes, shopping, my dear. I'd like you to come with me."

"Shall I arrange for to-morrow?"

Rebecca reflected.

“Let me see, to-day’s Friday. I think Mr. Max is coming down for the weekend. Let’s make it Tuesday, Mary. Two or three days won’t matter.”

“Why not have a local doctor—first?”

“No, Mary; if I have to go anywhere I’ll go to London. It would give the thing away if I had a local man in.”

Mary Arch did not argue the point. Personally, she did not agree that Mr. Karl should be spared. She was feeling a little hostile towards Mr. Karl. There might be other and more elemental reasons. But if a man, even though he happened to be young and a celebrity, could not look attentively at a familiar and devoted face and see certain things for himself? Mary’s impatience might be an emotion that was in secret rebellion against certain frustrations of her own.

3

Max Sartoris came down to Burntshaw on the Saturday. Karl had been waiting for the intervention and the almost infantile candour of Max. Max might be a musician, but he had a curious clarity of mind, and a nature that was so golden that nothing was said in malice. Karl had decided to thrust “Chaos” upon Max, and let this one friend censor it. The play might not be as hopeless and amorphous as he feared, and Max had a flair for things.

Sartoris lying flat on his back in the Burntshaw punt, with his naked feet trailing in the water as though inviting inquisitive fish to nibble at them, read the first act of “Chaos” and was shocked by it. What was the matter with Karl? This was preposterous stuff, its people swollen-headed marionettes, and Karl had taken to ranting.

But Max’s child’s eyes had seen something more immediate than the declamatory falseness of “Chaos,” Karl’s mother propped up in a long chair in the garden. Yes, propped up, and somehow and obviously needing those cushions. A sick woman. And was Karl aware of it, or was he so lost in “Chaos” that he could not read a face?

Moreover, Max and Karl’s mother had had a little talk about “Chaos.”

“If he asks you about it, my dear, tell him he has taken to ranting.”

Karl, going in search of his friend on that warm spring day, found the punt and Max at rest under the shade of an alder tree. Max lay flat, staring at the sky with a face of peculiar innocence. Karl twitted him. Max was looking very comfortable. Karl sat down on the bank, and saw the manuscript of “Chaos” lying on a cushion, a

red cushion.

“Want any tea, Max?”

“Is it as late as that?”

“Nearly.”

“I’ve had a sleep.”

Karl gave a little, self-conscious laugh.

“Did that damned play of mine do that?”

Max sat up suddenly.

“I say, Carlo, what’s the matter with the Dear Mater?”

“Mother?”

Karl was aware of those slightly prominent and dog-like eyes of Max’s looking up at him.

“What do you mean?”

So Karl had not noticed anything! Max, suddenly sensitive, reached for Karl’s manuscript and stood up in the punt.

“What about the cushions?”

“I’ll fetch them presently.”

Max had rolled the manuscript of “Chaos” into a scroll, and without a word and as though handing over the daily paper, he passed it to Karl. Nothing was said upon the goodness or badness of “Chaos.” Max’s silence was somehow sufficient.

Karl’s face had become live and actual.

“What’s this about mother?”

Max, remembering that he had left a pair of white canvas shoes in the punt, recovered them and sat down on the bank to put them on.

“Just—an impression.—It struck me she looked—a bit seedy.”

Karl’s head gave a little jerk.

“I hadn’t noticed anything.”

“You see her—every day, Carlo.”

“That’s true.”

Max got on his feet, and they went up towards the house. A great rhododendron hedge was splashed with colour, and Karl saw it as something separating the then from the now. “Chaos” was just a roll of paper in his hand. Max swung an iron gate open, and sensitive to the silence, loafed casually in creased grey flannel trousers.

“I’ll go and have a wash.”

“Right.—I expect tea’s in the garden.”

Karl found his mother in a long chair on the grass near one of the cedars, but there was a conscious stealth in his oblique approach. He wanted to look at his

mother dispassionately, if such detachment was possible, though in attempting it he might have known how impossible it was. What had Max Sartoris seen that he had missed? Yes, just as he had missed seeing things in “Chaos.”

His footsteps were muted by the turf. He came within four yards of his mother, and stood looking at her as though watching from the wings someone on a stage. Rebecca lay quite still. Her eyes were closed, her hands folded over her bosom. It struck Karl that his mother’s hands looked very large and white. He noticed the cushions and the way his mother’s shape seemed to sink into them. Surely, there was an indefinable shrunken look about her face?

And, suddenly, the stillness of her frightened him. He seemed to see his mother lying dead, and he was conscious of a poignant premonition. He just stood and stared rather like a child to whom life was showing something strange and sad and unexpected.

Rebecca’s eyes opened. She turned her head, saw him and smiled.

“Karl.”

There was more in her eyes than a smile. She was looking at a creature who was very dear to her, while feeling herself in the shadow of things unseen. But she too was being looked at by youth who seemed to stand just outside the shadow.

“Time for tea, dear?”

“Yes, just about four.—Is anything the matter, mother?”

“Matter, my dear?”

“You don’t look quite yourself.”

Rebecca sat up in her chair.

“Just a little tired.—I suppose it’s the spring. Quite wrong, isn’t it, that with things coming into flower one should feel a bit faded.”

Karl’s eyes were mere slits in the sunlight. He was seeing what Max Sartoris had seen, and wondering why he had been blind to those suggestive lines and shadows.

“No need to move, mother. I’ll have tea brought down here. But isn’t there something more?”

“I’m not so young as I was, my dear.”

“Well, you’ll see a doctor.”

“Yes, perhaps I will.”

He was aware of her glancing at the roll of manuscript in his hand, but by neither of them was the play mentioned. “Chaos” had ceased to have any dramatic meaning for Karl, and Rebecca knew that the eyes of her beloved were open.

Max Sartoris was reading in bed when Karl came out on the landing and saw the slit of light under his friend's door. Karl hesitated for a moment before knocking at Max's door, and such hesitation was new in Karl, the reaction of a raw, clean surface.

"Can I come in, Max?"

Sartoris put his book aside, and tilted the lamp-shade so that the light was dimmed. Karl's face was not wanting too much light. Max's cigarette-case lay on the table beside the bed. He reached for it.

"Have one?"

Karl did not appear to hear him. He went and sat in the arm-chair by the open window. The blind was up, and the curtains undrawn.

"Full moon, Max."

"It doesn't keep me awake."

Sartoris' hand went out a second time and switched off the lamp. He could see Karl as a dim shape, strangely and significantly still.

"Sorry I gave you that rot to read."

Max's cigarette end glowed.

"I know what it is to be tone deaf."

"Do you?"

"One can't say why. The virtue just goes out of one."

There was a pause. Then Karl said, "That's the funny thing about creative work. There seems to be something that is not you in it, and if that something goes——"

"One flounders and rants or is just—clever."

"Yes, just clever."

Max saw Karl get up, go to the window and lean out. Karl was looking at the garden in the moonlight, and the great trees and their shadows, and the sheen of water. He was conscious of this natural world's serenity, its beautiful and strange orderliness. Something was hurting in him.

"You've done two things for me, Max."

"I've had a child's day."

"That's it. I was going about thinking I could be a sort of little G.B.S. As though I could get near Shaw. It's not in me—yet. Besides——"

Max sat and smoked.

"Besides, I've seen—what you saw at once. You know what I mean. It has scared me."

"It is sometimes good to be scared."

"Is it? Anyhow—it brings one back to the raw stuff of life, one's belly and one's

heart, and all the subconscious qualms that matter. But how was it I didn't see? Well, —what do you feel about it? I don't mean that damned play.”

Sartoris hugged his knees.

“She looks rather a sick woman. Carlo.”

“Yes.”

CHAPTER XXV

Into Mr. Gilbertson's waiting-room direct sunlight did not penetrate. It had two tall windows, green damask curtains, a Turkey carpet, a cabinet of old china, two portraits in oils, six chairs after Hepplewhite, a sideboard and knife boxes to match. Mrs. Kesteven and Mary Arch had this room to themselves. The appointment with Mr. Gilbertson was a special one, arranged on the telephone by Dr. Bentley, and since Mr. Gilbertson was a very busy man, Mrs. Kesteven had had to wait till late in the afternoon.

The room contained only one arm-chair, and Rebecca occupied it. Patiently, with her hands lying in her lap, she sat and waited, looking haggard and old. Now and again she would draw a deep breath. It was the body's protest against this long suspense. Mary, sitting at the table, had felt from the first that this room was a room of fear. You whispered in it lest sounds should rebound from its tense, resonant walls. It was a room in which people might exchange silent and tragic glances, and remain inarticulate or blurt out a few casual words.

"You ought to have had some tea, Mary."

Mary's eyes were sudden and deep and kind. She was aware of the forced smile on that other face, a smile that concealed a kind of quiet anguish. The earlier visit to the physician had been ominous. He had disappeared to speak on his secretary's telephone to Gilbertson, and had come back with a smooth kindness that had contained pity.

This crisis! And here was her mistress regretting that Mary had had no tea. Courage in the considering of trifles. Mary had reached the realization of a human attachment that was somehow elemental and subconscious. Why should she care? The thing was that she did care.

"We can have tea presently, dear."

Rebecca looked at her suddenly, and sat breathing with a deeper rhythm. As woman to woman—that one word was precious to her. She needed it, for she was feeling so very frightened.

"How much longer?"

Mary looked once again at the clock on the mantelpiece. She had glanced at it repeatedly as at some unfeeling and inhuman face.

"I think someone's coming."

The door was opened by a young woman in a white linen coat.

“Mrs. Kesteven, please.”

Mary moved quickly round the table. She seemed to understand that this other woman needed help. “Thank you, dear.” Rebecca’s eyes met Mary’s as she rose heavily from the chair; those legs of hers would persist in trembling.

“Come in with me, Mary.”

Mary slipped a hand under Rebecca’s arm.

Mr. Gilbertson was a man who concealed professional haste with an air of hard geniality. He had very blue eyes that seemed to pin you instantly in a chair or on a table. His questioning of Mrs. Kesteven was brief and actual. How long had she been aware of her particular symptoms? Two or three months? Yes, Dr. Bentley had provided him with details. Mr. Gilbertson left his chair to prepare himself for the business that mattered.

“I want you to undress, Mrs. Kesteven. Yes, behind that screen.”

“Everything?”

He thought her stupid, whereas she was only bewildered.

“No, just the dress and corsets.”

Mary followed her mistress behind the screen, and she was needed there, for Rebecca would have pulled and fumbled at things with agitated fingers. This man with his cold, brisk glitter had frightened her.

“Leave it to me, dear.”

Mary’s hands were almost as quick and as capable as the surgeon’s.

“I couldn’t have got on without you, Mary.”

Mr. Gilbertson had a peculiar sense of the grotesque. He was a collector of cartoons, and Mrs. Kesteven was a Rowlandson, like a vast and prematurely aged child with her immense legs and bulges.

“I want you on this couch.”

“Which way, doctor?”

Mary Arch was conscious of a spasm of compassion. Mrs. Kesteven stood there just like a frightened child. She did not see her as Mr. Gilbertson saw her, as a fat old Jewess in a short silk petticoat and vest.

“On your back, please.”

Mary Arch returned to her chair. She fixed her eyes upon a glass-doored bookcase full of professional literature. Mr. Gilbertson’s hands were dipping deeply and gradually into the bulge that was a body.

“Hurt you?”

“No, doctor.”

“Now, turn on your side, please. No, the other way.”

More silence, with Mary's head averted. She was conscious of sharing in someone else's ordeal. She heard Karl's mother utter a little groan.

"Painful?"

"Yes, doctor."

"I'm sorry. Try not to strain."

The examination was over. Mary, glancing anxiously in the direction of the couch, saw two large, black-stockinged legs lying one upon the other. The upper leg made a little squirming movement. Mr. Gilbertson was walking across the room towards a corner where a basin was fitted to the wall.

"You can dress now, Mrs. Kesteven."

Mary crossed quickly to the couch. A haggard face smiled at her. The two large legs rolled themselves off the couch.

"I'll just sit a moment, my dear."

Mr. Gilbertson was waiting for them in his chair when they reappeared from behind the screen. He had been writing in a case-book. His blue eyes fixed Mary.

"Will you wait outside, please."

Mary waited until Mrs. Kesteven had sat down in the patient's chair. She was intuitively sure that Mr. Gilbertson had bad news for her mistress.

She found herself standing at one of the waiting-room windows. She could not hear the voices in the other room. Taxis and cars passed in the street, but to Mary Arch they were soundless. This horrible room! She felt it to be full of human suspense, a closed box into which emotion had been compressed. Footsteps, voices, the sound of a door being opened. Mrs. Kesteven came into the room, and when Mary saw the other woman's face, she stood still and wondered at it. The face of Karl's mother had a kind of sheen. It was luminous with the light of some emotional exaltation.

"We'll go and have some tea now, Mary."

Mrs. Kesteven's hat was not quite in order, and Mary went and gently adjusted it.

"Do you think you can manage?"

"Yes, my dear. I'll just sit down for a moment."

She sat down rather hurriedly as though her legs had been only too ready to accept the decision.

"I'm to go into a nursing-home."

"Now?"

"No, to-morrow.—I'm to be——"

Her lips seemed to writhe and refuse the word.

“Mr. Gilbertson is making arrangements.—I want to go back to Burntshaw just for one night.”

She sat there, looking out of one of the tall windows, but Mary was sure that her mistress was not seeing immediate things, for Rebecca was thinking of what she would say to her son.

2

In the car Mrs. Kesteven recovered some of her colour and the whole of her composure. The maternal habit reasserted itself. To-morrow she was to go into a nursing-home to be prepared for a major operation; meanwhile, she was concerned about her son and his affairs.

“I’m wondering what to do about Mr. Karl, Mary.”

Why worry about Mr. Karl? When Mr. Charles Kesteven was told the truth about his mother he would be the person who should be worried. Mary Arch was feeling more than a little critical towards Mr. Charles, in that she could accuse him of taking so much of life for granted, and of failing to appreciate how sedulously the large hands of his mother had smoothed out all creases. She dared to say that it was her mistress’s duty to think of herself, and to conserve her strength and her courage.

“I’m sure Mr. Karl won’t let you worry about him.”

Rebecca sat smiling at nothing.

“It’s such a habit with me, Mary.”

The month of May had reached a mature and happy splendour, and on that spring evening the world had an aura of gold. Mary, silent in her corner, was moved to wonder at the strangeness of the occasion, in that her impressions were so poignant and unexpected. Objectively she was aware of her mistress, of her folded hands, and her large tranquillity, and of a face that kept smiling at things. How strange that one should smile after such a verdict! Did her mistress realize? But, of course, she realized. Mary Arch sat and wondered. What were this other woman’s thoughts? What made her smile to herself? Was she dreaming in the past, and so happily so, that the future appeared to her as a kind of sacrificial consummation? But in Mary there was more than crude curiosity. She had no religion in the conventional sense, and yet—like most sensitive women—she was essentially religious, in that she had mystical feelings and intuitions about things, and gave heed to them. She could have said that she was in the presence of a spirit that moved her very deeply. She had seen her mistress looking like a frightened child,—but now—that smiling face and those quiet hands.

They had passed through Leatherhead and the car was descending a hill. Beech trees shaded the road, and in the valley below a very green meadow lay hollowed out in the evening sunlight. Rebecca's eyes were turned towards this green hollow, and there was a pleased look in them.

"Isn't that lovely, Mary?"

Mary was conscious of a swelling of the throat. Almost, the voice of her mistress was the voice of one taking leave of a beautiful world.

"Yes, almost too lovely."

Rebecca turned to look at her. Did Mary feel like that too?

"It shouldn't hurt you, my dear."

"But it does, to-day."

Rebecca's hand went out.

"Thank you, my dear. But you are young. Yet, I can remember—when I was young—being hurt by things. They don't hurt so much—or differently—when you are old. Let's say it is just beautiful, Mary, and leave it at that."

Rebecca held her maid's hand. Probably, she had ceased to think of Mary as a handmaid, for this younger woman had shared with her a day of inward revelation.

"I'm not afraid—of that—now, Mary."

"No, dear."

"Only of one thing."

She did not say what that thing was. She was going home to tell her son that she might be a doomed woman, but that was not the secret. Would he be profoundly affected? And how did one reconcile the passion to protect with the self in you crying out for someone to share in your pain. She wanted Karl to be stricken; she wanted to feel that she mattered more than anything else in the world. The assuageless ego! And against this selfishness her mother spirit strove.

If loss there was to be, let it be sufficiently sure to save her from being forgotten. It was so horrible to be put away and forgotten, and to have buried with you all those little toys and possessions and trophies, the things that you had suffered and striven for and exulted in. This was her one secret, would life just look a little shocked, and then remember that it was good to live? But—of course—it was good for him to live, yet, on this day of revelation Karl's mother shrank from the one supreme loneliness, and was afraid. It was not indeed possible that the relationship that had meant so much to her could mean so much to him. He was young; he had his life to live. She was under no illusions; she felt that she had seen death in the surgeon's blue eyes.

From the hollow below the house where the shadows were spreading across the grass Karl heard the sound of a car. His mother and Mary were late, and Euphemia had been fussing over a spoilt dinner, but Smith was a careful driver, and Karl had postulated nothing more serious than a puncture.

He went out to the terrace which had been built the previous winter, and behind him the level sunlight washed the house with light, picking out the white window-frames and the mortar between the old bricks. There was a freshness in the air that was not far from frost. Below the terrace a bed of azaleas blazed against grass that was the colour of a very green apple.

He had spent the day working in the garden, trying to rid himself of his restlessness. Life, so smooth on the surface, was not running happily within, though these moods of vague dissatisfaction become so familiar to the imaginative worker, concealing below an irritable sterility some nascent inspiration. Karl was more concerned for the moment with his own moodiness than with his mother's health, for he had come to accept Rebecca as a symbol of strength and security, someone who was always the same, someone whose sympathy never failed him. Max Sartoris was a somewhat emotional person, and if it had seemed to him that Mrs. Kesteven was not quite herself, Dr. Bentley would set things right. Doctors could be such useful people in that you were able to transfer to them your vicarious problems, and remain creatively self-centred.

But, as Karl stood there on that May evening waiting for the car he was conscious that some virtue had gone out of him. What was the crave? Change, excitement, some new dramatic noise? The inward flame of his inspiration seemed to flicker in a draught. For the chastening of his soul he had spent part of the morning hoeing weeds with Lavender, though he lacked Lavender's skill, and suddenly he had stuck his Dutch hoe in the soil and stood to watch this other man. Rather a futile job chopping weeds out of the earth! And it had occurred to him to question the steady, lean labour of this peasant. Did Lavender ever feel bored? Was this rather morose man tempted on occasion to toss his spade over a hedge, gird up his loins and go forth upon adventure?

He had asked Lavender that sudden question.

"Do you ever get bored with your work?"

Lavender had straightened his long back, and smiled with rustic irony.

"Haven't time to be bored, sir."

"Always something to do?"

“You can’t let weeds get the upper hand.”

And Lavender had resumed the scufflings with his hoe.

Was that the secret? Necessity? Keeping your weeds under? And could life be rather too easy for one of the world’s favoured children? Perhaps he had been able to please himself too much and too easily. Did he need what his boxing professional might have described as a sock on the jaw?

He saw the radiator of the Rolls catch the light as the car emerged from the shadows of the park trees. Hands in his pockets he stood there watching the landaulette climb the slope. Probably he would twit his mother, ask her if she had bought half Harrod’s. He was aware of three faces looking at him.

“Had a puncture, Smith?”

“No, sir.”

Smith was a quiet fellow, with manners. Karl, opening the near door, smiled at his mother and was smiled at in return.

“Well, better late than never.—Euphemia’s been worrying about the dinner.”

He stood back to let his mother out, only to realize that Mary Arch had slipped out of the other door and was interposing herself between him and her mistress. There was something challenging in this other woman’s intervention. He made way for Mary. He was aware of her helping his mother out of the car, and it was borne upon him that his mother needed helping. Mary knew it, and was impatient with him for not knowing it also. His mother’s movements were glutinous, slow, and laboured.

“Too much shopping?”

Why did Mary give him that sudden, oblique, hostile glance?

Rebecca was crossing the terrace, leaning on Arch’s arm, and Karl, following them, noticed that his mother’s feet seemed to drag. She was more than tired. And he had been calling Max Sartoris an alarmist! The ennui and the moodiness of the day were forgotten.

“Go and lie down, mother.”

Her voice trailed back to him.

“I think I will, my dear.—I’ll have some dinner in bed.”

Rebecca had reached the foot of the stairs. She paused there with Mary as though preparing herself for the effort of climbing them. Mary Arch, holding her arm, was looking questioningly at her mistress. Karl caught that glance of compassion and was surprised by it. Mary had not looked at him like that.

“Can you manage?”

“I think so, Mary,” and she heard the voice of her son say, “I’ll carry you up, mother.” Carry her up, indeed, when she weighed some thirteen stone! She turned a

whimsical, poignant face to him.

“O, no, my dear. I’m much too heavy.”

“No, you’re not.”

He was in earnest about it, and she surrendered.

“I’m afraid you’ll strain yourself.”

“Nonsense.”

He was very strong, and on this occasion stronger than he knew. He happened to meet Mary Arch’s eyes, and they had become different eyes. He spoke to his mother, “Put one arm round my neck. That’s it.” Yes, she was heavy, far heavier than he had expected, but with a set and almost fierce face he carried her slowly up the stairs. Mary Arch, like some young priestess, followed behind them, keeping her distance, yet near enough to help should he falter. But Karl knew that if he paused his mother’s weight would be too much for him. He saw that her bedroom door was shut, but Mary slipped past and was there before him. She opened the door, and Karl, feeling his heart beating hard and fast, carried his mother in. The door was closed behind them.

“Put me down, my dear. I’m too heavy.”

She had watched his tense face, but his strength held. He carried her to the bed, laid her upon it and stood straight for a moment. Rebecca’s hands went up to remove a superfluous hat. He took it from her, and collecting a cushion from a chair, added it to the pillows. Then, quite suddenly, he knelt down beside the bed.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

A hand went out to him. Her face looked both luminous and anguished.

“You were worried—about the play.”

“O, damn the play! Have you seen Bentley?”

“Yes, my dear. He sent me to see a surgeon. I’m to go into a nursing-home tomorrow.”

Karl looked steadily at his mother. So, she had come back just for the one night to see him and tell him.

“That means?”

“They are going to try and take something away, dear.”

Karl’s face went down on his mother’s hand.

“I see. I ought to have realized. Tell me—just how bad it is.”

And very gently she told him.

Karl met Mary in the hall carrying his mother's dinner tray. She was without cap and apron, and save for her bare head just as she had come from town.

"I'll take it, Mary."

Her eyes observed him. They had become very gentle eyes.

"I can manage, Mr. Karl, unless——"

His eyes looked into hers.

"Unless. Yes, I want to. I'm glad you were with her, Mary."

Her eyelids drooped. She gave him the tray and turned away, and then turned again to watch him go deliberately and carefully up the stairs. There was hot soup in a plate, and his eyes were fixed upon the plate. Anything that had been hostile in her passed from her consciousness. She stood there wide-eyed and watching until he had disappeared.

The light was beginning to fail when Karl sat down to his own meal. Mary brought him Euphemia's apologies for a dinner that had been kept waiting.

"O, that's all right, Mary."

"Would you like the lights, sir?"

"No, not yet."

She was leaving the room when he called her back.

"O, just a moment, Mary. I shall be going up to the flat.—Could you manage? if not, I can put up somewhere."

"We can manage, sir."

"The car can make two journeys, if necessary. I'll get Lavender and his wife to come in."

Euphemia, who, like a conscientious cook, was curious as to how her dishes had been received, was troubled about this particular dinner.

"He's hardly touched it.—I knew it wasn't what it should have been."

Arch realized that Euphemia would have to be told just why Mrs. Kesteven had gone to bed and why her son had no appetite. Euphemia, with her honest eyes like two bits of blue glass, stood holding an empty plate. Conversational on most occasions she had not a word to say in the face of this catastrophe. But Mr. Karl's lack of appetite was understandable, and a desiccated chicken and pulped vegetables mere signs and symbols.

In going to place the plate on the washing-board Euphemia stumbled over the cocked-up edge of a mat. She looked reproachfully at the mat. "You would, wouldn't you? Wanted me to break the plate, didn't you?" And Euphemia burst into tears.

Mary Arch's bedroom was on the top floor at Burntshaw, and immediately

above Mrs. Kesteven's. Having done all that could be done for her mistress, she went to her room, undressed and slipped into bed. It was a habit of hers to read for half an hour, and the book of the moment was one of John Galsworthy's, but even Galsworthy could not hold her attention on this particular night. She put the book aside, turned off the light, and lay thinking, for sleep seemed very far away.

Someone else was wakeful. She became conscious of a little sound treading Burntshaw's silence, a silence that was so complete that it would fret into wakefulness visitors from London. Someone was walking up and down the terrace, and she had not to ask herself who that someone was. But did he not realize that his restlessness might keep his mother awake? She got out of bed, drew the blind aside and saw that the moon was shining. Yes, it was a wonderful night, all ebony and silver, but why must he walk up and down under the moon like an old-fashioned lover under a window. It might be part of her tragedy to know that man could love himself as he loved no woman.

Then, as she stood there, his footsteps ceased. He had thought, "Selfish as ever. You may be keeping her awake," but whether the prompting was his own or descended upon him from that other window was a question for the gods.

CHAPTER XXVI

An eminent psychotherapist has described modern man as a sex-obsessed iconoclast breaking every ancestral image. The new—"Why?" is universal now that the gods are mute. Youth may cry, "What is morality but a fancy dress worn by my grandmother." At the Emetic Club Karl had listened to other bright young men claiming the right to pursue every sort of social experiment. Someone else had replied that in this cult of the subconscious, this disinterring of primordial propensities, man was rather like a nasty urchin poking his fingers into a latrine bucket.

Karl was prejudiced at the moment against the self-consciously modern. He had discussed this attitude with Julian Dare. "I'm a sentimentalist." What a confession! Dare—one of the most brilliant of the moderns, and so modern that he was almost a mystic, was on the side of the sentimentalists. "Clothes, my dear lad. Stick to them. In spite of the nudists.—England is not made for nakedness." He asserted that there was a psychology according to Freud and a psychology according to Jesus. Personally, he preferred that of Jesus. It might be a question of temperament. Some people conceived it to be their duty to explore the slime at the bottom of the pond. Well, let 'em. But they should not accuse of insincerity those who preferred to float about in a punt and look at the sky. "They damn us, because we sometimes hold our noses, but is not the holding of noses sometimes a social necessity? Do we ask to live with stinks? The mediævalists let their sewage run down the gutters. We suppress it in sewers. Is—therefore—sanitation hypocritical? A bundle of instincts, urges. Are we to let them run wild like a lot of untaught kids? My dear man, where would my research work be if I ran about all day after every female who piqued me? Freud is all right—as Freud. Take a dose of Eddington, and you'll find mountain climbing better than digging up submerged complexes."

For Karl had entered upon a period of disillumination. Modern he might be, and modern he was in that his secret soul was hungry for some otherness, the eternal mystery, God, a meaning for things. Yes, certain things should matter. Had man no right to take himself more seriously than had an ape? Was love to be left to the fat cads who crooned in nightclub orchestras? Was the whole social assumption crass humbug, sentiment a faked fig leaf? Off with all fig leaves and girdles of chastity! Let all the demagogues shout. Let social theorists conceive Utopias and bring in bills to ensure the lion lying down with the lamb. What rot the whole show was! And his

mother was dying of cancer.

That dreadful day!

He sat in the waiting-room of the nursing-home, turning over the pages of *Punch*. Devilish clever, and devilish cruel, but where was the chuckle? Why keep *Punch* on such a table? He got up, walked up and down, and then stood looking out of the window. People, vehicles, a dog sniffing at some railings, a man with a red and greasy nose talking to a squalid woman in a bonnet and ulster. How long had this business been going on? Was his god of the moment the man with the scalpel? He had paid Mr. Gilbertson three hundred guineas for the operation.

Someone else was shown into the room, a middle-aged woman who brought with her a sense of breathlessness and unrest. She could not sit still. She tried three different chairs, rustled the papers, blew her nose, and kept glancing at Karl as though she resented his presence. Karl had sat down on a sofa to watch the clock. His mother had been nearly forty-five minutes under the anæsthetic.

The door opened and a nurse's head and shoulders appeared.

"Mr. Kesteven—please. Will you come into the matron's room."

Karl rose and followed her.

"Is it all over, nurse?"

"I think so."

In the matron's room he came abruptly upon Dr. Bentley and the suavity of the bland physician who waited for people behind doors. Karl was conscious of a hardening of his suspense. Bentley's pale and sympathetic suavity was ominous. Mrs. Kesteven was a valued patient, and he had attended in the operating theatre to watch over the case.

"Sit down, Mr. Kesteven. Yes, everything is over. Mr. Gilbertson asked me to come down and tell you."

Karl did not sit down. He stood to take his punishment, head up, lips compressed.

"Bad news, doctor?"

"I'm sorry, yes. Gilbertson found the trouble much more extensive than he had expected. Yes, surprisingly so. In fact——"

"He could not do anything?"

"There are limits, you know, to what we can do. But—of course—we are not giving up. We shall try radium."

"Of course," said Karl tonelessly,—"radium."

Dr. Bentley asked him if he would like to wait and hear what Mr. Gilbertson had to say. No, Karl had no further interest in Mr. Gilbertson. The surgeon had asked for

his cheque in advance and he had received it. Karl was not in a mood to see anybody, and especially that man with the hard blue eyes who had failed to resolve his crisis for him. Radium! He knew what the use of radium portended. It was a forlorn hope. And suddenly he smiled at Dr. Bentley.

“No. I’d rather not. Gilbertson’s a busy man. When can I see my mother?”

“That will depend.—Perhaps this evening.”

Karl stood and stared at a worn patch on the carpet.

“By the way, who is going to tell her?”

“Would you like me to?”

Karl’s head came up with a jerk.

“No. That would be rather cowardly. I’m her son. I’ll tell her, doctor.”

“Not just yet.”

“I understand.”

Karl turned abruptly and walked out of the room. He was not very sure of his face, and he wanted to escape from this fatal house. More repression! But why should he be afraid to blub like a kid? Why pretend that you were ice? There was a nurse in the passage, the same nurse.

“Your hat, Mr. Kesteven.”

“O, thanks, nurse.”

It was a little thrill for her meeting the dramatist, and he was forgetting his hat.

He found himself in the street. The red-nosed man and the squalid woman were still face to face. On what conceivable subject could they be so protractedly garrulous? He crossed the road and looked almost fearfully over his shoulder at that fatal house. How long would his mother be in there? How long would she be left to him? Radium! The last empirical gamble! Where was he going? Back to the flat? No, not yet. He wanted to be out in the air on this spring morning, not shut up in a cage with his grief. He walked. He had a most strange feeling that the streets and houses were mere illusions, cinema stuff, and that the people were dream figments, and that he and his consciousness alone were real. Reality! What was reality? A metaphysical abstraction? While crossing a road he heard the sudden blare of a horn and a voice shouting. Brakes squealed and a taxi swerved. It had missed him by inches. He found himself looking at a red and reproachful face with bulging blue eyes. “Want to be killed, do you?” Karl smiled faintly at the indignant driver, and passed on.

He came to Hyde Park. The grass was green, the trees coming into young leaf. Hundreds of green chairs waited for people to come and sit on them. Karl left the path and walked across the grass; he did not ask himself whether walking on the

grass was permitted. He found himself looking at a sheen that was the Serpentine, water-fowl, boats, children, a few dogs, strolling humans. The water reminded him of the lake at Burntshaw. Burntshaw! What the devil would he do with Burntshaw? He sat down on a chair; it was a solitary chair, and to Karl it might have been the only chair in the world. This meaningless show, a Spring morning, London, man and his assumption that his posturings mattered, all the fuss and fury of living and getting and spending! What the devil was it all about? He sat and stared at the shimmer of water.

2

Could he slip into the flat without coming face to face with Mary or Euphemia? But the women would have to be told, and they were devoted to his mother.

He took himself up in the lift. The iron gate opened opposite the door of the flat, and the mechanism elevated Karl and produced him upon the stage like a little *deus ex machina*. Mary Arch was holding the doorway against a woman in a black mackintosh, though the wearing of a mackintosh on such a day was surprising.

“I tell you,” said the woman, “I’m going to stay right here until they see me.”

Emily! How strange that he should not have remembered his brothers on such a day. He was aware of Mary Arch’s eyes looking almost black in a very pale face.

“This—lady, sir, refused to take my word.”

He stepped out of the lift, and Emily confronted him, an Emily whose eyes looked more angry with life, and who had little crimped lines round her mouth.

“Oh,—it’s Karl!”

The insolence of her had ceased to be a pose, and had become an habitual response, a protruding of the lower lip, a lifting of the nostrils. Karl was made to feel the essential ugliness of Emily. She was as old as Time, and yet completely modern.

“Good morning, Emily. Come in.”

Politeness! She cocked her head as though appraising it. Now, just what did soft soap signify?

“Yes,—I’ll come in all right.”

She turned a buttoned-up glance on Mary. She would show this slavey, this parasite who had forbidden her the door.

“And how’s dear Rebecca?”

Mary drew back, her eyes on Karl’s face. It was a face frozen with self-restraint, and she understood.

“It’s quite all right, Mary. This lady is my sister-in-law.”

He led the way into that big, cheerful room with its windows looking west over roofs and chimneys. He stood holding the door.

“This way,—Emily.”

Emily’s eyes were slits. She flounced in, meagre about the throat, and shoulders, yet suggestively swollen in that black mackintosh. She looked right and left like a suspicious animal. So, the old woman—was—out, and that slavey had not been fibbing.

“Sit down, Emily.”

Emily sat down on a cretonne-covered chair.

“I’ve come about Augustus.”

Karl had closed the door. How strange that he should welcome the unexpectedness of Emily, and that her effect upon him should be that of an acrid and stimulating smell. “What can I do for you, Emily? Won’t you take that mackintosh off?” Her eyes were yellow slits. His politeness made her profoundly suspicious, for when a toff was courteous either he had his tongue in his cheek or he was proposing to exploit you. The Slopp world could not get exploitation out of its head.

“No, I won’t, thanks. Yes, you needn’t stare. I’m going to have a kid.”

Karl’s eyes were almost childlike. Emily a mother! Another Slopp born into the world. He could see no beauty in motherhood with Emily as the source of life.

“You needn’t congratulate me.—I don’t want the kid. I can’t afford to have a kid, with Gus in hospital.”

Karl said, “In hospital? I’m sorry,” and he felt that Emily did not believe him.

“Yes, his chest. It began with his throat, all the talking and speaking—for the cause. They want to send him to a sanatorium, and that means money.”

To Karl her slits of eyes were like knife-blades. She was bitter, was Emily, incredibly bitter.

“Nice for me—isn’t it, with a kid coming? And if I ask for money—I’m a sponger. I tell you my Gus is a martyr; he wanted to clean up this rotten, stinking world.”

Karl rose from the sofa. He was in no mood to let Emily rant at him. He went to a bureau, opened a drawer, and took out a cheque book.

“We won’t discuss economics, Emily. Will you accept help from me? Of course my brother must have treatment.”

There was a little gleam in her eyes.

“If you expect me to thank you——”

“Supposing we say nothing about thanks.—Shall I make the cheque out to Augustus?”

“A cheque’s not much in our line.”

“My bank will cash it. I’ll give you a covering note to the manager.”

Emily sat stiff and straight.

“You’d better make it out to me.”

Karl glanced at her obliquely, and then sat down and opened the cheque book. He happened to glance at the last counterfoil. “Gilbertson. Three hundred guineas.” Emily, having found Karl unexpectedly facile in the absence of that old terror, allowed expectations to swell in her. How much was he good for? Ten pounds, twenty pounds? She saw him tear out the cheque and lay it aside, and write a note to his bank manager. She screwed up her eyes, but she was too far away and the cheque lay too flat for her to be able to read the figures. Karl slipped the note into an envelope, addressed it, and turned to his sister-in-law.

“Here is a note to the manager.”

She was squirming to see that cheque.

“Much obliged, Karl, I’m sure.”

“And here is something to help.”

She sat holding the cheque and screwing up her eyes and forehead. “Pay Emily Slopp—one hundred pounds.” Coo! For the moment she could not believe it. One hundred pounds! Was she grateful? Not at all. So young Karl could cough up a hundred when you squeezed him! Was it that Mr. Charles Kesteven did not think it good policy to let it be known that he had left his brother dependent upon charity? To Emily it was disgusting that young Karl should be so rich that he could hand out cheques of this fatness.

“Will that do, Emily?”

She folded up the cheque and held it clipped between fingers and thumb.

“It will give my poor Gus a chance. I suppose I ought to thank you.”

“I’ve had a lot of luck, Emily.”

“I should say so.”

But she was in a fever to get away and turn that piece of paper into cash. She would not feel sure of the money until she had it in her hands. She stood up. She looked at Karl with her narrow, yellow eyes.

“I’ll be getting back now.—And how’s ma?”

Karl stiffened inwardly.

“She is away for a few days.”

“Give her—my love.”

Karl let her out and rang for the lift. Emily’s love! Ma! How vulgarly ironic! They stood there in silence, waiting for the lift to arrive, conscious of mutual antipathies.

Emily's lips were pressed together, her eyes almost shut, and to Karl there was something squalid in the bulge of that black mackintosh. Yes, democracy could be so damned ugly, and what would Julian Dare do about it with his insistence upon the aristocratic principle in nature?

The lift slid into view, a uniformed porter inside it, a cheerful and polite person who smiled upon Karl.

"Sorry to keep the lady waiting, sir."

Emily sniffed.

"Don't mention it, my man."

Karl saw her black shape and narrow earthy face drop out of sight, and with the passing of Emily there returned to him a little querulous sense of pain. Why had he given Emily that cheque? As a sop to his conscience, or out of kindness, or as a gesture of surrender in acknowledging that however big a bank balance you had it could not defeat death? That poor, futile, ranting Gus!

He turned back into the vestibule to find Mary waiting like a shadow against a wall. Her eyes were downcast, her hands hanging. She did not look at him directly, as though she had a feeling that he did not want to be looked at too closely.

"Will you be in to lunch, sir?"

"Yes, Mary."

He walked past her, to pause half-way down the passage, his face in the shadow.

"I'm afraid the news is rather bad, Mary."

She was rather dim to him. "I'm sorry, sir," and she seemed to breathe out the words almost noiselessly. Poor Mr. Karl! But she was moved by more than pity, and if her eyes were suddenly wet her tears were not merely for the man. There was deep affection between her and Karl's mother. She stifled a sound, but not so completely that Karl did not hear it, and that sob sent him quickly into the room, shaken and unsure of his own self-control. He wanted to be alone.

Before one o'clock Emily had cashed her cheque. She lunched at a Lyons' restaurant, sitting carefully on her handbag; she let herself go over her lunch. Yes, most of that money would be deposited in the Post Office to her credit. She took a bus to the Brompton Road. It was a visiting day. As she climbed the stairs to one of the upper wards her face had a crimped, sly look. She had decided to tell Augustus that young Karl had given her thirty pounds. She would keep the rest of the money. She needed money.

She sat by her husband's bed.

"Yes, just thirty pounds, Gus, and him—rolling. But it will get you to the San."

Emily was vibrant and cheerful, but her husband lay with half-shut eyes, picking at the sheet with poor, ineffectual fingers.

3

Morning. Three freshly-whitened steps, a blue door, sunlight. In the roadway three ex-service men, one minus a leg, playing *Roses of Picardy*. So, in his notes on a play, Karl would have roughed in the stage details of a scene.

Roses of Picardy. How British! The French were not sentimental in that way. "A little love, Tommy. Yes, five francs." He had not rung the bell yet, but he was aware of the blue door opening. The face of the nurse opened to him like the door.

"O, good morning, Mr. Kesteven. Excuse me a moment. These men——"

She swept forth and spoke to the musicians. "Do you mind not playing outside this house, please. It is a nursing-home."

One of the men took off his cap.

"Sorry, miss, we'll move on."

Decent fellows—these. Karl crossed the pavement and put two half-crowns in a cap.

Stairs, the blue linen skirt of the nurse jiggling in front of him. He noticed that she had thick ankles, and that the heels of her shoes were worn obliquely. The nurse opened his mother's door, and looked in brightly.

"Here's a visitor, Mrs. Kesteven."

Karl stood a moment, looking at his mother. It seemed to him that her face looked smaller, almost like the face of a child. The lips were very pale. How frightened he was, poor lad! She smiled at him.

"You can kiss me, dear."

He bent over her, closed his eyes, and found her cheek strangely cold to his lips. He was conscious of a sense of chill, a little tremor of anguish.

"Mustn't talk much, mother."

He knelt down by the bed, leaning sideways against it, and holding one of her hands. Did she know how he had yearned for and dreaded this meeting, and that out there in the passage he had felt like a man putting on a mask? A bright and cheerful face. Good God, what a futile phrase! His mother was a doomed woman. She might live three months, six months, even a year, but could such a gradual and daily fading be called living? He had promised to tell her, calmly and compassionately, keeping a treacherous bright face.

"We shall have you back at Burntshaw in no time."

Why did his mother look at him so queerly? He was conscious of the sudden pressure of her fingers.

“My dear, don’t pretend.”

She saw his face quick with sudden emotion.

“Pretend.”

“Yes, Karl, I know.”

Who had told her? Almost she could hear him asking himself that question. As if his poor face had not betrayed it to her. Deceiving his mother? Not likely.

His lips quivered.—“Gilbertson wants to try radium. When he——Yes, they are getting results with radium.”

His mother looked at him and smiled.

“Did they ask you to tell me, dear?”

“I said I would.—After all,—I’m——”

“It was brave, Karl.”

“It was about the most damnable thing that I——O, mother, mother.”

Something gave way in him. He put his head down on the bed and sobbed. He had promised himself that he would be so calm and tender and consoling, and he was whimpering like a rotten kid. Was his mother to bear the bitterness for both of them?

He blurted, “What a beast,—selfish, weak.”

His mother was stronger than he knew. Did she ask for calmness, a bright stiff face, a nicely calculated self-control, or that her beloved should weep for her and for himself?

“O, my dear, I know.—But we have had such wonderful times. I’ve been so happy, yes, and proud.”

Her two hands rested on his head.

“Just let go, dear. I’m mother still. It’s good for you and good for me.”

CHAPTER XXVII

Karl was never quite sure about the last months of his mother's life. Had he any reason to regret them? Would it have been better if their comradeship had ended on that morning when he had betrayed to her how much he cared? Those terrible months! He was so afraid of failing her, and yet they left with him a sense of something transcended, in that the patience and fortitude of his mother made him marvel. If life had any mystical and significant meaning, then—this dying woman was its exemplar.

Sartoris, who came to see her a month before she died, was both shocked and touched, shocked by the physical change in her, profoundly moved by her courage. She spoke to him of Karl. She made him promise to keep near to Karl, he was good for Karl, and Karl might need someone who had the spirit of music.—“He has never been alone, Max.—He may not understand it.” Sartoris came out of her room with unshed tears in his eyes.

All he could say to Karl was, “She has somehow proved to me that my music's right, I mean—one's intuition about the significance of things.”

They had brought her back to Burntshaw, and during those summer months she liked to be carried out into the garden whenever the weather was kind. She became more and more easy to carry. The massive body shrank until it was no heavier than a young girl's, and her son's arms served her.

Even to the last she could make fun of herself.

“I'm getting quite slim, my dear.”

Insuperable courage! But it made Karl thick in the throat.

He did no work those days, save in the garden. He found himself unable to concentrate on his craft, and after a while he did not attempt it. He became more and more busy with his hands, and he was never very far from his mother. She liked to lie and watch him working, like a woman watching her child at play.

The local doctor in attendance, a Dr. Macpherson, a long, lean, plain person, proved far more consoling than his appearance had suggested. Macpherson was both humane and logical, an admirable combination, and before many weeks had passed Karl loved the man. He liked his long red nose, his dry mouth and little bright blue eyes in their crumple of kind wrinkles, even his red and prominent ears, but especially his capacity for being thorough.

“Will she suffer much more than this, doctor?”

Macpherson had looked him straight in the face.

“Don’t worry. I shan’t let her.”

Then, there was the question of nursing. When the problem was put to Rebecca she looked just a little plaintive. Need she have a strange woman fussing round her. Couldn’t Mary do it?—She was so accustomed to Mary’s hands. Macpherson nodded his gaunt head at her. Quite so. This pale young woman with the quiet, gentle eyes, had soporific hands.

“I’ll speak to her.”

Mary listened to what the doctor had to say, but merely as a woman who was allowing him to put a proposition that had been accepted in the beginning. Mrs. Kesteven wanted her, and she wanted to be with her mistress. If other help could be obtained in the house, she would be able to give the whole of her self. Help was arranged. A sister of Mrs. Lavender’s was available, and Mary became nothing but Rebecca’s nurse.

There were other matters. Rebecca mentioned her will, and Karl spoke to her of Augustus. Why had he not spoken earlier? Well, he had felt—Yes, he had helped Augustus, and would continue to help him, but if his mother wished to intervene, well and good.

Rebecca lay with eyes half-closed. Poor, ranting Gus, so like his father, a pale and bitter plant born to failure!

“I ought to make a will, Karl.”

“Yes, mother.”

“I should like to leave Gus something. He got nothing from his father but hot air, poor dear.”

“Would you like to see Gus? It may be possible.”

“Yes, my dear, I should.”

This wish of hers sent Karl off on a blind pursuit. He did not know Emily’s address, nor the sanatorium to which his brother had been sent, nor the name of the hospital in which he had been a patient. Should he advertise in *The Times*? But the Slopp world did not see *The Times*. Dr. Macpherson gave him the name of the sanatoria in the southern counties, and Karl, drawing a bow at a venture, drove to a Surrey institution. His search was at an end. His brother had died ten days ago of hæmorrhage. Rebecca’s first-born was buried in a Surrey cemetery.

Karl drove back to Burntshaw to find his mother lying in the garden. She fluttered something white at him.

“Curious coincidence, Karl. It came by the eleven o’clock post.”

A letter from Emily, and addressed to Karl! Emily wrote a neat, niggling and

characteristic hand.

Karl sat down on the grass, opened the letter and read.

“DEAR KARL,

“I’m not the sort of person to write begging letters. My pride wouldn’t let me do it but for my poor husband’s sake. Perhaps you will help him again. He is still in the ‘San,’ but I’m sorry to say not making much progress.”

Karl folded up the letter. What an epistle, what a woman! Poor Gus making no progress! Well, hardly so, unless he had been fitted with wings. The cool, greedy impudence of the thing! Should he show the letter to his mother?

But she held out a hand for it.

“Emily is always—so transparent.”

Karl hesitated, and then he passed her the letter without comment. He sat and waited for the inevitable question. His mother turned her head and looked at him.

“She doesn’t say where Augustus is.”

“No, mother.”

“Did you find out anything to-day?”

“Yes, I found out. Don’t be shocked. Gus died ten days ago.”

Rebecca’s voice seemed to recover its old vigour.

“Dead! And Emily——”

“I suppose she thought it might be her last chance, and that if we knew that Gus was dead——”

“The fool,” said his mother, “people like Emily always are a little too clever.”

Emily had given an address in Camden Town, and at his mother’s request, Karl wrote to Emily and asked her to come down to Burntshaw. He said that his mother was not well and unable to travel. He suggested sending a car for his sister-in-law. Rebecca had said to him, “I’m not taking either my money or my quarrels into the other world, my dear. If Emily comes to see me I shall tell her that I am leaving her something. She may be a greedy fool, but—after all—one has to satisfy the little god inside one.” Karl had kissed his mother. “I’ll remember that saying.” But Emily did not reply to Karl’s letter; she had hoped to find a cheque enclosed, and that invitation to Burntshaw was rather like toasted cheese in a trap. Emily sniffed at it suspiciously and was shy. She might not be afraid of Karl, but she had a profound respect for his mother.

When no reply was forthcoming, Karl drove up to London and hunted up the

house in Camden Town from which Emily had written. The woman who kept it let lodgings, and from her Karl heard that Emily had gone elsewhere and left no address.

When Karl told his mother she said, "That's what happens to the mean-minded. I shall trouble no more about Emily."

But when, later, Karl came to read his mother's will he found that Rebecca had left Emily a thousand pounds. His mother could be magnanimous.

2

Some three months before she died Rebecca expressed a wish to visit some of the places that she knew so well, Upper Street, the Essex Road, Highbury. Karl was only too ready to humour her, but would not a sixty-mile drive exhaust his mother? Rebecca assured him that she could manage it, provided Smith drove slowly and she was well padded with cushions. Karl converted half the back of the Rolls into a travelling bed. His mother insisted on being dressed as for an occasion, and it was the last time she was to leave Burntshaw alive. Karl carried her out to the car, and with Smith's help got her comfortably settled in it. There were rugs, cushions, a hot-water bottle. Mary Arch sat beside the chauffeur.

Rebecca may have been a dying woman, but her eyes were the eyes of a live one. She talked to Karl as though this was a most ordinary day, like dozens of other days they had spent together. She might have been going to raid Harrod's, lunch with Sir Oscar Bloom, see Noel Coward's latest, or buy a new hat. Her capacity for enjoyment was chastened yet unimpaired. She was saying good-bye to certain things, and if she felt the strangeness of such a leave-taking, Karl felt it even more acutely. It did not seem credible that this vital and vigorous creature could die.

When they reached Southampton Row Rebecca spoke to her son.

"Tell him to drive into Tavistock Square."

Karl lowered the glass panel.

"Tavistock Square, Smith. Yes, straight ahead."

"Any particular number, sir?"

Rebecca's voice prompted him, "Stop outside No. 107, Smith."

Smith took the car into Tavistock Square, and cruising round it to find his number brought the car to the kerb outside the particular house. He came to the door, but Mrs. Kesteven shook her head at him. No one was getting out. Karl, mystified, was wondering whether this house possessed some peculiar significance for his mother. It had, but she did not tell him what it meant to her. She looked at its

railings, door and windows with a faint smile in her eyes as though contemplating the portrait of an old lover.

“He can drive on now, dear.”

His mother’s eyes seemed to deepen as they drove to the Angel by way of the Pentonville Road. Yes, the Pentonville Road also had its memories. There was the grass-banked reservoir, and below it lay Myddelton Square, and the Sadlers Wells and the New River. In Myddelton Square she had walked one dim autumn evening with the leaves coming down. How long ago was that? How old was her beloved? She was in a silent mood, and Karl left her to her silence. He supposed that his mother had some memories which no living person could share. By Islington Green she asked again for the car to be stopped, and lay contemplating the trees, the seats and their occupants, and the familiar front of Collins’ Music Hall. Who, in these days—remembered Lottie, and *Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay*? Rebecca’s shrunken face was like the face of a wistful child.

“Yes, dear, we’ll go on now.”

Karl told Smith that he would rap on the glass partition when he wanted him to stop. He was conscious of strange, inward qualms when the lines of familiar shop-fronts opened before him. It was another world, the world of his childhood. They came to the appointed place, and Karl bent forward and rapped on the glass.

The shop had changed its decor, so much so that it had to be looked for. A firm of cash chemists had refronted it, and but for the upper windows, the cornice and chimney-stack it would not have been recognizable. The shop next door still sold fruit.

Karl heard his mother give a little sigh.

“Changed, my dear.”

Karl held her hand.

“But still there in the mind.”

His mother was gazing at the upper windows. “It seems so long ago. Do you remember the landing where you used to play soldiers?”

Said Karl, “I wonder what became of those soldiers?”

His mother smiled. “I’ve got them put away in a chest of drawers.”

They drove on to Highbury by way of the Canonbury Road, and again Mrs. Kesteven’s whim was to diverge. Smith was told to drive up Highbury Grove and into Aberdeen Park where the mansions of an embattled bourgeoisie were suffering the spirit of change. Some of these yellow brick fortresses had become boarding-houses or private hotels. Karl observed a number of swarthy and foreign-looking men emerging from a gateway, probably the members of some fashionable jazz-

band. So, Imperial Rome in her decadence had housed Syrians and Egyptians and effeminate Greeks. Having cast a circle round St. Saviour's Church the car returned upon its tracks and was directed into Calabria Road. Karl and his mother both remembered their joke at the expense of Calabria Road.

"Remember that day you came back from Germany?"

Did he not! But associated with that memory had been the assumption that in spite of possible revolutions and social cataclysms his mother would be with him indefinitely. Revolution was with them, a patchwork of red, black, brown and blue, but his mother was proving mortal. How crude and casual were one's youthful assumptions. Outwardly, Calabria Road had not changed, but its little respectable interiors might be credited with certain yeasty spasms of unrest.

They came to Highbury Terrace, and Karl left the car and walked up and down. Had he wished to recapture some of the old swagger and laughter of those adventurous days he could have assured himself that such reversions may be forbidden. Man and his moods must go forward; only when you were senile was the process reversed. He returned sorrowfully to his mother.

"They have painted the door green."

As though she had not seen it! But Karl was observing his mother's face. She looked suddenly and terribly tired. The shadows of yesterday were overlaid by the shadow's of to-morrow.

"Home, Smith, and make it as quick as you can when the going's good."

As he spoke to the chauffeur his eyes met Mary's. Mary also had seen that drawn face, and she was his silent partner in the day's poignancies. Karl joined his mother.—"We are going straight back now." He noticed that his mother had ceased to look eagerly at life, and that even Upper Street was a blur of dim associations. Rebecca lay with closed eyes.

Later, he became aware of lines of suffering upon her face, of little vague writhings below the rugs. His mother was in pain. How long was it since she had had morphia?

"Pain, mother?"

"Just a little, dear."

He looked stricken.

"I'll get out and try to 'phone Macpherson and ask him to be at Burntshaw."

She smiled faintly at him.

"It has been such a wonderful day, Karl."

He lowered the glass partition and told Smith to watch for a telephone kiosk, and stop near it. How the rhythm of things changed. His mother's painless periods

depended upon a drug and a little glass syringe. Even in the war he had realized how potent pain could be, and that there was something spiritual and chastening about it. When Smith sighted a telephone kiosk and pulled up, Karl sprang out and managed to get into touch with the doctor.

“Yes, she wanted to go. It has been a little too much for her. Pain. We shall be back in an hour, doctor. Could you be there?”

He heard the voice of Macpherson say, “Yes,—I’ll be there.”

Karl blessed him and returned to the car. His mother was looking at him with a kind of wounded gratitude.

“I got Mac all right. He’ll be there.”

“Thank you, dear. It—it makes me such a coward.”

Karl raised one of her hands and kissed it.

“Don’t be afraid, dear. We—understand. Macpherson’s not going to let you suffer.”

3

When Karl was told that his mother had only a short time to live he was conscious of profound relief, for what was this but a martyrdom. Had he needed a dial to mark how the days dragged, life could have shown him Mary Arch’s pale, tired face. All the responsibility of waiting and watching was hers, and her hands had ever to be ready.—“Can you move me just a little, Mary?”—or “My mouth’s so dry.” It became evident even to the dying woman that Mary was being tried beyond her strength, and it was Rebecca who asked for help.

“You are doing too much, Mary.”

“No, dear.”

“Yes, you are. I don’t want you to hate the thought of me. I’ll tell the doctor.”

The Scotsman hardly needed telling. “Now, don’t you worry. I’ve been keeping my particular nurse round the corner.”

Did Karl know that his mother wanted to die, and that deep down in her something cried out for death? Why pretend? It must be blessed to die when each day was a living death. Moreover, save in occasional glimpses, this poor, starved, drugged creature was not his mother, or but a shadow of her. The mother, the good comrade, the friend to whom he had turned for sympathy and solace, was becoming a memory. He was watching the fading of a familiar spirit, a light that was being quenched. Yet, if Karl discovered moments of beauty and of clarity in the gradual obscuration, it was partly because devoted women hid certain realities from him. It

might be said that he was allowed to see the dying spirit of his mother washed and clothed in white, and not her poor disintegrating body. Ugly things were hidden from Karl, even as any fretting details of the life at Burntshaw had been kept from him. Mr. Karl must not be worried; Mr. Karl must not be disturbed; and if he was less of a spoilt child than he might have been, certain of life's fundamentals would wait upon him for payment. His mother might be in pain, or drowsy with drugging, or suffering these intimate ministrations that were hidden from mere man, but she remembered her son.—“Don't let Mr. Karl in yet.” Her poor body had to be washed and scented and saved from being an offence. She might be dying, but she wanted certain horrors to be hidden from her beloved.

She was infinitely grateful to Mary. Mary was fastidious, Mary had sensitive hands and yet she betrayed no shrinking, though—as a nurse she had not been hardened to the ugly realities of disease.

“I wonder you do it, Mary.”

“What, dear?”

“All—this——”

“I don't feel about it in that way.”

The new nurse was a kind and capable person, and when Karl was allowed into his mother's room, it had been cleaned and garnished. There was nothing to suggest mortal sickness. Women's hands had been busy. Fresh air, flowers, a sweet scent, a pale face on a pillow, an arm-chair ready beside the bed. Even a little colour had been applied to his mother's lips.

She said to him on one of these occasions, “I'm leaving Mary something in my will.”

“Quite right, dear.”

“She has been so very good to me.”

“I'm sure she has.”

His mother lay and looked at him. Did he understand all that one woman could do for another, or what women did for a man? Things had been made so easy for him. Had she made them too easy?

“I want you to remember dear, about Mary. She's been more than a maid to me. A friend.”

“Of course, mother.”

And then she asked him that question.

“Have you thought, dear, about what you will do?”

He had, and he had not. But did it matter? He was in no mood to make plans.

“You ought to marry, Karl.”

“Is it—necessary?”

“What’s the alternative, my dear? A man—some men—can’t get along without—a mother. But don’t be in a hurry. You’ll know when the real thing happens.”

He looked at her a little whimsically.

“It won’t be easy—to find someone. After you,—I mean. And the mother idea.”
She watched him dearly.

“Yes, the mother idea, Karl. I should keep this place on, if I were you.”

“Can I?”

“I think it has always been good for you. And perhaps Mary and Euphemia will stay on. I’ve asked them to.”

Karl went and stood at a window. The day was at full noon, but he saw the autumn world like a landscape in the grey of the dawn, vague, colourless and undifferentiated. It lacked distinctness, emphasis, meaning. It would be such a very strange world without his mother.

4

Karl stood in his mother’s doorway. It was the twilight hour, and the house was very still. Mary Arch had gone to lie down. Karl had opened the door very quietly, and he stood looking at the figure in the bed. His mother was being kept under the influence of morphia, and she might be sleeping. Sleep spelt peace.

But there was a little movement in the bed.

“Is that you, Karl?”

“Yes, mother.”

He closed the door and, crossing to the bed, sat down in the chair beside it. His mother’s face was both dim and lucid. She was enjoying one of those painless interludes when the body was unvexed, and the spirit wide awake.

“I’ve just thought of something, Karl.”

“Yes, dear.”

“It may sound so silly, but sometimes silly things seem to matter.—I have been thinking of that necklace.”

He put a hand on the bed.

“I loved you giving me that, my dear.—You know, you might have given it to some young woman.”

“Hardly. It was a sort of symbol, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s the word I wanted. It did mean something.”

“Everything, mother.”

There was silence between them for a moment. Then she said, "I should like to have it round my neck, Karl, when I'm buried. It's in my safe. You'll find the key in the bureau. Does it sound horribly selfish and wasteful?"

He was conscious of a thickness of the throat. He sat holding her hand and looking at her.

"No.—But there is something else. The manuscript of 'Golden Rain.' I'd like it to be with you."

She made a feeble movement as of drawing him to her.

"I'd like that too, dear, so very much."

5

Mrs. Kesteven died in the night.

Dr. Macpherson was wise as to why the delicate balance swung peacefully towards finality. He did not tell Karl the truth, and Karl asked him no questions. His mother had wished to die.

Mary Arch, entering her mistress's room in the grey of the morning, found that Karl's mother was asleep in another world. Was Mary Arch in the secret? Possibly. But having made sure that her mistress's martyrdom was over, she knelt down beside the bed and gave thanks for all their sakes.

It was she who took the news to Karl, a Karl who was almost as weary as the women. She knocked at his bedroom door, knowing that her message was one of blessedness.

"Yes, who's that?"

"Mary, sir. It's—all over."

She slipped away and pausing half-way up the stairs, heard Karl's door open and his bare feet going towards his mother's room. She waited to hear that other door open and close. The silence was profound, and to Mary it was like a cool, soft hand laid upon the tired foreheads of the house and its dead mistress.

Two days later it was Mary, who, coming into that room with some flowers Lavender had brought up to the house, surprised Charles Kesteven standing beside the open coffin, with something in his hands.

"Oh,—I'm sorry, sir."

She was shrinking away with a shocked and sensitive face, but Karl had turned. "Oh, it's you, Mary. Come and look. And you can help." He had the necklace in his hands. One end of it had to be slipped under his mother's neck.

"Will you raise her head, Mary."

She went to the other side, and supported the dead woman's head, while Karl slipped the necklace into place and fastened it.

"I gave her that, Mary, when we had our first success."

He was looking down at his mother and his face had a sheen.

"Doesn't she look—peaceful. You wouldn't think——"

A little broken sound came from Mary.

"I think—she—had been very happy—yes—somehow—in spite of—the pain. I'm so glad, sir, it's all over for her."

But for Karl life in its deeper tendencies was only just beginning.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Max Sartoris was not a man who read the papers. To the musician this was a habit or a convention which—like shaving your chin in the morning—was best done quickly and forgotten. Moreover, Sartoris, like many men who give ear and heed to inward sounds and voices, could be exquisitely absent-minded, wandering about with himself and yet out of himself, which blessed state may make for secret happiness. There were friends of his who told tales about Max, that he had been seen standing in the middle of Piccadilly like some ridiculous child listening to music in the air, and forgetful of the traffic, which boiled and seethed like a Red Sea upon which a miracle had been wrought. Max was really not quite safe in a world of progress and of machines. He was one of those transcendental idiots who do not conform, and who—if the spirit moved them—could walk past a pneumatic drill and not hear it, because of the other sounds in another world. But somehow London was kind to this child, and did not trample on him as he deserved.

Max, walking down Shaftesbury Avenue, and incidentally walking into somebody who looked indignantly into his face, smiled into the indignant person's countenance—"Sorry, my fault," and the indignant person retorted, "I should say so." But Max's mental concerto had been disarranged; the orchestra in him was mute. He stood in the middle of the footway, his back to the shops, and became objectively conscious of things. What was that over there? The Apollo Theatre. But it couldn't be the Apollo. "Prelude"—Charles Kesteven's latest had been running at the Apollo, Karl's first personal production. "Prelude" had been advertised in large letters across the façade of the theatre, and "Prelude" had disappeared. Another play was billed in its place, somebody else's play.

Max indulged in one of those sudden impulsive, childish moments. He made a dash across the roadway, and was just missed by a red bus. He entered the swing doors of the Apollo, and seeing a face at the ticket office window addressed it.

"Excuse me, has 'Prelude' moved?"

The man in the box-office was engaged in a telephonic argument with a Keith Prowse clerk. Either he did not hear Sartoris, or could not be bothered with Sartoris at the moment, and Max waited until the argument was over.

"Excuse me."

The man said, "Yes—sir," without waiting for Max to explain, and proceeded to scribble on a piece of paper. He was feeling huffy. The man at the Keith Prowse end

of the wire had been damned saucy and rather successfully so. "I don't want any more of your double bookings." Meanwhile, Max waited rather like a nice dog, and a spaniel at that.

"Excuse me."

"Yessir."

"Has 'Prelude' moved?"

The man looked at him suddenly and cynically.

"'Prelude's' been off a week."

"Withdrawn?"

"Yes. That ought to teach Mr. Kesteven something."

Max walked out of the theatre. "Prelude" withdrawn! A Kesteven play a failure! How was it he hadn't heard of it before? And what had that fellow meant by saying that the failure of "Prelude" might teach Mr. Kesteven something? Rather impertinent and Charing Cross Roadish of the man.—But, after all——? Could anyone teach Karl anything? Karl had been strangely intractable since his mother's death, a Karl who ran about the world like a Peace Conference expert. You could never be sure where Karl would be, in Vienna, or New York, or even in Moscow. Restless, ferociously restless, and so electric.

Max paused by Lyons' corner shop and stared at a cake in a window. He was not contemplating the cake, but some inward suggestion. "Prelude" off! Karl's first failure. What if Karl's inspiration and his success had been buried with his mother? But Max boggled at the sentiment of the suggestion. It was rather too Rossetti-ish and Victorian. You might inter a manuscript with a woman, and then be persuaded to dig it up again. Besides, Karl was a forceful person, rather too forceful, perhaps.

Max had not seen much of Karl lately. Karl seemed to have avoided him. Yes, and he had rather avoided Karl. There was something jangling about Karl, a disharmony, clatterings like some of the new milk-churn music. Karl had become rather a night-club person. Max had not been able to keep pace with Karl. It had been like a child trying to go for a walk with a farouche and self-concentrated young man who needed a dentist or a woman.

Max was going to lunch at the "Fig Leaf." He met Dare at that pre-Adamite restaurant, and with his usual innocence he sat down opposite Dare. Not many people were so audacious, when Dare had a book propped up, but ferocious pre-Adamites and Emetics accepted the Sartoris innocence.

"Hallo, Maximilian. Don't mind my reading?"

Max did not mind, but there were times when—like a child—he would ask questions.

“Did you know ‘Prelude’ was off?”

Dare looked at him with quizzical kindness.

“Been asleep, my dear? Have you seen the thing?”

“No.”

“Just as well. I was at the première. I gave it a month. It ran one and a bit.”

Max sat round-eyed, eating macaroni, and making rather a mess of it.

“What was the matter with ‘Prelude’?”

“What’s the matter with Karl?”

“Yes,” said Max, “I suppose that is the fundamental question. Preventative medicine and all that. But what is the matter?”

Julian had forgotten his book. It was a somewhat priggish book on the marriage question.

“Matter?—Karl’s become self-conscious.”

“Oh?” said Max.

“Simply tingling and clanking with it. The thing has got into his work. ‘Prelude’ as self-conscious as a refined young person who aspires to marry someone in Somerset House.”

Max was as solemn as a child.

“There’s something in that.”

“Everything. Now, Oscar Wilde could have written a completely self-conscious play like ‘The Importance of Being Earnest’—but Karl can’t. At least—not yet. And Karl’s public doesn’t ask for self-consciousness. It wants the primordial stuff, and Karl had the knack.”

Max nodded, and apologized for the macaroni.

“Rather messy stuff—this.”

“Don’t mind me. You know—there seems to have been something in that old Yid that kept Karl primordial.”

“Don’t call her that, Julian. She——”

“Apologies. She was a bit of a person, Biblical. Now—your music, Max. You’re one of the saurians who still snort about Wagner. Ever tried to be self-conscious and clever?”

“I know what you mean.”

“Bright young Epsteins with a portable foundry. It doesn’t work, does it?”

“No.—I’m a mystic, Julian.”

“Stay a mystic. That’s what Karl has lost. He is being too demi-mondaine and glandular and neo-noisy. He’s racketeering. All wrong for the lad. At least—that’s my view. I believe he has gone quadroon, you know, the coffee lady who sings at

one of those non-stop shows, one noise after another. That's not Karl's *métier*. The old woman was right. She kept him with one leg and a half—in the country.”

Max had asked for prunes and cream, but instead of prunes they gave him figs. Meekly he accepted them, and Dare smiled.

“You ought to get Karl married, Max.”

Marriage? Did Dare really believe in marriage?

“So—atavistic, isn't it?”

“My dear,” said Julian, indicating the book, “I really do attach some significance to the old Yid stuff. It goes deeper than this—tolerant tripe. Tolerant! One has to be damned intolerant, to get anything done. Fact is—some of us need mothering, yes—all our lives. Go out and find Karl a new mother.”

“But you said—marriage.”

“Exactly.—It's an amazing thing, but the moderns will muddle up lust—and excuse me—love. You don't lust after the woman you love, I mean—not like the new sex hag-expert. It's all so damned silly. We take a century creating a beautiful sentiment—and then a lot of louts in the spotty stage—come and throw—I beg your pardon—clods.”

Max was spooning up juice.

“O, yes, you're quite right, Julian. But would Karl see it in that way?”

“Of course not,” said Dare, “until he has got down to the—juice—like you have. Karl's in the experimental stage.”

2

For the last six months Mr. Charles Kesteven had occupied a flat in Tite Street. Max Sartoris did not like Tite Street, but it was less repulsive to the musician than was Tite Street Mews, beloved of the young and the noisy. Max had once spent a night trying to sleep on a sofa in Tite Street Mews, and had been kept awake until four in the morning by infernal “baby” cars and banging doors and bright young voices. Oh, those bright young voices! It occurred to Max as he climbed the stairs that Tite Street might have contributed to “Prelude's” failure, just because Tite Street was a sort of nursing-home for noisy young neurasthenics who had to hammer at life like a tea-tray in order to assure themselves that this was—living. Max had diverged to stroll through Hyde Park and had seen the tulips in flower. Did Karl ever go down to Burntshaw now for the week end?

Karl himself opened the door to Sartoris.

“Hallo!”

He was both glad and sorry to see his friend, sorry because Max was an embarrassment, and you could neither treat Max with ceremony or fob him off with a cheerful excuse. This creature was absurdly quick and sensitive, and could be hurt.

“Come along in.”

Max, suddenly unsure of the occasion, hung back.

“Oh,—if you’re——”

“Rot. Only one of those damned charity shows. Half an hour before I have to change. Come in and have some sherry.”

Karl’s flat was adequately modern, its decor stripes and wedges of black and primrose, its furniture completely curveless. The chairs were square upholstered lumps squatting on a turquoise blue floor. On the mantelpiece was the statuette of a girl by Eggson, a creature with a face like the nose-piece of a Norman helmet, and immense gnarled hands. That piece of impertinence had cost Karl two hundred guineas. Max sat down on one of the lumps, a sofa. Something else shared the sofa with him, a pair of salmon-coloured silk knickers, and even Max’s innocence was not deceived. Mutely and comprehendingly he shared the sofa with those pink bags, and looked at the stone girl on the mantelpiece. Yes, she would figure admirably in the Bayeux Tapestry. Karl was extracting a decanter and glasses from a recess in a large and highly polished wooden box on stumpy legs. That too might have come out of the Bayeux Tapestry. Karl managed to drop one of the glasses.

“Damn!”

He bent down to pick up the broken pieces. These particular glasses were old Bristol and had been treasured by his mother, and to Max they brought back memories of “Harlequinade” and spacious, lyrical days.

“What a pity,” said Max.

He was feeling troubled about his friend’s face, for it suggested to him the face of a man who had lost something and had failed to find it, and was savage and bothered.

“Things are made to be used and smashed. Hoarding’s a sign of senility.”

“Sure?”

“Of course. When we are full of stuff don’t we take life and break it?”

Karl threw the broken fragments into the coal-box, and Max looked wistful. Karl in the part of the young Schopenhauer, fierce and farouche! It did not suit him. It was not convincing.

“Perhaps I was born senile.”

Karl handed him a glass of sherry.

“In a sense that this sherry is senile.—Cigarettes on that table.”

And then a voice made itself heard, a voice with an alien, nasal, vibrant timbre. It might have squalled *Sole Mio*. It called upon Karl, but it used a ridiculous pet name. Max saw his friend glance irritably at a communicating door, like a man who has begun to feel that he is being made a fool of. He did not respond to the challenge; the door opened and the face and naked right shoulder of a woman appeared.

“Knickie-knicks, Carlo.”

Seeing that innocent round-eyed figure on the sofa she made a grimace and smiled at it.

“How do?”

Karl’s head gave a jerk. He grabbed those salmon-coloured accessories and flung them so straight and hard that they applied themselves to that coffee-coloured face.

“Put ’em on and keep quiet.”

The lady banged the door and Max sat looking mutely at his sherry glass. He felt that he had nothing whatever to say.

But something had to be said, even though the convention might creak like a squeaky floor.

“Doing any work?”

Karl was lighting a cigarette.

“Work? Yes, something rather farcical. What about you?”

Max appeared interested in the grotesque girl on the mantelpiece. Was she coming or going? Or was she a creature of other dimensions whose bust and back had got mixed up in the space-time formula?

“I have an idea for another musical fantasia. Funny thing, but I was down at Kew.”

“Kew?”

“Yes, the gardens. I was looking at the pagoda when a blackbird started to sing.”

“Ghastly structure—that,” said Karl.

“But the blackbird’s song wasn’t. It set something off in me. I suppose you don’t feel like joining in?”

Karl refilled his sherry glass.

“Something fantastic? Not much. I’m rather in with the cult of the hideous.”

“I see,” said Max, blinking at the statuette, “experimenting in new ways of self-expression, and all that.”

“Yes, if you like. People’s insides as well as their faces.”

Sartoris had to smile.

“Can’t one take the insides for granted?”

3

At Burntshaw there were no prehistoric studies in stone, but Nature went her way and repainted the same old pictures. Man may improve upon nature in some of his details, in his groupings and reshufflings, but rather like a child in a nursery with Nurse looking on. At Burntshaw there were thousands of narcissi in flower, tulips, wallflower, forget-me-not, red daisies, polyanthus, primulas. Many of the narcissi and tulips had wonderful new names, but they remained narcissi and tulips to Tom Lavender. The grass in the park had lost its shabbiness and was like a new green sheet. The plums and pears were flowering superbly. The larches were emerald, chestnuts discarding their sticky leaf buds, the cuckoo calling. On the moist bank below the High Wood primroses and violets were like points of colour in a green tapestry. The almond blossom had fallen. Apples were showing rosy nipples.

Lavender, pausing to listen to the cuckoo, was moved to answer inwardly, “Cuckoo; yes—that’s me.” With his early peas thrusting through the soil in straight green streaks, he was moved to push his cap back and scratch an eyebrow with a thumbnail. What was the use of growing early peas for a man who did not care a damn about them? Why force early rhubarb under pots? Why dress the lawns with loam and “artificial?” Why prune roses, and plant out sweet peas, and raise young plants by the thousand? Breaking your back over those damned seed-boxes! Mr. Charles Kesteven appeared to have lost all interest in the place. He came down perhaps twice a month, and on the last occasion he had brought with him strange people. A pantomime crowd! A coffee-coloured woman who wore trousers! To Lavender it wasn’t sense; it wasn’t even decent.

“I’m going to chuck this job, mother.”

Mrs. Lavender knew her man.

“Isn’t it good enough for you, Tom? No one interferes.”

Lavender might work just as conscientiously to satisfy his pride, but something else in him was not satisfied. There is a child in every man asking to have its sand-castle admired. He said that keeping the Burntshaw garden was like tidying up a cemetery.

“I shouldn’t be in a hurry, Tom.”

Mrs. Lavender sat with compressed lips, sewing.

“He isn’t himself again yet.”

“Maybe—that’s just what he is, my dear. When the old lady was alive he was

sort of in the nursery.”

“I don’t think it was quite like that,” said his wife.

Lavender sat down to unlace his boots.

“Well, if you ask me, there won’t be any girls in that house by midsummer. Young Millie’s giving notice.”

“She would.”

“Yes, but it ain’t fair, mother, on Mary and Phemie.”

“Why not? They go on just as you do. The old lady asked them to stay, and they’re not fools—either of them.”

“I’m the fool, am I?”

“Don’t talk like a kid. You know there’s not a garden like Burntshaw for miles. You’ve got the Nurses Show next week.”

Lavender went to deposit his boots in the scullery.

“Well, I bet you Mary Arch won’t stand for another of those Lido parties.”

“O, won’t she,” said his wife. “I may know a bit more about Mary than you do.”

Mrs. Lavender was of a comfortable largeness which could laugh and stay put. Not that a woman does not ask for excitements, but one weekly visit to Dorking seemed to satisfy her. She had a liking for making jam and bottling fruit, and filling her store cupboard with rows of shining bottles. The butcher’s roundsman would have it that everybody at Burntshaw was on jam; wages paid, bills unquestioned, no getting up at half-past six in the morning, no one to give orders and ring bells, go out when you please, eat when and what you please. Asparagus and strawberries free from the garden, and a young fool with too much money and no morals, coming down once a month.

The butcher had a nasty lower lip and little waxed moustachios. He was a creature of very low ideals, and much cheap cleverness.

“You’re on jam, cookie. What about a nice bit of sirloin?”

His venality smirked at the back door. Why not inflate the weekly bills and add the best beef to jam? Euphemia might grumble, but she was not persuadable.

“You’ve charged me for six pounds of suet I never had.”

Euphemia was a naïvely honest soul. She had cooked for the late Mrs. Kesteven for more than ten years, and she had been left a legacy, and she was not going to see Mr. Charles robbed.

“You cross that out of the book, my man.”

Yet Euphemia grumbled. She was paid to cook, and her pleasure was in cooking, and she was not being permitted to exercise her function. She grumbled to Mary Arch, and was perplexed and irritated by Mary’s lack of response. Mary

might take her responsibilities with equal seriousness, for she was exercising a double rôle at Burntshaw, that of housekeeper as well as parlour-maid, but Mary might be a little more conversational. And would you believe it, Mary was taking French lessons!

“Coo,—French lessons!”

The under-housemaid giggled. Miss Arch had a bed-sitting room of her own, and a case full of books, not the sort of books you would expect a parlour-maid to read.

“Coo, ain’t she refined!”

Dreadful word! But such was the case; Mary was taking French lessons from a little Picard lady who cycled over from Dorking twice a week. The lessons were given in Mary’s bed-sitting room. Miss Arch possessed a French grammar, a conversation book and a dictionary, and two old copies of Pierre Loti supplied by her teacher. She had other books on a variety of subjects, geography, history, art, horticulture. Euphemia, who read nothing but her cookery manual and the culinary notes in her penny daily, might have felt perplexed and astonished. Of course, Mary was an unusual young woman, and had occupied a place in the Kesteven regime that had been intimate and singular. Arch had travelled; she had visited Egypt, Germany, Austria, Italy, France. Euphemia did not accuse Mary of being above herself. All that you could say was that Mary seemed to like that sort of thing, and that when she was not working she was reading.

Tom Lavender and Mary Arch had one quality in common, a worker’s conscience. That which this long, round-backed indefatigable peasant found good to do upon the land, Mary found good to do in the house. Had Mr. Kesteven paid an unexpected visit to Burntshaw he would have found Burntshaw ready for him, clean and garnished. There were fresh flowers everywhere, even in the room where his mother had died, and flowers are the signs of a live house.

The inwardness of her pride might be hidden from the cheap and the vulgar, but Mary, like some pale young priestess, served at her secret altar. Lavender might say of her—“That girl’s good,” or that she had wonderful fingers for flowers. It was that she loved beautiful things, as most sensitive women love them, and beauty included so much, peace, a little solitude that was yours, flowers, trees, shady places, the moods of the sky and of the weather, moods within yourself, books that made something in you laugh, or tremble or yearn. It was just that she happened to be a sensitive creature who had been given some opportunities to let her sensitiveness please itself. There might be secret pangs in the process, dreams that were not objectively realizable. There might be things which she wished for and could not

have, an accord that was incomplete and compounded of apposites. Some vulgarly cunning child like Millie Carter might point a mocking finger at her—"She's after someone,"—but it may be hidden from the vulgar that pride—if it poses—may pose to itself.

Was she restless—rebellious? Sometimes, yes. Why did she stay in this manless house? Because a dying woman had made her promise? Because now she was a somewhat independent person with a very small income of her own, and had leisure and beauty about her, and the chance to be somewhat individual? Yes—and no. She kept her secret to herself.

The telegram arrived on the Friday morning. Miss Carter took it in, but since the envelope was addressed "Miss Arch," Mary had the reading of it.

"Expect me—Sunday. One visitor.
Kesteven."

Mary carried the telegram into the kitchen, and laid it on a corner of the kitchen dresser where Euphemia was at work.

"Two for the week-end."

Euphemia had taken to spectacles for her work. She picked up the telegram with a floury finger and thumb, and held it to the light.

"One visitor. He doesn't say what or who."

Mary's eyelashes flickered almost perceptibly. She stood there with an air of austerity, declining to explore possibilities.

"Everything is ready for him."

"Coo!" said Euphemia, "but what about me? I like to know whom I'm cooking for. If it's for a man——It makes all the difference in the world, dearie, like keeping the cat in at night."

She looked at Mary over the tops of her glasses.

"If it's that brown bit of fancy work—I'll—I'll give notice. Disgraceful! Running about all over the house in her pyjamas, and shouting. And she's thirty-five—if she's a day."

Mary held out a hand for the telegram.

"That's Mr. Karl's affair. Tom would like to know. I'll take this out to him."

CHAPTER XXIX

On the Sunday morning, it happened to be May 1st, Karl's car was brought round from Tite Street Mews, and parked for him in Tite Street. If this Sunday in May happened to be Labour Day and was charged with potential social unrest, Karl was not concerned with it. He had had excursions and alarms of his own, a veritable howling, shattering storm which had passed suddenly during the night, and left a strange, enigmatic peace behind it.

Mr. Kesteven's car was a Bentley, and to car lovers a thing of beauty, specially rendered in sparrow's-egg blue. Smith stood on the pavement beside it, a somewhat depressed and sober Smith who had to share with his wife and family in the noise of the night life of Tite Street Mews. Contrary to the ordinary statistical formula Smith would have preferred to live in the country. He kept Mr. Kesteven's two cars polished as for a Concours d'Elégance. He too had a craftsman's conscience, and prejudices in favour of sleeping fatly and peacefully at night.

Mr. Kesteven came down the steps with a suitcase, and Smith hastened to take it from him, and stow it in the locker in the coupé's tail.

"Shall I bring down—the lady's luggage, sir?"

Smith asked that question innocently and with a perfectly polite face, but he was not feeling polite towards the lady. Why must Mr. Kesteven mess about with such people? His employer pulled on a second wash-leather glove. He was driving himself down to Burntshaw and leaving poor Smith in Tite Street.

"There isn't any lady, Smith."

Just those few words, uttered with a casual yet brittle finality. Did Mr. Kesteven mean that the lady was not travelling, or that she had ceased to be—a lady?

"Very good, sir."

Smith closed the locker. Later in the day his curiosity was to be satisfied by the night porter who was able to give him a veridical and vivid description of the exodus.

Karl got into the Bentley and sailed out of Tite Street. He was not in a particularly Christian temper. Life for some months had been so much the morning after, a little sour about the mouth. Karl proposed to leave the metropolis by way of Whitehall and the Chelsea Embankment, and he did so leave it, but gathering the unexpected on his way.

He might have observed the fact that on this Sunday morning the police were much in evidence; but it was on the embankment that the thing happened. Labour

had prepared a considerable social protest, a converging concentration upon Trafalgar Square and Hyde Park, and somewhere in that strange region called Pimlico a procession swept suddenly and with tactical unexpectedness out of a side street.

The marching column filled the roadway. It carried banners; it sang. A scuffle of children, girls, loafers accompanied it along the sidewalk. Karl was leading a queue of five or six cars. He saw the banners, the slogging feet, the faces singing the Red Flag. No police were in evidence for the moment. The rather shabby column came aggressively along the roadway, Labour on the march. Had Karl been in a more consenting mood, he would have drawn in and allowed the men to pass and received no more than some glares of hatred and fragments of crude humour. Certainly, he did slow the car. He expected this ordered rabble to swing to one side and give him room. It did not, and he hooted.

That trumpeting was a provocation. The Bentley seemed to cock its nose at the crowd. One man was marching a little ahead of the column, a stoutish, full-blooded fellow with a brown felt hat set rather flamboyantly on his head. He waved an arm at Karl. He shouted.

“Take that toff-machine out of the way.”

Karl did nothing of the kind. He hooted—perhaps a little ironically in reply to the challenge, and suddenly crowd psychology became manifest. Those faces became vivid and ominous with elemental things. There were shouts, an ugly rush.—“Blow us off the bloody earth, would you?”—“Up the workers, up the Reds.”—“Turn the blighter’s swank-pram over.”

A class clash! The crowd surged at the Bentley. They hung on it like dogs round some big beast, and held it glued. A window crashed. Several men had their hands to the off wings and running-board, and Karl felt the wheels rise.—Intervention. A body of police appeared from somewhere and charged the crowd. Blue figures bullocked into the scrimmage. Karl felt the car subside. The crowd was forced back. Men were on their backs, or dodging and struggling; banners jerked and fell, helmets were knocked off, but the police charge cleared Karl’s car, and drove the crowd towards the railings. Karl, taking his rescue like an opportunist and seeing clear roadway, accelerated, shot through, and finding himself beyond the imbroglio, pulled up.

A voice addressed him through the broken window.

“Excuse me,—mind if I come inside?”

Karl realized he had a man on the offside running-board, and that he had carried this passenger out of the scrimmage, the flamboyant, breezy fellow who had led the

column. The man opened the near door and slipped into the coupé. He had lost his hat.

“I’m the chap the cops would like to get. Mind if I sit here while you step on the gas? But,—well—I’m damned!”

Recognition came to him first, for he was more changed than Karl. He wore a little red-brown beard cut to a point like Captain Kettle’s. His lounge suit might be old, but it had a cachet, and the whole texture of the man was sleek and self-important.

“Well—I’m damned!”

Karl’s eyes became sudden narrow slits.

“George!”

“The little hero, what!—Introductions required. Mr. George Blunt, Mr. Charles Kesteven. Both of us shed the Slopp, what!”

And Karl laughed.

“So—you’re George Blunt. Well,—I was feeling bored, brother,—or should I call you comrade?”

Brother George, looking through the glass panel in the back of the coupé saw the embroilment still in progress, and two figures in blue approaching.

“Pity to have this reunion fractured, Charlie. Get on with it. Two cops, and one of ’em knows me.”

Karl, feeling that the morning had blessed him with a burlesque, drove on with Brother George.

For a minute or so they sat in silence, mutually assimilating impressions. Karl’s may have been more subtle than his brothers. It was Sunday and the New Kings Road was clear of approaching traffic. Brother George, stoutish and bearded and obviously a person, was a man who had lost an almost Bohemian hat, yet retained an air of jocund and pragmatical potency. George leading Labour, George a man marked down by the police authorities; George wearing a coquettish red bow-tie. And that last occasion when they had met and clashed!

“How far do you want to go?”

They were crossing Putney Bridge with the river a shimmer of silver. George appeared very much at ease in the coupé. He sat there as though born to it.

“Some car—this.”

“Not so bad.”

“I’m not worrying. The police will be. They’ve been sitting on a wall waiting for a chance to get one on me. You gave them the chance.”

“And I’ve spoilt it?”

“Rather. A day in the country. I can get a bus back. I shall have a laugh with the boys.”

They were climbing Putney Hill, and as the Bentley soared up it Karl had a grotesque inspiration. He had been feeling bored and out of temper and sour in the spirit, and here was a laugh on the face of the morning. Strange, but he rather liked Brother George. Brother George had a wicked, pawky eye.

“Well,—why not a day in the country?”

“Picking bluebells?”

“I’m going down to my place for the night. Solus. Come and spend the night?”

George chuckled.

“No hat, no pyjamas, no razor.”

“Hats are not needed—these days.”

“No, lad, when you’ve got a head.”

“I can lend you pyjamas, and a razor.”

“Upper lip and chops. I’ll come.”

“Splendid,” said Karl.

His impressions of Brother George enlarged themselves. George had expanded and mellowed. George was a person, and pleased with himself, and his self-pleasure gave him poise. He was like one of those old-fashioned toys, a little fat figure mounted on a leaden stand shaped like a half sphere. Give it a push with your finger and it wobbled and swayed but always recovered its balance. It was irreversible, not to be upset.

“You know mother’s dead.”

He did not look at George.

“Yes, I heard. Regular figure-head—wasn’t she. She and I never hit it. Too bossy. And she too couldn’t stand Slopp. Poor old Gus.”

“You heard about Gus?”

“Saw Emily by chance. Emily’s running a boarding-house in Fulham. She’ll skin ’em all right. But poor Gus; just like his father, a regular Slopp.”

Karl shot the Bentley past a crowded motor-coach.

“Is that why you changed your name?”

“Absolutely. The world’s full of Slopps, with sloppy theories about social progress. But the Slopps never have the guts to get things done.”

“So—you are Blunt?”

“Exactly, brisk George Blunt of the I.L.P. And you’re Mr. Charles Kesteven, the celebrated dramatist. Just like the old woman, she hadn’t any use for Slopp. And she never left me any money, God bless her. She was consistent.”

Karl had started this adventure with the assumption that—however politely he might conceal the truth—his was the right to feel patronizing towards George.

Mr. Charles Kesteven, driving his specially proportioned Bentley, had run into a flock of sheep, and as a result thereof had picked up the shepherd. Brother George was just a demagogue, a professional agitator, an exploiter of the world's discontents. But Brother George had a round, confident manner, a blue, pawky and appraising eye. He sat and observed and assessed things, the car, his brother's clothes, as—later—he was to observe and assess his brother's house and estate and parlour-maid. Karl may have expected to uncover in George a genial servility. He was to be disillusioned. Brother George was no small beer.

2

On that Sunday morning all the flowers in the Queen Anne house were fresh. Mary had been up at six. It was Miss Carter's Sunday off, and beneficently so. Millie had a conviction that only opportunity was lacking for her to become a Gloria Swanson or a Garbo. She was incorrigibly capable of putting herself in Mr. Karl's way and of glad-eyeing him behind a veil of back street insouciance.

Mary was human, if a wise and tender virgin. Her morning's passion was curiosity. With whom would Mr. Karl arrive, that Creole person with the dentifrice smile and the accordion voice, or with Mr. Max, or the latest accessory? There were deep, pale angers concealed in Mary Arch like plants in a cellar, etiolated urges. Mr. Karl usually arrived about twelve o'clock. Euphemia was simmering in the kitchen; she had decided to make of it a male meal, roast duckling, gooseberries and cream, and a savoury. At ten minutes to twelve Mary commenced to lay her table. She had her hock in ice; Mr. Karl was liking hock.

Flowers, yes. She gave a long look at the flowers, the glass and the silver, and went to stand at a window. A cuckoo had alighted in one of the beech trees below the garden, and was calling like a clock at noon. But there was another sound. The car was coming.

Mary drew back into the room and stood to watch. She was unconscious of that gesture, the pressure of her two hands over her heart. Almost, her face had a young, white fierceness. She saw the blue car flash out of the shadows, and pull up below the terrace. A man was getting out.—She felt suddenly and strangely welcoming to that man. He was fat and florid, and to her quick divinings not what the world called a gentleman. He had no hat, and was incipiently bald. He stood for a moment and surveyed things.

Mr. Karl was out, and unfastening the locker. He took out one suitcase. The fat and florid stranger addressed a remark to him.

“Say—boy, this is a bit of buried beauty.”

Mary saw Mr. Karl’s white teeth flash in his rather brown face.

“England—and peace, brother.”

They turned towards the house.

Mary met them in the doorway. She was conscious of being assessed by the visitor’s eyes.

“Hallo,—Mary. You got my wire?”

“Yes, sir. Shall I take your suitcase, sir?”

“No,—don’t worry.—I’ll just show my friend upstairs. Lunch at one.”

“Yes, sir.”

They went up the stairs together, somehow like old acquaintances, and Mary walked swiftly to the kitchen. “It’s a man, Phemie.” Euphemia’s hot face expressed relief. So, her lunch was adequately male. “Well, that’s a blessing,” and she was referring to the sex of the guest as well as to the rightness of her dishes. Mary, returning to the dining-room for a last glance at her table, heard a voice calling her.

“Mary,—Mary.”

“Yes, Mr. Karl.”

She saw him on the stairs. His face was obviously serious, and yet she would have said that something in him was laughing.

“O,—Mary, Mr. Blunt came down for the day, but he has decided to stay the night. He hasn’t any things. Can you fit him up?”

“I’ll try, sir.”

“You’ll find a spare razor and a new shaving brush in my cabinet. Put him out a pair of my pyjamas.”

“Yes, Mr. Karl.”

He gave her a friendly, casual nod, and turned to go back up the stairs, and she—with eyes that had been strangely bright and mysterious for a moment—seemed to step back into a little shadow of pale austerity. He could be so nice and casual and easy with her, for had she not been part of his familiar, fostering world, a silent and suppressed young woman whose business in life was—to put out his pyjamas.

Lunch. Mary had put out hock, and red and white wine, and upon further reflection, two bottles of beer. Mr. Blunt looked like beer.

“What will you take, George? I have some rather special hock.”

“Hock for me.”

George’s pleasure and confidence in himself was undiminished by Karl’s country

place, his silver and his glass, his wine, and his maid. George's blue glance was upwards and appraising and appreciative. "Yes,—I'll take some hock, Miss, please." Karl surprised his brother shining upon Arch.

"You need not wait, Mary. We can manage."

Mary passed out, and Brother George raised his glass and sipped the wine as though he had a palate. But what did Mr. George Blunt know about wines?

"Smart little bit, that, Charles."

Was George referring to Mary Arch? Obviously, yes.

"Been with us for years. Nursed mother through her last illness."

George's glance was ironic and luminous. Master Charlie had done very well for himself in the matter of wines, women, cars and acres. O,—the girls! But Brother George's sex fury had become sobered and sublimated. He had other and more potent affairs to pursue, and a wife and three kids and a villa in Battersea.

"You've made a success, Charlie,—what! Nothing Slopp about this show."

The wine was agreeing with Brother George. Wine was to warm his career for him so that in later days club gossips could assure the innocent that George Blunt only attained to his great moments when pleasantly primed. Mary Arch, returning to clear away plates and to serve the sweets, was told to open a second bottle of hock. Mr. Blunt was looking flushed and genial. He cast sly, appreciative glances at her.

"Yes,—I'm standing for West Battersea at the next election. It's a pretty safe proposition."

Karl's impressions were solidifying. He was beginning to appreciate the swelling significance of George, the benignity and bonhomie of him. George was ascending, inflated by the breath of the People. George had every reason to be pleased with himself and his show. Mr. George Blunt, M.P. Mr. George Blunt a member of the Cabinet. Mr. George Blunt a privy councillor. The King and the People, God bless them! George had become genial and successful and a humanitarian. Instead of Mr. Charles Kesteven being in a position to patronize George, Brother George was feeling like a potential premier, a person of international distinction.

"A safe seat, I suppose?"

"Ear-marked, my lad. I take it you're not very interested in the revolution?"

Karl's smile was oblique.

"Only as a capitalist, of course. Has it ever occurred to you how a capitalist may arrive?"

George chuckled.

"Selling rotten ships at a thousand per cent. profit to the country—when a war's on."

“Blackguardism, George. I’d have hanged the lot. But there are other ways.”

“Surely.”

“Take my case. I had a passion for writing plays. The public liked my plays. I was not thinking much about the money. The public proceeded to pelt me with money.”

George raised his glass.

“What’s the surplus value of an artist? Don’t you worry. You’re a play-boy. We may shove up the surtax and the death duties, but it is not you we’re after.”

“Thanks,” said Karl.

“You may have to paint your car a little less blue.”

“Red—like a G.P.O. van?”

“Not quite as red as that.”

“So—you are not a complete communist?”

George gave him a pawky look.

“That might depend—of course. We have to think of Fascism. There’s always competition, and there’s competition as to who is going to control the disgruntled millions. Who gets ’em, the Fascists, or the Ultra-Reds or the Violets? I’ve learnt moderation. We don’t mind our stuffed wolves doing a bit of howling. We’re out for a change in the management. Well,—I’ve got a philosophy.”

Brother George with a philosophy! But, why not? Plainly, Brother George was just the man for the million, no pale hyperbolic Slopp, but a lusty fellow who could shout and become sentimental, and let wind and crack a joke, while retaining a pragmatical shrewdness.

“And what about your—idealists?”

“More nuisance than they are worth, or just—soap-suds like poor old Gus. Yes,—I’ve got a philosophy.”

“I haven’t,” said Karl, “I’m still looking for one.”

Brother George nodded at him consolingly.

“You’ve got—the Public, though ‘Prelude’ was a bit of a flop. Your first and only.”

Karl’s face stiffened momentarily. George telling him that a play of his had been a flop! But such was the truth, and Karl was feeling savage and bothered about it. He was far less sure of himself than he had been, far less sure of himself than was Mr. Blunt.

“You saw ‘Prelude’?” and his voice came quietly.

“I’ve seen all your shows.”

“What—in your opinion, George, was wrong with ‘Prelude’?”

“Preaching,” said George promptly; “there’s only one man who can do that, old G.B.S. I take it that putting up a play is much like speaking to a crowd. I know all about crowds. My business is to get the crowd. You must not be too high-brow and lecture ’em. You were a bit of a schoolmaster in ‘Prelude,’ Charlie.”

Karl sat inwardly smarting, but he was able to give his brother a slow, whimsical smile.

“There is something—in that.”

George nodded at him.

“I should say there was.”

Coffee, liqueurs, cigars and two deck-chairs on the terrace. Green trees in young leaf making the cedars look very black, sunlight and shadow, the scent of wallflowers, a cuckoo calling. George had unfastened the two lower buttons of his waistcoat. He was feeling digestive and good.

“Well,—I feel like kissing the police. That was a cute getaway, wasn’t it? They have been trying to get a case against me—for months.—By the way, where is the old woman buried, Charlie?”

Karl’s eyes were half-closed.

“Only three miles away. Country churchyard.”

“I’d rather like to see the place.”

“Quite easy. I’ll take you in the car.”

They went. The churchyard was as much asleep as the people lying in it. Two old yew trees grew on either side of a lych gate. A great elm in young leaf threw a shadow across the squat grey tower and its shingled cap. Karl led the way to an extension of the burial ground, a piece of grassland surrounded by iron railings. He had put up a simple stone pillar to his mother.

“Rebecca Kesteven.”

That was all, no date, no text. George stood and stared, and had he been wearing his swashbuckling hat he would have removed it.

“Just right,—Charles. She turned me out of the house,—but I had her stuff in me. What did she die of?”

“Cancer.”

George gave a flick of the head.

“Cancer. That’s a curse that leaves the wordmongers guessing. For that’s what we are, my lad, wordmongers.”

Karl stood very still. Brother George was a man of surprises.

Dinner, champagne, brandy, cigars, coffee, and the same chairs on the terrace. Sunset. Blackbirds and thrushes singing, Brother George bland and ruminant.

The conversation went strangely. It was started by a remark by George to the effect that his brother had not starved him, a remark that led Karl to retort that no one starved in England.

George sat up suddenly with a gleam of aggression in his blue eyes.

“What?—No starving?”

“Yes,—the dole.”

“Rot,” said George almost hotly—“rot. Do you know anything about it?”

Karl lay still.

“Well,—surely——”

“Listen. Supposing you were a married man with one child, and you were put off. What then? What do you get—if you are eligible? Fifteen and three, eight bob for the wife and two bob for the kid. Twenty-five and three. And perhaps—your rent’s twelve bob. What’s the margin?”

“Not much.”

“Not much!—And when you’ve run through your time? And what about those who aren’t included in the scheme? My God,—no starving!”

He waved his cigar in the air.

“I could take you to places, and show you men. Decent chaps.—Starving? Why—there may be something in their bellies,—but the life of thousands—is social starvation. Short of food, short of fags, short of booze, of boots, of picture-money, starved of work, short of any share in the bloody show. And not—seeing any chance to get a share. Our Show is to see that they get a share in the show. Yes,—and I’m a showman. Ashamed of it?—Why—the hell should I be? It’s business—not Slopp.”

Karl sat thinking. Brother George had astonished him, and he was discovering in Brother George realities, fundamentals.

And then, Brother George astonished him still further.

“Why don’t you write a play on ‘The Man on the Dole’?”

Karl smiled suddenly.

“I—might. Show me one.”

“Christ, I can show you hundreds.”

CHAPTER XXX

Karl's attack of altruism and his subsequent exploration of the sociological aspects of a London semi-slum were sufficiently serious to make of Brother George a pedagogue and a prophet. Not that Karl accepted Brother George as a sincere herald of a new heaven upon earth. Brother George was in business as a socialist showman, and though Karl might be very sensitive to the discords and disharmonies of the capitalist state, he was essentially an individual, and not tolerant of interference. George's new world would be too terribly full of interference. It would be like being sent back to school, with a staff of Brother Georges occupying desks, and telling you bluntly and blandly what plays you were to write and just how you were to write them. Karl was to meet many sincere socialists, and to love some of them, but they could never persuade him to accept collectivism as anything but a misdreamed dream. True, the man might be drugged into dreaming that dream, but he would wake up fighting and struggling.

Meanwhile, this brother of his had called him a wordmonger, and the burr had stuck. Was there no mastery in words? Had a man to pull a lever or operate a pneumatic drill in order to deserve social self-regard? In proposing to shed the egotism of the artist Karl was emphasizing the very ruthlessness of that passion which would fool him and wait for the return of the prodigal. Karl's genius sat and chuckled. What would this young Ulysses recover from his descent into the Hades of the Submerged?

The matter was settled between them on that Sunday night over two last sacramental whiskies-and-sodas. Brother George swallowed nothing contradictory in the spirit.

"This has got to be thorough, George."

"As thorough as you like, my son."

"A month—under dole conditions. Can you fix me up the right sort of billet?"

"I should say so. And the idea is——?"

"Suppose—I'm a clerk or a draughtsman out of a job. I want to live for a month on what a dole drawer would get."

"Fifteen and three."

"That's the idea. Call me Charlie Smith."

George was a competent stage-manager.

"Old clothes, my lad. Got any?"

“Things I’ve worn in the garden.”

“Give you away at once. You will have to rig yourself up in a second-hand reach-me-down. If you look even like the ghost of a toff—they won’t talk to you as they talk to each other. Revert to the Essex Road. You have become too much the gent.”

Karl smiled.

“I’ll sound—louder. And perhaps—bitter?”

“You can be that, but don’t overdo it. Some of these fellows are marvels of patience. You’ll see reasons for their being patient, and reasons for their seeing red.”

“I want to touch the bottom of things.”

“But—you won’t taste what it tastes like to them. Yours is make-believe. All the difference in the world. You can get out of the bog; they can’t.”

So, it was agreed between them that Karl should come up in three days’ time to Tite Street. Brother George would produce some clothes and arrange a billet, and in Tite Street Karl would shed the Kesteven and become Smith. He would disappear in the night into that other world. George would give him the necessary push. “You won’t like it, my lad. I can tell you that.”

On the Monday Karl drove his brother up to town, but he was not allowed to penetrate into the purlieu of Battersea. Mr. George Blunt had to consider certain conventions, and as a showman respect the niceties of the show. A tram or a bus was allowed him, but even a taxi might have rendered him suspect. His little house was a very unprovocative affair. Brother George did not wink at Karl, but he confessed that discretion was necessary.

“Better drop me here.”

“But——”

“My lad, you don’t know how suspicious they can be. Bitterness makes them that. If I was seen touring round with you in a swank machine like this——”

Karl understood. So, even the social reformer had to exercise the cunning of the serpent. He eased the Bentley into the kerb, and somehow George’s pawkiness was more convincing to him than three pages of rhetoric in a collectivist tract. Was human nature made so fiercely mistrustful by the bitter conditions under which it existed?

“You mean, they—really—would——?”

George nodded at him.

“I can tell you it isn’t all red roses. Some of ’em watch you like a cat with a kipper. Poor beggars! You see—when a man’s guts haven’t much to grind on, they seem to get twisted. It’s natural. Not all of them—of course. Some of them get too slobby to care, but the live ones are touchy.—I should say so. Drop a match—and

the petrol tank goes up with a bang.”

George got out on the pavement, looked right and left with an air of caution, and slammed the near door.

“Thanks for the lift, guv’nor.”

And Karl drove on.

2

Burntshaw was still so reminiscent of his mother. How acutely Karl continued to miss her large and cheerful presence had been emphasized by the melancholy ferocity with which he had joined in the clash of a bright and brassy world. He had lived a sort of syncopated life with blonde young women with bald foreheads and plucked eyebrows. He had explored more than one strange sexual experience. Both his appetite for and his valuation of woman were in shreds. He was a poor, motherless egoist hurrying restlessly from sensation to sensation, while an inward voice cried, “Mother, mother.” As a dramatist he would not have attempted to make so sentimental a relationship appear credible to an irreverent world, though the psycho-analysts would have revelled in it. “Prelude” had been the product of that motherless period, and the public had refused to listen to “Prelude.”

Yes, no one to listen to your prattle. Rebecca had listened so wisely and so well, and in his loneliness he was seeing life as a naked affair. Even his excursions into a false realism had been wilful and ironic, a rather savage protest against a sore self-consciousness. The world is no mother. Set out to talk to it about yourself and your problems and it will say, “Indeed!—Really, is that so?” and become bored and vague, and change its chair.

Returning to Burntshaw after shedding Brother George, he stopped the car in the avenue and sat looking between the trunks of the beech trees at a beauty that was particular and personal. Was that one of his sins, that the beauty of this fragment of England should be too personal? Mine? Also, the sweet sadness of England in the young green of the year had a personal pang for him. Could trees speak? He drove on slowly and ran the Bentley into the red-brick coach-house with its faded blue doors, and wandering round and into the house, he stood at window. Loneliness. He had lost his feeling of loneliness in the company of that socialized blackguard, George. Dinner at eight. What was he to do till then? Take a gun out? Kill something because he was bored? How excessively crude! He had been playing with the idea of going to Brooklands and learning to fly. His own aeroplane. Or should he stroll down and gossip with Lavender? He would find Lavender in his cottage garden,

busy with something, or in his little shed soling boots or soldering a kettle. Lavender was always busy about something. He had never caught Lavender yawning. But Lavender was not always sociable. Queer, laconic creature, yet somehow happy in doing things.

He had dipped a hand into a pocket for his cigarette case when he became aware of a figure moving in the light and shadow of the beeches. A woman! Someone coming to call or collect a subscription?—Who—the devil——? That little coloured shape intrigued him. It came nearer and out into the sunlight; it was provokingly familiar. Who was it who walked like that? This figure suggested the gentlewoman and very serenely so; the woman knew what to wear and how to wear it. A study in black and cerise. And then he was conscious of surprise, recognition, a curious, intimate, inward tremor. Arch? Yes, by the Lord, it was Mary Arch, but somehow astonishingly new to him.

He stood there watching her, realizing that she had no suspicion of being observed. Brother George's remark recurred to him—"Smart bit,—that." The cheapness of the phrase annoyed him. Smart? But where had she bought that frock and that hat? His parlour-maid looking like a mannequin? No, damn it, like a woman who knew how to carry herself and her soul. Soul? But this was really extraordinary, and extremely interesting. Watching her, he saw her diverge, bend down, and put her face close to a stone vase of wallflowers. Would a mannequin do that? She came up and on, and reaching the terrace, stood looking up at the house. What did she see there? Her face had a slightly smiling, tender, luminous pallor. Some impulse moved him. He went quickly into the hall, and as she entered it, he met her.

He saw her eyes go big, and that little smile vanish.

"O,—Mr. Karl!"

He was looking at her fixedly. He was seeing her as something new and strange, and yet as the woman who had nursed his mother, a woman who was the same and yet different. And somehow he was made to think of a light burning steadily and serenely; it had been burning for years, the lamp of the wise virgin.

"Sorry, Mary."

She appeared a little breathless.

"I'm sorry, sir. You said——"

"I know. Dinner at eight. I got back earlier."

She seemed in a hurry to speak.

"I've been to Dorking.—Millie ran away this morning."

"Oh."

"I didn't worry you."

“Does it matter?”

“I went to see whether the agency—could——”

“That’s all right, Mary. What was the matter with Millie?”

“O, just—bored, sir.”

He looked at her deeply.

“And you,—Mary?”

“Oh,—I’m not bored, sir.”

“How clever of you. Of course, I don’t want you to be—overdone—here.”

“I can manage, sir.”

“You always do manage,” and to himself he put the peculiar question, “I wonder why?”

Dinner, with the sunset and the cedar trees filling the windows. There were flowers on the table, exquisitely and lightly grouped in an old silver lustre vase. He could only suppose that Mary Arch had arranged those flowers, the Mary who stood to serve in black and white, with a purple ribbon threaded through the coronet of her cap.

“Did you do those, Mary?”

“The flowers, sir?”

“Yes.”

“Yes. I wanted a few columbines to—give it just that something—but columbines are not quite out. What will you take to drink, sir?”

“A little whisky, Mary.”

She placed the decanter and syphon on the table near him, for he liked to help himself, and as she did so he noticed her hands. They were sensitive hands, delicately cared for, with shell-pink nails, and he wondered how—in spite of housework—she managed to keep her hands like that. It was about to become the fashion for women to tint their nails, and to make them suggest claws that had been dabbled in blood.

She was turning away when Karl asked her a question.

“What were you looking at on the house when you were standing on the terrace?”

There was a little silence before she answered.

“I was looking at the wistaria, sir.”

“The wistaria?”

“To see—if it is going to flower—like last year.”

“Yes, I remember; it was wonderful last year. The thing has a French name, a rather attractive name. I can’t get it for the moment.”

“Glycine, sir.”

“Glycine,—that’s it.—But—how——?”

He had turned in his chair to glance up at her, and suddenly he was angry with himself. Clumsy brute! Almost, he had blurted out the snobbish question that would express surprise that a parlour-maid should know the French name of a Japanese flower. His impression was that she was ever so faintly flushed, though standing upon the feet of formalism, the perfect maid, dispassionately polite.

“Is there anything else you need, sir?”

Again there was a pause, and she waited. She saw him pick up the decanter and remove the stopper.

“Yes,—I think there is, Mary. I want to talk.”

“To me, sir?”

“Exactly. Won’t you sit down?”

Would she sit down? He wondered; he was sufficiently sensitive to the occasion to doubt it. He poured out some whisky, and was very conscious of her still standing there. And suddenly he pushed back his chair and stood up.

“Sorry, Mary, that wasn’t quite the way to ask you. Won’t you sit down?”

Her eyes seemed to darken. She stood there, pale and hesitant.

“Do you want to talk to me about—my work, sir?”

“No.”

He crossed the room, drew an armed Georgian chair away from the wall, and looked at her almost shyly.

“We have known each other a good many years, and yet—in a way—we haven’t known each other at all. I’ve had rather a lonely time,—lately. Yes, that’s the characteristic, egotistical beginning, isn’t it? But I do ask you to sit down.”

“Have you all you want, sir.”

“On the table, yes—till the next course. Try and forget my dinner. What’s the old saying, man does not live by bread alone?”

She had stood erect, rigid, motionless, but now her throat and shoulders became fluid. She moved to the chair, sat down, and let her hands lie in her lap. She was very pale.

“Thank you, Mary.”

“Since—you wish it, sir.”

He stood a moment, looking down at her.

“Can’t we drop the sir?—I mean—you were Mary to my mother.”

“That was different, Mr. Karl.”

“Was it? Well,—I suppose it was.”

He sat down.

“Is it your idea—that one can’t mix classes?”

“Yes, Mr. Karl.”

“Well, that’s intriguing. Of course—you know that my mother used to keep a second-hand clothes shop?”

“Yes, I knew. She used to tell me about it.”

“And what did you think of Mr. Blunt?”

“Do you expect me to——?”

“Of course.”

“Very—new, Mr. Karl.”

His smile was sudden and open.

“You could not have put it—better. Mr. Blunt is my brother. And I’m rather new.”

Now, how would she answer that? He was finding the exploring of Mary intensely interesting.

“No, there’s a difference, Mr. Karl.”

“O, how?”

“One speaks of classes,—but isn’t the direction—different. I mean—the old idea was layers.”

“Horizontal?”

“Yes.”

“And the new streaks are vertical?”

“Yes, I read in a book somewhere about old souls and new souls. Don’t you see it in children?”

“One does. And Mr. Blunt—is very new—and smelling of varnish?”

She smiled her first smile at him.

“Yes.”

“And I—and you—have been born over and over again?”

She nodded at him.

“Then—how do you explain that, Mary?”

“I can’t,” she said, “but yet it seems true.”

She glanced at his plate, and rose. She removed that plate, and the dishes on the serving-table and went quietly out of the room. She had forgotten to ask him whether he would like a second helping. He sat staring at the flowers in the silver lustre vase, waiting and listening. He heard her footsteps returning.

“What has Euphemia produced, Mary?”

“A jam tart, sir.”

"I like it,—but isn't that rather—crude?"

"I should call it simple and healthy, Mr. Karl."

He smiled at the flowers.

"By—gemini—wise words.—I have been going to too many cocktail parties, Mary. Rotten sort of life. And now I'm going exploring."

She looked at him quickly as she placed the plate before him.

"Abroad, sir?"

"No. Only as far as Fulham or Battersea. I might even get as far as Bermondsey. Won't you sit down again?"

She sat down. Her eyes watched him.

"Are you—a socialist, Mary?"

"I don't know, sir. I don't think so."

"My brother is a very advanced social reformer. It's his business. In a sense—he challenged me. The idea is that I should go and live in a back room as a man out of work, on fifteen shillings a week. Yes, just to touch and see and feel, and—understand.—I'm going for a month."

Now, what would she say to the project? Would she applaud it, react to the humanism of the adventure, and crown his enthusiasm with a garland of praise?

"I don't think you'll like it, Mr. Karl."

So, she was not a social illusionist!

"Probably not. Probably I shall loathe it. A back bedroom in some deplorable street, smells, noise, bad food. But then, Mary, isn't it pretty deplorable for the wretched people who can't escape, people who might do better. I'm not speaking of the submerged, the social problem class. You've probably heard of them."

She said—"I lived with them—once—for six months."

"You?"

"Yes, before your mother took me into the shop. I had been ill and out of work. There's not much I don't know, Mr. Karl, about all that."

He noticed that she had ceased to use the sir. Was their confessional becoming too intimate and real for social frills?

"You've no wish to go back?"

She looked at the flowers on the table, and then at the sunset hanging in the branches of the cedars.

"No. That's hell, if one is sensitive and fastidious. Don't waste too much pity, Mr. Karl."

"Aren't they to be pitied?"

"O, yes, some.—But they don't know any other way of living, and they don't

want to know. It would take so long to teach them. The pity is that most of them were born.”

She rose, and going to the serving-table, took the silver dish in her hands.

“More tart, sir?”

“Mary, that’s a reversion! You know, it must seem so scandalous to the honest idealists that some of us should live in a place like this—when——No, no more, thank you.”

“Would it help, if you ceased to live in it?”

“No, I suppose not. And if one turned it into a sort of social colony for the failures?”

She stood with the dish in her hands.

“All the beauty would go, Mr. Karl, and they would be bored.”

3

He went out and sat on the terrace and lit a pipe, and watched the sunset fade. Wonderful pageantry of Nature! The water in the valley was like steel, the cedars black with an immeasurable blackness. Mary was clearing the table, and he could hear her moving in the silence of this spring evening.

Had she summed up the great disharmony in those few words, hung it up on a line like a sheet with those intelligent flower-loving hands of hers? The beauty would go, and the crowd be bored? Had humanity to endure other cataclysms before a sacred remnant could create the world anew? Man was a social creature, but the more his intelligence became subtilized the less he desired to rub noses indiscriminately. Democracy! All this tragic froth and economic muddle, this theorizing, this insistence upon the possibility of turning cabbages into kings! What was the solution? Huxley’s delightful jibe in “This Brave New World”? Would collectivism come? O,—probably, and all the sensitive and fastidious souls would loathe it. The creed of the woolly and wild young men!

He heard the closing of a drawer, and he called to her through the open window.

“Mary.”

She came to the window.

“Yes, Mr. Karl.”

“Am I having coffee?”

“Yes, Mr. Karl.”

“I shan’t have these little luxuries in Fulham. Mary, come and talk again with the coffee.”

"I have to wash up, sir."

"O, bother the domestic details! Can't Euphemia wash up?"

"Euphemia cooked your dinner, sir."

"Apologies. You have me. But,—Mary——"

"Yes, Mr. Karl."

"Leave the coffee until you have washed up, and then come and talk."

She did not answer him, and he sat and waited with the sky fading, and the stars coming out. Would she return? He got up and dragged another Dryad chair into position. So, she had no illusions as to the probable and ultimate profit of his pilgrimage. Was he essentially an un-crowd creature, just as she was?

He heard footsteps on the flagstones of the terrace.

"Your coffee, Mr. Karl."

He rose and took the white cup from her.

"I put in one lump, sir."

"Sit down, Mary."

She stood hesitant in the dusk.

"Euphemia——"

"O, bother Euphemia. Please, Mary. I want to ask you something."

Deliberately she took the other chair.

"Do you believe, Mary, that Nature laughs at us when we talk sentimental stuff? I mean, there have always been individual differences. Even the golden spoon idea?"

"Haven't people always been different?"

"You believe—that what is—is inherent and inevitable? But, after all, man has been interfering for centuries. And now our interferers insist that we can make man what we please. We have only to educate the unwilling mass, cut off the heads of the too uppish and lofty fellows, and all sit on the ground with Bernard Shaw."

"It never has been quite like that."

"No, Mary, but they say they can make it like that."

"I doubt it. Besides,—I don't want to sit on the ground with—lots of people."

He gave a little laugh.

"You don't humbug yourself. For instance, I too should loathe to sit—for ever—by my brother George. So, you don't think my expedition will lead to profound personal changes?"

She was silent for a moment, and then she asked him a question.

"Would you like to go back and live in the Essex Road, Mr. Karl?"

He looked at her shrewdly in the dusk.

"And you won't let me humbug myself. No,—I should loathe it.—But what

about the thousands who might be rescued from the Essex Road idea?”

“Aren’t they—Essex Road, Mr. Karl? Of course—they may improve the Essex Road, but won’t there always be Essex Roads, and Essex Road people?”

CHAPTER XXXI

Karl arrived in Carmel Street.

Possibly at some remote date a Biblically minded person had not been exercising irony when he had christened this little street. In those days there had been fields and hedges, and pleasant houses standing in walled gardens, and Carmel's one unappropriateness had been its flatness. There was nothing mountainous here now—even in dreams—save huge, murky gasometers swelling against the sky.

George had been more merciful to his brother than Karl suspected. He had given him a pat on the shoulder and a note.—“Not so lousy, my lad!”

Carmel Street was made up of two rows of little grey houses with semi-basements and high steps ascending to front doors, most of which lacked paint. They were frowsy little places with smudgy windows, like old faces whose eyes were bleary and whose skins had grown shabby. Karl's note directed him to No. 5. He was wearing a stained grey felt hat, and a dark blue suit shining as to elbows and posterior, and boots whose heels needed attention. Something had squirmed in him when he had put on those clothes, even though his underclothing was impeccable. His skin had itched and protested. He had insisted on cleaning with methylated spirit the leather lining of that hat, and he had gazed reflectively at the dirt on the towel. He carried with him a very small fibre suitcase that was as nicely shabby as his clothes.

Karl climbed the steps of No. 5, looked for the bell handle, and pulled it. The thing came out loosely, bringing with it six inches or so of wire and producing no tintinabulation. Karl pushed the handle back and reverted to the knocker.

He had to wait. Someone was labouring from the semi-basement. The opening door disclosed a short old lady in black, with a huge goitre and a belly that stuck out like a gourd. She had a rosy face, very blue eyes and an air of irrepressible good nature.

Karl raised his hat.

“Mrs. Hadwin?”

“That's me.”

“My name's Smith.—Mr. Blunt——”

Her eyes twinkled at him.

“Come inside. Mr. Blunt was 'ere yesterday. Yes, it's the first-floor back.”

She let him in and closed the door, and then put herself between him and the stairs. The bulk of her heaved and wheezed as she moved.

“You pay in advance, dearie.”

“Five bob?”

“That’s it.”

This was reality, and Karl produced five shillings, though his feeling about it was that necessity and not greed compelled the Hadwin hand to demand payment in advance.

“That’s all right, dearie. Sorry to have to ask for it. But—with my man—paralysed. Come up and I’ll show you the room.”

She wheezed and heaved in front of him up the stairs, opened a door and introduced him to his upper chamber.

“You’ll be careful of the bed, won’t you. I ’ad to ’ave it spliced with wire.”

She left him there, and Karl put his suitcase down on the one chair, and savoured that room. He appraised it physically with eyes, nostrils and skin. It seemed to smell, and then he noticed the shut window, and he went to lower the upper sash, only to discover that both sash-cords were broken, and that the window had to be lowered to its full extent, or not at all. He lowered it. He found himself looking into a black backyard that appeared to have been made a dump for every sort of rubbish, mostly metallic. Mr. Hadwin, before his stroke, had earned a precarious livelihood with a handbarrow as a seller of junk, and the backyard and two home-made sheds bulged with the forlorn débris. There was not a live, green thing in that yard. A cat was asleep on a sheet of corrugated iron.

Karl turned and surveyed the room. Its wallpaper, a faded pink, was certainly—mellow. There was a cheap ochrish coloured mat in the middle of the floor, a mat that suggested that it had been scoured and pounded by many feet. The wash-hand-stand held a small white basin and a cracked blue jug; there was a marbled chest of drawers whose patterning suggested the smeary touch of many hands. Karl was to discover that the thing was minus one stumpy leg, and that it wobbled whenever you attempted to pull out a drawer.

But—the bed!—The bedstead was of metal. One of those funny old blue quilts covered it, and Karl went and turned down the quilt. He saw a blanket, and something squirmed in him. The pillow-case and sheets had been washed,—but somehow no cleansing could save that bed from being second-hand. Second-hand—indeed! It was a prostitute of a bed, a creature that had accepted every sort of occupant with a kind of toothless, consenting smile. “Come on, dearie. Let’s get down to it.” Karl’s very stomach revolted. Did his adventure insist upon his accepting that bed? Incidentally—he never slept in it, but on it. He sneaked out with an empty suitcase, and denied his God by purchasing a clean sheet and a blanket

and between those he was to sleep, with the sheet pulled well up over the pillow. He hid the things away each morning in his suitcase, and locked it.

The Hadwin household would give him breakfast and nothing else. It contained another lodger, a hefty, good-looking, masterful young man—appropriately surnamed Samson. Samson was supposed to be a warehouse porter, but he was a good deal more than that. Mr. Samson occupied the front room opposite Karl's.

Karl happened to have a newspaper with him, and he lined the drawers with the clean sheets before putting his two spare shirts, vests, and pyjamas, etc., into them. His bedroom did not encourage vanity. It had one small mirror hung on the wall over the chest. There was no key in the door. Were keys unnecessary in Carmel Street? And suddenly he felt hungry in spite of this disgusting room.

He went out and down the stairs, and meeting no one, emerged into Carmel Street. Some very dirty and noisy children were playing in it. A hawker was passing along, pushing a barrow full of geraniums. Karl hailed him, and purchasing a plant with red flowers, carried it back up the steps and into the house.

He met Mrs. Hadwin wheezing up the stairs.

"Find your room nice and comfy, dearie?"

"Quite," said Karl.

He showed her the geranium, and her old eyes lit up.

"Makes it more like 'ome, dearie, what? I do like a bit of flower about."

Karl had an inspiration. He presented the pot plant to the old lady, and returning to the street, and finding the hawker still there, he purchased a second plant.

Meanwhile he was hungry. He had calculated that he could allow himself one good meal a day at the cost of one and threepence. One and threepence, just about enough to cover the cost of a glass of sherry before a conventional, Mayfair meal! He explored, and in the main highway of that quarter he discovered a cheap eating-house, "Cork's Café." He went in and sat down at a marble-topped table, opposite a juicy fellow who was eating beef-steak pudding. What was the plat-de-jour? A girl with red hands and bad teeth came to attend to him.

"What have you got?"

"O, the usual," said she, looking at him as many women looked at Karl.

"And what—is—the usual?"

"Steak and kid, or sausage and mash."

Karl's *vis-à-vis*, vigorously masticating, with his mouth open, proffered advice.

"Try the puddin', mate."

Karl tried it. Hungry he might be, and the steak and kidney pudding none so bad, but the atmosphere and the accessories gave him qualms. He did not like the

table, or his knife and fork, or the masticating, churning mouth opposite,—the man had one of those red and flabby lower lips that stick out like some glabrous growth. And this was to be his principal meal. But how sybaritic of him! What of the war, or life in the backwoods? Had he become so much a thing of velvet that he could not stand the rub of coarse sacking? He was thinking of Mary Arch's hands and comparing them with the red dollops of the woman who waited, and instead of a vase of flowers he had before him that coarse and friendly face.

Yes, by the gods he had learnt some things and forgotten others. If beauty was to be desired, there might be a brotherly virtue in ugliness.—But cheap, and greasy ugliness!

His *vis-à-vis* was observing him. So, was the waitress. He was the best-looking boy she had seen for weeks.

“’ave anything on the three-thirty, mate?”

Karl was slow in the uptake.

“What’s that, old lad?”

His *vis-à-vis* belched.

“Simple, ain’t yer!”

Karl smiled at him.

“No.—I never have any luck.”

“Not with the girls? Garn, I’ll swop yer one.”

“Say,” said Karl, “how much does a plate of this cost one?”

“’ad spuds?”

“Yes.”

“One and a copper.—Hi, miss, got anythink with jam in it?”

“Treacle roll.”

“That’s me.”

Karl chose some very aggressive cheese, and when he left Cork’s Café he found that he had squandered one-and-ninepence, with a threepenny tip to the lady. What next? He had a date with Brother George for the evening. Brother George was to take him on a tour of introduction.—“I’ll show you our Pink Parson, Charlie.” Meanwhile, how did an out-of-work clerk spend the day with a greasy meal queezily repeating in him? He could stroll; he could find a seat somewhere, and sit and calculate how much he could afford to spend on breakfast and supper. Tea would have to be extruded.

As a somewhat sensitive creature it did not take Karl long to discover the deplorable boredom that descends upon men who had been out of work for any length of time. In the early days there may be hope, but when hope is denied week after week—some men sink into a state of staring apathy. They are even too bored to feel bitter. Man has been condemned as an incorrigibly lazy beast, but in a civilized community—with things happening, man wishes to share in the happenings. His urge is to be part of the show.

Karl soon realized the rightness of Brother George's challenge. These out-of-works were starved, not only physically so, but of all the things that make men something better than a beast. They stood and stared at a show that was not theirs. The turbulent, thunderous life of the great city went on, tantalizing, agonizing, crushing men who somehow had ceased to share in its expression. Whatever the eugenists might have to say about the process, its tragic and unsocial elements were so poignant, that Karl was profoundly moved.

Pity and nausea struggled in him.

Meeting Brother George's Pink Parson that night in a club-room that the Rev. Jack Barter had organized, he was led to listen to this Christian. Barter was a pragmatist; necessity had made him so. Also, he was not of the pale brand, but beefy, and cheerful and a sportsman. He was sympathetic towards this pseudo-Smith, even if he was a little puzzled by him. Smith did not look underfed, and he was obviously highly intelligent.

He took Karl into a little committee room where the library was kept. There was a boxing show going on in the main room, and the noise was considerable.

"How long have you been out, Smith?"

"O, not long, sir."

And then, Karl's conscience smote him. He did not like deceiving this very good fellow, and he confessed to the masquerade.

"I wanted to see for myself."

They sat there and talked for twenty minutes, Jack Barter on the table, Karl on a chair.

"You see—we've got to do something about it."

Jack Barter grew heated. What was the use of talking mere transcendental stuff to these poor devils, and doling out hymn books? They were decent chaps, most of them, the victims of an industrial disharmony. Yes, and the only remedies were faith in the future and good will. But the good will would have to be practical and active. Charity? To blazes with charity. There would have to be a surge of unselfishness. Some people would have to surrender some of their prerogatives and their

possessions. “No,—I’m not an out and out collectivist, Smith. We’d better keep to the Smith, hadn’t we? I’m what I call a social positivist. Let’s cut the cackle and the theory, and each of us try to do—something. If every person who could do it would try to create work, a job even for one man. Yes,—I know the thing is frightfully complex. How to spread the mass about, house it, and make a new life for it? Well,—I’m supposed to be in there, playing. Do you box?”

“Yes, a little.”

“Come along, and put the gloves on. I’ll take you on.”

Before an appreciative and applauding audience Mr. Barter and the new comrade indulged in a whirlwind bout. Karl had blood on his lips, but he gave Mr. Barter some good ones, and on the following sabbath the Rev. John Barter had to appear in the pulpit with a black eye. But since his congregation was strongly male, the blemish was a badge of honour, and Jack was not ashamed in the presence of his God.

But those boxing gloves! Even their inherent foulness had been apparent to Karl. They had punched the mouths and noses of all and sundry, and Karl had gone back to Carmel Street and washed his face.

A voice had hailed him.

“Would you like a little supper, dearie?”

Mrs. Hadwin’s motherly face had shone on the stairs.

“I’ve got a kipper and a cup of tea. Come down to the kitchen.”

Karl, descending to the kitchen, had been introduced to Mr. Hadwin and a catastrophic fug. Mr. Hadwin occupied a long chair in the semi-basement kitchen. The window was shut, and the atmosphere smelled of kipper, grease, dirty clothes, and warm unwashed bodies. There were other aromas that Karl associated with the war, a stuffy dugout crowded with men whose clothes smelt of stale urine and sweat.

Karl shook hands with Mr. Hadwin, and Mr. Hadwin mopped and mawed at him. His hemiplegia had left him funny.

“Sit down dearie. The butter’s only margarine.”

Karl sat down at a table covered with white American cloth. He had to suppress a rising gorge. He managed to conquer that kipper and his nausea.

Mrs. Hadwin chattered, and Karl wondered if he could ask to have the window open. And was that poor swollen thing in the long chair ever washed?—Good God, why a well-kept stable was preferable.

Mrs. Hadwin did explain certain physical disabilities of her own.

“I can’t do for ’im as I should like to do, dearie, but—yer see—I carry a lot. I’ve got a rupture.”

Karl's stomach squirmed. Yet, he did carry from the kitchen the conviction that Mrs. Hadwin was a very gallant and courageous old lady. And she charged him only sixpence for that supper.

3

Karl's chief shelf of reference was Stedman Street. Brother George had said to him, "You'll find all you want in Stedman Street." And it was so. Stedman Street consisted of two long rows of flat-topped, narrow little houses with minute patches of dirt in front of them protected by iron railings. These houses were packed like shabby books on two shelves. You could take down a book and study it.

Yet, Karl soon realized that even these books of brick and mortar differed from each other. Take a stroll up Stedman Street and observe the doors and lower windows—especially the lower windows—and you would notice social contrasts. Some windows boasted clean lace curtains, a blind that hung straight, and an aspidistra or a pot of geraniums behind the glass. Some doors had been painted. Some of the dirt patches did dare to be gardens, though the product was sooty and stunted. Sometimes you would find two self-respecting little houses together, and then you would pass half-a-dozen depraved, depressed, and eczematous faces. Yes, eczematous was the very word, sometimes dry and scaly, sometimes oozing. The people in those diseased houses either did not or could not care. They had given up. Karl came to suppose you could distinguish between the out-of-works and those who were in work, by their houses, but the assumption was not always valid.

And the people?

Karl got to know many of them. He loafed with them, stood and stared with them, was sometimes bitter with them, and on rare occasions drank with them. He roughened his lingo and his manners. So creditable was his reversion to the Essex Road at its crudest, that he managed to appear the down-and-out cheap black-coat out of a job. His nausea and his compassion were still in conflict, and were to remain so. Stedman Street needed, not only a new philosophy, but a house-breaker, a dentist, a plumber, a dozen painters, a tailor, a laundry, and perhaps—in some cases—a euthanasia centre.

To take the numbers in succession.

At No. 9 lived Percy Manners and his wife, and a lodger. Manners was a carpenter, a hollow-chested, sallow creature, with a ruff of black hair. In the winter Manners was almost a chronic bronchitic, and hence apt to be casually employed. He was a sensitive and melancholy creature, whose only grievance was against

himself and his forbears.

“Fact is,—I shouldn’t have been born.”

His wife was a worried little woman with frightened eyes. They received twenty-three and threepence a week, and rent and rates absorbed ten and sixpence. But for the lodger Mrs. Manners could not have managed.

But there remained a pride in Manners that resented the presence of the lodger.

“I have to live on—him, Charlie. Do you know, I used to think when I was young that I was going to make a success of life. I’d save. We lived in the country then. I thought I might get a little business of my own, and a little house of my own, and a garden. All such dreams have gone down the drain.”

Karl liked the man, and was moved to ask the inevitable question. Was life finished for Percy Manners?

At No. 14 lived Cragg the communist, a complacently insolent person with waxed moustachios and a fish face. Potts and Figgis, labourers, occupied 17 and 21, submerged souls who hung about street corners and regarded life with sulkily, blue-eyed perplexity. Both of them were bullied by their wives. Karl was not able to get on terms with Potts and Figgis; they seemed to regard him with suspicion; they were excessively suspicious, like primitive men somehow conscious of the process of elimination, but failing to understand it. Also, they were extraordinarily inarticulate. They would emit a few monosyllables and grunt at each other. Once only did Karl hear Figgis venture an opinion.

“Another bloody war wouldn’t do us any harm.”

Both of them had served in the infantry. Both of them had been somewhat insensitive to the horrors of the great experience. They remembered it as a rather spacious period when they had been well fed and well clothed, with cigarettes to smoke, and sharing in the life of an ordered community. The S.M. might have had a voice, but they had been, to some extent, emancipated souls, unscreamed at by their women.

At No. 23 lived Tom Ridout, a vanman, a lean and cheerful soul who was always clean and polished like a good black boot. Ridout would set forth in the morning full of cheer and hope. The man walked miles every day in search of any sort of job. That it eluded him was one of life’s ironies. He did so deserve a job. He had a delicate wife, and was simply and touchingly kind to her. He was down early in the morning to light a fire, polish the kids faces, get them fed and off to school. Karl was to remember Tom Ridout and prove instrumental in giving that cheery soul his chance.

But the most strange and significant home of all was that of the Maces. They

lived in Archer's Row where that queer cul-de-sac branched off from Stedman Street. The family consisted of Bill Mace, Lizzie, his wife, Spot Mace, a nasty lout of eighteen, and Sally Mace, who was one year younger. William Mace had been a fitter in an engineering shop, but when he had fallen out of work his wife had taken to charring. Young Spot was a garage hand, Sally in a laundry, and his family's activities had placed the father in an extraordinary position. The Means Test denied him the dole. His wife and children brought sufficient money into the house to de-dole the father.

Mace hadn't a penny of his own. He was reduced to the position of a domestic parasite. If he wanted a packet of cigarettes he had to cadge the money from his wife or children. He was a state-determined loafer. Mace had been a gunner in the war, and had won the M.M. A man of large appetites, full blooded, and prone to sullen rages, he was chained up like a big dog, or allowed to prowl hopelessly and savagely about the streets.

Karl began to see much of Mace. The man was likeable. He was alone during most of the day. Karl would find him pottering at some futile job in a noisome back yard. He cut firewood and trundled little bundles out on a barrow, and made a few pence on occasions. He was interested in pigeons and kept half a dozen in a cote in the yard. Karl would find him whittling away at something with a knife, the backs of his large hands covered with reddish hair.

On that particular spring evening Mace was sitting on a chair outside his front door, collarless, unshaven.

"Well, Bill, how goes it?"

"Bloody."

The man was sulky and savage and humbled. Karl had not been with him a minute when the son arrived, an unpleasant, flashy young brute. It was late, and young Mace belonged to a world that took some of its ideals from Chicago. There were nights when the Mace home did not see him.

His father growled at his son.

"Where've you been?"

The son was more fierce than the father.

"What the hell's that to you?"

Karl saw the big man draw his legs up sharply.

"I asked you a question."

"Ask me another. No bloody business of yours."

"Oh,—ain't it?"

Young Mace stood off, ugly and sneering.

“You keep a civil tongue, old man. I help to keep you, don’t I? Talk about parasites!”

Mace was up with sudden fury, but his wife came running out of the house, a skinny woman with the face of a scold. She caught her man by the sleeve.

“You come inside, father. Rowing with your own son. Ignorant—you are. I won’t ’ave it. You go and cut some firewood.”

But the man’s rage was out of him. He sat down again on the chair, deflated, sullen, and young Mace went in with his mother.

“That’s what I’ve come to, Charlie. Cheeked and bluffed by m’own kids. They’ve got the money.”

Karl passed him a packet of cigarettes.

“Have one.”

But Mace shook his head.

“I’m a sponger,—that’s what I am! Take the bloody fags away. Christ!—I’d like to have my old 4·5 ’ere, and blow the whole bloody street to blazes.”

Someone had been watching Karl from an upper window. A permanently waved butter-coloured head had been protruded. Sally Mace had begun to look at Karl. She was a fat young wench with a large mouth and teeth that needed scientific attention. Sally was very much the sister of young Spot. When she laughed all the ugly, elemental things of this shabby world seemed to quake and jangle.

Karl was lighting a cigarette before saying good night to the ex-soldier when the girl appeared in the doorway. She was dressed to go out, and her big mouth was a red smudge.

“Evening, Mr. Smith.”

Karl smiled at her and nodded.

“Evening, Miss Mace.”

“Being funny, aren’t you?”

Karl offered her a cigarette. She took one, and stood close to him while he held a match, and her eyes were rogue’s eyes. Sally was not a person who asked for formalities.

“Thanks, says I—says you.”

Karl, happening to glance at her father, saw the man’s sulky eyes observing them.

“Where are you going, my girl?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” said she.

“Now, I don’t want any lip from you.”

“Well, don’t ask for it, pa. If you want to know I’m strolling along with Charlie.”

Karl laughed, but he was feeling uneasy.

“She must have her joke, Bill. I think I’ll be getting along.”

But the man in the chair was shedding another illusion. So this was why a bright young fellow strolled along to Archer’s Row for a chat. He was after his daughter, and Sally needed no persuading. Mace’s face looked dark and ugly.

“I ain’t saying anything. Who the hell cares?”

His daughter giggled at him.

“Aren’t you going to cut some firewood, dad?”

Karl expected an explosion. He knew that glare in a man’s eyes when he was seeing red.

“Well,—cheerio.”

Would that damned young wench hang on to him? She did. She slipped a hand under his arm. There was no reticence in Sally Mace when she liked a man and wanted him.

“Nifty-night, dad.—I’ll be all right with Charlie.”

Karl walked off with this female attachment. He decided that he would feel safer with her round the corner.

“If I were your dad,” said he, “I’d——”

She snuggled up against him.

“But you’re not my dad,” and she giggled.

CHAPTER XXXII

Karl's bedroom door and that of his fellow lodger in Carmel Street opened simultaneously. Mr. Richard Samson, like his namesake, had a fine head of hair. The good six feet of him seemed to taper from shoulders to feet, with no bulges at the belly or the hips. He wore a yellow polo-jersey under a brown sports coat, grey flannel trousers, brown shoes.

He looked at Karl with eyes of friendliness.

"After the girls, Charlie?"

And Karl smiled at him. "No. But isn't it the other way—these days?"

"That depends. I know something better than girls. You ought to be with us."

"Have I the qualifications?"

The other lad nodded.

"I should say so.—You're not one of these sewer rats."

"And what is the Cause?" asked Karl.

Samson smiled at him, and raised his right arm in the Fascist salute.

"Just that. England and discipline."

He did not tell Karl at the moment that "We are out to smash this collectivist cant, this conspiracy of all the world's failures and little jabbering Jews." Karl did not confess to being half a Jew. So, Samson, the pseudo-warehouseman, was a Fascist, and Karl had not explored the inwardness of Fascism. The social noise of it was spreading, but the significance and the spirit of it had not yet manifested itself to him, but Samson—its exemplar—was to prove to him that it was a piece of psychology, not an economic theory. It was more Cœur de Lion than Ricardo.

"I'd like to talk to you about it."

"We don't talk, Charlie, we—do. That's what the world wants. We are going to be its schoolmasters and drill sergeants, and put the crowd back in the classroom and the barracks."

"And the ideal?"

"A new dignity, Charlie, discipline and getting things done. We're sick of this crowd chaos."

Karl happened to have an appointment with Brother George, and Richard Samson's exposition of Fascism had to be postponed. They descended together into Carmel Street, and Karl paused to watch this tall lad pass upon his way. Samson was head up, shoulders squared, a young man in the pride of his comeliness and his

strength. He walked with a faint suggestion of swagger, and it is right that youth should be gaillard. His handsome strenuousness was individual and picturesque. He walked like some young Goth, armed and fierce and jocund in a city of slaves. He was a fighting man, ready to burn up with the blue glare of his Berserker wrath some rabble in Alexandria, Rome, or Byzantium. Was Fascism a blood-cult, the essential scorn of the strong and the comely for "These sewer-rats"? Discipline, a flag, marching men, the swagger and the swing of it, a new dignity, a new ruthlessness, youth and its panache. "Hail, England!"—or "Hail, Rome!" instead of "Hello, Gus, old lad, M.P. for Slopperton!"

Karl did not mention Fascism to Brother George. It could be a red rag to Mr. Blunt who had plumped for the proletarian philosophy, and yet was sometimes moved to ask himself whether he had mounted the wrong horse. Would the cry of "Hail—Cæsar!" smother the yells of "Up, the Reds?" But Karl spent three evenings with the fascist. They crossed the river, and swinging up to Putney Heath, lay on the grass amid the birch trees, and talked.

On one of those evenings Karl had noticed a couple of louts at a street corner. They had given the fascist ugly looks.

"Friends of yours, Dick?"

"Young reds, and gangsters, much the same. They tried it on me once—three of 'em, after dark. I gave 'em this."

He produced a knuckle-duster from a pocket.

"I've got a punch, Charlie. Cowardly little swine!"

Under the birch trees Karl asked him a question.

"What's the difference between Fascism and Communism? They are both young and prone to violence."

"Haven't you got that, yet?"

"Not quite."

"Communism is—the wolf pack. Fascism—youth disciplined and armed. We don't propose to cut throats, and loot. It's like the Cromwell idea, Ironsides, the new Puritanism. Justice and discipline. We've done with the humbug of a false humanitarianism. It's like a thaw, leaving a country—all slush."

"Haven't some of these collectivists—ideals?"

"O, plenty. That's the danger. The hundred per cent. idealists are woolly; they haven't the guts; they'd be pushed into the ditch by their young roughs when the row started. The mock-idealists are the danger; they've got the guts, and they're after power and plunder."

"And you?"

“Of course we are after power too, but we are honest about it. The inferiority complex has got loose in the world, and we are going to fix it. Put people back in their places, and tell ’em to stay there and get on with the job. The humanitarians have been exploiting the crowd’s inferiority complex. Telling cabbages they ought to be as high as the trees. We’ll squash that humbug. What would Socialism be but organized graft and state loafing? O, yes, it would. Man has a streak of the beast in him. He has got to have necessity chasing him up the street. The social sentimentalists are all wrong.”

“Anything else?”

“O, yes, of course we stand for more than that. Pride, my lad, breed, looks, guts. This equality bunk! You think I’m arrogant.”

“No. Anyone who is worth while is a little arrogant, even though he hides it.”

“Yes,—I’m cocky.—I’m not going to sit down with a crowd of C 3’s and jabberers. Ever read history? What did the Goths and the Franks do? And the Normans? Barbarians? Rot. They had some ferocity. The slop-mongers are white rats. We’re going to put new virile stuff into the humanitarian swill. We shan’t let the jabberers up on soap-boxes. They’ll be shut up until they have been taught to hold their tongues, and then—we’ll put ’em to plant potatoes.”

Karl considered the comely, stern young face of his companion.

“A kind of new crusade, Richard?”

“That’s the idea. A crusade of youth—that doesn’t feel inferior. Or the new Roman legions. We’ll give the sentimentalists a lesson to learn, and the world—a master.”

“Have you found your Cæsar?”

“Come along with me one night when I put on a black shirt, and I’ll show you.”

Other happenings intervened.

Karl had begun to hunger for certain things; cleanliness, silence, aloofness, beauty, some green and gracious place where dirty children did not scream. He had striven to be consistent, thorough, and he wanted a bath, and a bath that was used by no other person. Carmel Street was innocent of baths, and a public bath was always a little smeary. Like a boy, but a fastidious boy, his stomach yearned for Euphemia’s cooking, and the spirit of him for the fine texture of the life at Burntshaw, his furniture, his silver, his flowers and trees. To lie in an honest bed, and be able—without qualms—to bury your face in the pillow. And Mary Arch’s flowers and her hands! For, Mary, with her pretty pallor and her dark dignity was more and more present in his consciousness.

This world of Stedman Street and of Archer's Row was a conglomeration of rabbit hutches. Compared with it the life of the Semitic nomad was indeed a golden age, though the Emetic Club would have questioned Prof. Elliot Smith's belief in the peacefulness of primitive man. Or, at all events, that peacefulness had passed away thousands of years ago, save in a few obscure corners of the earth. Property had abolished peace, and even if the collectivists wrecked all property, the lion might not choose to lie down with the lamb. No, civilization had become—in some respects—a neurosis, or it was like an explosive that had been stored too long and was liable to explode on its own initiative. Civilization was but a crust that quaked above significant rumblings.

Karl's explorations were to be interrupted unexpectedly, and perhaps significantly so. He had not been able to visit Archer's Row without finding the ex-soldier gruff and sulky, and the daughter always dressed and expectant. He had discovered reasons for refraining. Sally was a young person without inhibitions. She was a gross and greedy child with a pot of jam, and at the moment Charlie Smith happened to be the conserve.

The incident was staged on a warm, dark, muggy night. Karl, strolling back to Carmel Street, found someone adhering to the railings. Sally! She sidled up against him.

“Dad wants to see you.”

“Something the matter?”

“He's feeling—bad.”

Karl was not eager to go with the girl, but he accepted her invention. Sally seemed unusually silent and serious. She did not giggle. There happened to be a short cut from Carmel Street to Archer's Row, a passage running between the walls of back yards, and at one point a little cul-de-sac ended in the gates of a stable. The place was dark and deserted. They had reached the opening of the cul-de-sac when Karl felt the girl's arm round him. She was a strong young beast, and she pulled him sideways into that dark entry.

“All bunk about dad.”

Suddenly, she was clasping him, her back to the wall, her coarse face pushed into his. He felt her legs, the splodge of her large, wet mouth against his. And the smell of her was undisguised, her breath, the reek of rotten teeth.

Nausea. His disgust was sudden and passionate. He broke away roughly.

“You little——”

He turned and ran. She made no attempt to follow him.

A girl had a tale to tell. She did not tell it to her mother or her father, but to her brother, and with a sodden, sobbing fury.

“We’ll get him,” said her brother, “you leave it to the gang, sis.”

Karl spent the following evening at the Rev. John Barter’s club, boxing, and playing darts and billiards. It was late when he left, and the world had gone to bed. He was not conscious of being shadowed by a lad in rubber-soled shoes, for the shadower was an adept at the business. Karl had reached the end of Carmel Street when he heard a whistle behind him. Someone signalling to a girl? He walked up the street into the gang’s ambush; young Mace and his lads had been waiting in the area of a house that happened to be empty.

Karl turned and fought, but there were no decencies in that struggle. He floored one fellow, but they were on him in a bunch, using feet and fists. “Give the swine hell.” They got him down on the pavement. He was kicked, jumped upon.

Sudden footsteps, and they fled. Karl lay there in anguish, writhing close to the railings. He was hurt in the vitals like a dog that has been under a wheel. Someone was bending over him, Samson the fascist.

“Hallo, god,—it’s you, Charlie!”

“They got me, Dick.”

“Who?”

“The gang.”

“Damn them I—I’ll get you in.”

Karl rolled over and lay gripping the railings. He was still in agony.

“No, not in there.—I’ve finished with this show.”

“Damn them!”

“No, just let me lie a moment.”

Samson struck a match, and saw Karl’s face.

“God! Fascists are wanted, what?”

Kneeling on one knee he waited until Karl made a movement as though to pull himself up by the railings.

“Steady on, lad.”

“Get me a taxi, Dick. Could you?”

“A taxi?”

“Yes, I don’t belong here—really. I came to live the life,—find out. I’ve got a flat in town. If I can get there——”

“Your bed’s nearer.”

“Not that bed. I can settle with the old people—later. Try and get me a taxi.”

“Right. I will.”

He helped Karl to the steps of the empty house.

“You’re badly mauled, old lad. Wish I’d been half a minute earlier.”

“Never mind. I shall be all right.”

Samson set off, and Karl sat on the steps, half doubled up with pain, his head in his hands. There was blood on his hands, and within him nausea, humiliation, a dry cold rage. The fascist, running into a main thoroughfare, fell in with a taxi that was trundling home. He mounted the running-board, and found the driver suspicious and surly.

“I’m done for the day.”

“All right,—I’m not a bandit. Be a sport. A friend of mine’s been hurt. Double fare.”

“Hospital?”

“No. He wants to get home.”

The man was persuaded. He turned his cab and drove into Carmel Street, and pulled up when Samson jumped off. Karl’s face was a dim white patch in the darkness. The fascist bent down and put an arm round him.

“Got any money, Charlie? If not—I have.”

“Yes.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“Thanks, old man.”

The taximan was tired and passive. He remained in his seat. It was no business of his to investigate the matter, but he was not sure of his fare.

“Where to?”

“No. 6, Tite Street. Flats.”

“Tite Street?” What was Tite Street doing in these shambles?

“I’ll take ten bob on tick.”

Samson shoved a ten-shilling note at him.

“There you are, Moses,” and he helped Karl into the cab.

Tackle, the night-porter, happened to be awake, though it was his custom to doss down in a corner of the vestibule when everyone was in. He heard a taxi, and voices, and he went to the door, buttoning up a tunic over a collarless shirt. Two men were ascending the steps, one of them supporting the other, and Tackle, having had

much experience, diagnosed too much alcohol. But who were these gents? Everybody was in, and Tackle was preparing to receive cavalry when he recognized Karl's face through the glass panel of the door. But, what a face!

"Lord love us, Mr. Kesteven!"

"Get the lift, Tackle, please."

"Yes, sir. Had an accident, sir?"

"Yes. Been knocked down."

Tackle was a good soul, small, wiry and intelligent. He and the strange young man got Karl into the lift and upstairs to the flat on the top floor. Tackle turned on the lights, and when he saw more of Mr. Kesteven he puckered up his lips as though to whistle.

"You ought to have a doctor, sir."

"I don't want to be fussed," said Karl. "I want to go to bed."

Tackle dodged into the bedroom and saw that the bed was made. The Tite Street flats were service flats.

"O.K., sir."

These two undressed him with great gentleness and put him to bed. Karl's face and hands badly needed washing, and Tackle procured a towel and a basin of water. "Let's clean you up a bit, sir." But Karl was a peevish child.

"I don't want to be messed about. I'll clean up in the morning. I just want to lie still."

Samson and the porter looked at each other across the bed. It was Tackle who closed one eye and jerked his head towards the door. They went out, Tackle turning off all the lights save the bed-light.

"He's in a nice mess, sir. How did it 'appen?"

"He was set upon by a lot of roughs."

"Gawd!" said Tackle, "we're getting like New York. But I'm going to 'phone a doctor. 'E can't be left like that."

"You're right."

"I'll 'phone the gent who always comes 'ere. Bentley's his name."

"Good business.—I'll stay till the doctor's seen him. Yes, I'm a pal of his."

Tackle went down in the lift, and Samson returned to the bedroom. He found Karl lying with his arms spread, eyes shut.

"How are you feeling, Charlie?"

Karl moved his head.

"Sick, but not so bad. I'm sore inside. The swine kicked me in the privates."

"I wish I'd been there."

“Don’t you wait, Dick. You might tell the old people——”

“I’m not going just yet,” and the fascist sat down in a chair.

Meanwhile, Tackle had called up Dr. Bentley. Dr. Bentley had been to a show and a supper, and he was still in his shirt when the telephone rang in his room. He was annoyed. He supposed that he was being called by a particular and infernal woman patient, a neurasthenic. He picked up the receiver. “What? Tite Street? Mr. Kesteven,—badly knocked about?—Yes, I’ll come along.—Who’s that speaking? The porter.—Right, I’ll come along.”

Dr. Bentley had the situation explained in part to him by Tackle before he reached the top floor. He found a strange young man waiting for him there. More explanations were supplied in a half whisper. Mr. Kesteven was resenting interference, and Dr. Bentley knew his Karl. Leaving his bag and his professional manner in the sitting-room, he lit a cigarette and strolled into Karl’s bedroom.

“Hallo, Charles. What’s all this? Let’s have a look at you.”

“They shouldn’t have bothered you, Bentley.”

“Nonsense. I hadn’t gone to bed. A show, and supper at the Mayfair. What have you been doing, my lad?”

Karl’s dilapidated face produced something like a cynical grin.

“Investigating social conditions in a semi-slum, Bentley.”

“Nice people, Charles!”

“O, very. The best and the worst. Some of them gave me a personal demonstration.”

“Nice people.”

When Bentley had used his eyes and his hands, and had attended to Karl’s bloody face, he told Karl that the proper place for him was a nursing-home.

“Nothing doing, doctor. Nothing would persuade me.”

“Why?”

“Modesty.”

“My dear lad.”

“I’ve had a licking.—I want to lie and lick my wounds in private. Could I have a cushion—or something?”

“I’ll fix that up. But do you call being savaged by a lot of roughs—a licking?”

“I do. Fancy being mauled by such swine. Something to reflect upon. Wash out the nursing-home, Bentley.”

“Very well,” and Bentley called for the porter; “we’ll see how you are tomorrow. Porter, do you think you could raise some ice? I suppose there is a refrigerator in the place.”

“I think I can manage that, sir.”

The doctor patched up Karl for the night, gave him a small dose of morphia, and told Tackle to come up once every hour—in his socks—and listen at Karl’s door. “I want him to sleep.” Samson, who had been waiting in the sitting-room, went down in the lift with the doctor.

“Think he will be all right, sir?”

“They knocked him about pretty brutally. I shall have to watch him. But he’s young and healthy.”

The fascist smiled at the doctor.

“That’s what the world wants, sir, youth and health. I’ll get some of our lot together and try and knock hell into that gang.”

CHAPTER XXXIII

Karl had called in the night-porter.

“Tackle, when Parsons comes on duty, tell him I want nobody in here.”

“But your breakfast, sir?”

“Ask Parsons to bring me up something. I don’t want any of the staff admitted.”

“Very well, sir.”

Mr. Kesteven’s attitude was understandable, but Tackle suffered from too active a sense of responsibility. Mr. Kesteven’s people ought to be informed. Mr. Kesteven’s chauffeur—Smith, who had been sent down to Burntshaw, ostensibly to help in the garden, was a capable fellow and might be useful to his master as an amateur male-nurse. Obviously, Mr. Kesteven was not wanting women about him. At eight in the morning, before going off duty, Tackle rang up Burntshaw.

A woman’s voice answered him.

“Yes, who’s that speaking?”

“The porter at Tite Street Mansions. I want a word with Mr. Kesteven’s chauffeur.”

“Is Mr. Kesteven at Tite Street?”

“He is.”

“I’m the housekeeper. I’ll take the message.”

Tackle hesitated, was tempted and fell.

“Fact is, Miss, Mr. Kesteven has had an accident. Yes, the doctor’s looking after him. I thought his chauffeur might be useful.”

“Mr. Kesteven did not tell you to ’phone?”

“No, Miss. You see—he’s in bed, and not feeling like being nursed. A man about the place might be useful.”

“Thank you,” said the voice. “I am very much obliged to you. I’ll give the chauffeur the message.”

It must be confessed that Mary’s appropriation of this information as a personal and intimate perquisite was not characteristic of her, and that the explanation she gave to Euphemia and to Karl’s chauffeur was a little equivocal. She packed a suitcase. She had decided to change her day, and to spend this particular day in town. Would Smith drive her to Dorking? He would do so. And the suitcase? Oh, she had in it a coat that needed pressing and cleaning. Already, she was touching with tentative, soft fingers those sensitive social threads. Dr. Bentley had visited and

attended to a somewhat temperamental patient before Mary arrived at Tite Street.

Parsons, the day-porter, had taken in Mr. Kesteven's breakfast, and later, had removed the unappreciated tray. Mr. Kesteven had not been feeling like breakfast. Parsons was a genial cynic; he was ready to allow a young man about town much latitude, especially so when he was a celebrity, and generous with his money, but a porter had to exercise discretion. Obviously, Mr. Kesteven had been involved in some adventure, and it was equally obvious that he did not want it noised abroad. Scandal, and the Press! Parsons considered the situation to be a delicate one.

So, when a young person whom he did not know by sight, walked into the vestibule carrying a suitcase, and asked to be directed to Mr. Kesteven's flat, Parsons played censor.

"Sorry, Miss. Mr. Kesteven's not seeing visitors."

Mary was scared to death, and the suitcase rubbed against a leg that trembled, but she was mistress of her crisis.

"That's all right. He sent a message. I have just come up from Burntshaw."

Parsons still barred her way.

"You'll excuse me, Miss, but——"

"I'm Mr. Kesteven's housekeeper. Take me up, please."

Parsons looked her over; Parsons made inward comments. A pretty piece of goods—this, and mighty sure of herself. Not the sort of girl—Well, a woman's looks were of significance.

"If you like, Miss, I'll go up and ask."

"Please don't trouble," and she walked round him and into the lift, as cool as you please, and stood there waiting. Parsons seemed to sight her down his long nose. Well, perhaps Mr. Kesteven had sent a message through the doctor or Tackle. He accepted her pale, slim assurance, and set the lift in motion, while registering a private opinion that had he been in a position to need a nurse——They arrived; he opened the gate, and Mary stepped past him.

"Thank you. This door—I think?"

Mr. Parsons looked hard at her. "You're a cool one," was his inward comment, but he unlocked the door for her.

"Excuse me, Miss, but hadn't I better——?"

"Thank you, I can manage," and she went in with her suitcase, and gently closed the door on him.

She knocked at the door.

“May I come in, Mr. Karl?”

“Mary!”

He saw her in the doorway. She had taken off her hat. Her slim black shape and her pretty pallor brought back poignant memories of his mother. But, for the moment he was angry and confused, though his anger was a complex reaction. How damned embarrassing! And Mary of all women, a Mary whom he had come to associate with fastidious, beautiful things. He was in such a squalid mess.

“Who sent for you, Mary?”

Deliberately she closed the door, moved forward into the room, and sat down in the chair Dr. Bentley had used.

“We had a message. The porter phoned us, Mr. Karl.”

“That damned fool Tackle.”

He lay rigid and self-conscious. She was sitting there like someone who had come to stay, the woman in possession.

“I’m sorry—Mary——”

“How did it happen, Mr. Karl?”

He met her eyes for a moment; they were serious and wise and steady.

“O, never mind.”

“I came up to see——”

“But you can’t stay here, Mary.”

“You must have somebody.”

He was both exasperated man and fractious child, and more than either. Was his vanity so preposterous? That he should resent her seeing his battered face, with its strips of strapping, and purple, tumid eye!

“I’m not quite a case for a nurse.”

“No, Mr. Karl.—I’m not a nurse.”

She sat there with her hands in her lap, mysterious, faintly smiling. He had looked at her and flinched, and now he looked at her again. What was it he saw in her eyes? Compassion? She had sat for weeks beside his mother’s bed, and he had not been emotionally aware of her as he was now. There seemed to be some quality in her presence that diffused about him the very essence of understanding. But, what was it she understood? And then—he knew.

“I don’t think you ought to stay here, Mary.”

“No,—Mr. Karl.”

“I’m in a rather disgusting state.”

“But who——?”

“O, the porter is looking in.”

“Why not have a nurse, Mr. Karl?”

“I don’t want a woman.”

“No.—But I could send for Smith.”

He caught at that suggestion.

“The very thing. Send for Smith. He’s a useful fellow.”

She rose, stood looking round the room with the air of a woman who was responsible for a room’s order, and seeing his clothes lying bundled on a chair, she made a movement towards them. Some men were just like children. But he was watching her.

“Leave those alone, Mary.”

“Why, sir?”

“They’re filthy. They are not my real clothes. I’ll get Smith to burn them.”

“Very well, sir.”

“And don’t call me sir.”

She turned and hid from him the little mysterious tremor of a smile. She went quietly out of the room, closing the door behind her. There was a telephone in the sitting-room. She rang up Burntshaw, and spoke to Euphemia; she eluded Euphemia’s very natural curiosity. Smith was to come up at once to Tite Street with the car, and would Euphemia get Mrs. Lavender in to sleep with her. Yes, she—Mary—was staying in town.

She rang off, returned to the bedroom door, and knocked.

“Yes?”

“I have sent for Smith, Mr. Karl.”

“O,—Mary——”

“Yes.”

“Could I have something to drink?”

With her head close to the door she smiled that little, tender smile at it.

“What would you like?”

“O, just water.”

She found a glass, and filled it, and carried it in. His eyes had been watching the door.

“I won’t bother you again, Mary. Just put it down.”

She did not put the glass down. She bent, and slipped a hand under his head, and helping him to raise it, held the glass to his lips. Maybe, it all happened between them in that one moment, and was expressed in that symbolic act. He lay back and relaxed into contemplating her as she stood there with the half-empty glass.

“Some of it has run down my chin, Mary.”

She put the glass down, went for a towel, and wiped his chin and throat.

“You don’t mind me—like this, Mary?”

Her eyes said “My dear, don’t you know?”

“I had such a—head, Mary.”

“Did Dr. Bentley give you anything?”

“O, yes.”

“What did he say?”

“Oh, I shall be all right in a few days. They knocked me about rather thoroughly.”

“They, Mr. Karl?”

And suddenly he gave a little laugh.

“Oh, of course,—you don’t know.”

She turned towards the door, hesitated, came back and sat down beside him. She did not utter a word. She just waited quietly and in silence, somehow sensing the climax of her crisis. Would he tell her? And if he told her? He was lying there with his eyes closed.

He put out a hand.

“Where did we leave off, Mary?”

Her face became suddenly luminous. Her hand went out to meet his.

“We were talking about the Essex Road, and the people who——”

“Yes, let’s go on from there.”

3

His experiment in elementary sociology! Yes, it had been exceedingly interesting and provocative, but so like the curate’s egg.—And so smelly! Though, of course, as a solution you could accept the Russian plan of preliminary destruction and organized self-effacement; it did not matter how lousy and primitive you might have to be for a number of years, provided that your sacrifice of soap produced the millennium. But what was the truth about Russia—what was the truth about anything?—save that the moderately successful were somewhat content with things as they were, and that the failures and their prophets wanted things altering, which was natural.

“I am afraid I have been spoilt, Mary. I like soap and civilized etceteras. I was quaking all the time between pity and loathing.”

She had experienced both those reactions.

“There is so much of it.”

“Yes, it bewilders one. There are people who are worth saving, and people who ought to be taken away in the Borough Council refuse van.—So much sentiment gets tangled up in it, and the thing isn’t solvable by sentiment. Someone took me to an Infant Centre welfare, a nice, sentimental person.—‘O, these mothers are wonderful!’ and all that. I had a chat with a little woman who had produced eleven children.”

“Poor mother!”

“Exactly. And poor—society!—I saw her last baby.—Its face was all scabs. Mary,—I’m afraid I hungered for the fleshpots of Egypt.”

“And why not?”

“O, well, with all those poor beggars——”

“Yes, but what can you do?”

“Find jobs for two or three of them—perhaps.—I am going to do that. But, Mary, my bed!”

“Your bed?”

“Yes, the thing I had to sleep on or in. It made me squirm. I couldn’t get into it. And the smells and the smeariness. I’m not made to be a missionary soul.”

“Is that anything to be ashamed of?”

“Well, yes and no. Some people can make a hobby of it, and of course my brother George regards all the filth as a sort of fertilizer. It will help to bring on the new crop. Of course industrialism and over-population got this world into this muddle.”

She sat there, pale, serious, the young priestess confronting reality.

“Why should one throw away all the beautiful things because a part of the world is stupid and ugly? That’s so silly. It’s such humbug. We want more and more beauty. Besides——”

He looked at her whimsically.

“Well?”

“Your business is to write plays.”

“You are talking like—a mother, Mary.”

“Some men need them. But you haven’t told me how——”

“Do you think I ought to tell you? It wasn’t exactly a drawing-room affair, but no fault of mine.”

“Yes, tell me.”

“O, well, it was just because a rather primitive young person became—rather too familiar. I was—rude. I gather that the family pride was hurt. Her brother and his

friends put me on the spot.”

“They attacked you?”

“Yes, four or five of them, in the dark; feet and fists.”

“Cowardly beasts.”

“O, well, Mary, cities seem to breed some of such youthfulness. The spotty stage, arrogant young animals short of adventure. Some of them have never worked. And what is one going to do about it? Join Brother George or become a fascist? I don’t know that I have much faith in socialism. When it is put on the street as a new red van it may look very nice for a few years, but when its uplift is worn out and it begins to misfire and to knock, what then? Of course, the humanitarians refuse to admit it. Education, education. But, you know, man really loathes the schoolmaster idea. He may put up with it so long as he thinks it is going to give him something for nothing, but when he realizes——Yes, more boredom, more explosions. They’ll smash up the red van, and have a blue or a green one.”

And then he asked her a question.

“Do you think one can give a blank cheque to humanity, Mary?”

She shook her head.

“Man’s such a lazy animal, really.”

Suddenly, he drew her hand closer.

“You have beautiful hands, Mary.”

“Have I?”

“Were they born so, or did you make them so? A bit of both, I suppose. After all, that’s life. I like the way you arrange flowers. You ought to be rather good at arranging—life. I mean—you seem to understand that an artist has to be a rather selfish sort of devil. One gets so absorbed. And then, one wants to rush out and play with the particular person who has the wisdom not to knock at doors—and ask you how much longer you are going to scribble. My mother was like that. And I adored her. I haven’t been the same since. So, you think I ought to go on writing plays, Mary?”

She nodded at him.

“Yes, that’s—your life, writing plays.”

Smith the chauffeur was the first male member of their world to run a pragmatical head against the new dispensation. He came up the stairs to report the arrival of the Rolls to his employer, and quite properly and rationally the door was opened by

Mary Arch.

“Hallo, Mary.”

“I’m so glad you have come, Mr. Smith.”

Mr. Smith—indeed!—though the prefix was presented to him with complete naturalness. Had it not been Tom in the morning when she asked him to drive her to Dorking station? And what about the suitcase, and her excuses? He had meant to twit her about her equivocal statements, and here was a young woman strangely and delicately upon her dignity.

“Mr. Karl wants you to help him.”

Smith’s round face was suddenly bereft of its genial frankness. What—exactly—was the situation? Both as a man and a servant he might have a high opinion of Mary Arch, but somehow their mutual attitudes and viewpoints seemed to have shifted. Smith became careful, like a responsible driver in traffic that was predominantly feminine.

“An accident,—what?”

“You know—his bedroom.”

Then—so did she! But, after all, Mary Arch had been—in a sense—a member of the family, and Smith, like most of his class, was a humanist, and if he had been somewhat critical of his master’s method of life, he had spoken as the father of a family. “Time the young beggar settled down.” Also, he had given it as his opinion that Mr. Kesteven ought to marry some girl with sense. Well,—well! Yet, at the moment he was glimpsing only the shadow of a sensation, and with headlights dimmed he went in to interview his master.

Mr. Karl might be in a shocking state, but Smith found him unexpectedly cheerful. Mr. Kesteven called him “Tom.” Smith emerged more wise as to one aspect of the case, and more ready to applaud Mary Arch as a girl of sense. She had understood that a man was needed about the place. Smith had been told to burn or deposit in the refuse bin a shabby, soiled suit, and to go out and buy cigarettes and a daily paper. Also,—Mr. Kesteven had said to him, “Don’t make a song about this, Smith. I rely on you to keep it to yourself.” Smith had said—“Quite so, sir.” The sitting-room door was half open, and Smith, on his way out, had a glimpse of Mary Arch, sans cap and apron, sitting on the sofa sewing at something. So, she was parked there. Well, well!

To Dr. Bentley the situation did not present itself as a subject to be analysed. Being a very busy and successful professional man he could remain surprisingly insensitive to the significance of incidents which did not affect a diagnosis.

“Afternoon, Miss Arch. You here?—That’s excellent.”

He had a very good opinion of Mary Arch as a domestic accessory. He happened to know how capably the girl had helped to nurse her mistress, and if she was here to wait upon Mr. Kesteven, that was part of the tradition.

“I sent for Mr. Kesteven’s chauffeur, Dr. Bentley.”

“Excellent.”

The doctor went in to see his patient, and found his condition much improved. Mr. Kesteven appeared to be comfortable in mind and body. No symptoms of internal trauma had developed.

“When can I get up, Bentley?”

“You are going to stay there two or three days, my lad. I see you are being well looked after.”

On going out Dr. Bentley found Mary Arch waiting for him in the doorway of the sitting-room. Had he been less the beloved and obsessed physician he might have detected in the atmosphere a delicate savour of sentiment. This young woman did not stand there quite as the parlourmaid, and if her pale young dignity was more sensitive than usual, that might be because she had no cap on.

“Is there anything you wish me to do, Dr. Bentley?”

Bentley was both suave and bustling.

“No.—I’m very pleased with Mr. Kesteven. His chauffeur can valet him. Of course, I don’t want him worried.”

“I will see that he is not worried.”

Admirable maid! Dr. Bentley fared forth to other patients, and so unsuspecting was he that when—in due season—the news reached him, he could only exclaim, “Well,—I’m damned!”

Mary shot the bolt of the outer door. No, Mr. Karl should not be worried. And then she heard him calling her.

“Mary.”

She went quickly to the door.

“Yes.”

“Come in, Mary.”

She entered. He had asked her for a book to read, and she had given him a particular book, one that had travelled up with her in her suitcase.

“I say,—Mary.”

He was holding up a strip of paper, an old newspaper cutting.

“How, on earth did this——?”

“O,—that!—I had quite forgotten.”

“Had you?—But how——?”

“Oh, I kept it,—Mr. Karl.”

“Rather a queer thing to keep.”

The newspaper cutting had once been pinned upon the wall of Karl’s working-room at Burntshaw. It represented Mr. William Slade’s bitter criticism of “Harlequinade.”

“Why on earth did you keep it, Mary?”

She stood with hands hanging, lashes lowered.

“Because.—Oh,—I don’t quite know. Perhaps because it made me angry.”

He looked at her intently.

“Angry? Poor old Slade, poor old hack. Fancy him making anybody angry! But, you know, Mary, this might be regarded as a tonic. Iron and strychnine!”

“It might.”

He let the cutting flutter to the bed.

“Did you mean it as a tonic?”

She looked at him, and then—with a little pale smile, sat down beside him.

“Yes, I put it there on purpose. How all the Slades would gloat if you were to fail.”

“My dear!”

“O, please, don’t——”

Turning on one side, he raised himself on an elbow, and she put out a hand.

“Mr. Karl, you must not——”

“Don’t call me Mr. Karl. I’ll confess to a coincidence. Do you know what has been jiggling up and down in my consciousness—most of the morning?”

“No.”

“Just one word ‘Prelude.’ My business is to wipe out that failure, my dear. And you, and old Slade——”

“Please, am I to be bracketed with——?”

He drew her hand in and kissed it.

“That’s all I’m fit for, my dear, at the moment.—Besides, I shall have to—stage—my appeal. This, is only Prelude.”

Mary received two more visitors that day, the fascist and Brother George.

Richard Samson she liked at the first glance, for that is the way of woman. She allowed him in. “You must not stay too long and tire him.” He promised that he would not do so, and he didn’t. His handsome strenuousness could control itself.

Brother George was a different proposition. He had picked up the news from the Hadwins, and come to condole with his protégé. Mary kept Mr. Blunt on the landing; she stood calmly and securely in the doorway, determined that all Brother Georgeishness should be excluded from her beloved's future.

"Hallo, Miss. Up from the country?"

George was gaillard; George had a way with the women. He was for sailing in, but the chain was down across the harbour mouth.

"Good day, Mr. Blunt. No,—I'm afraid you can't see Mr. Kesteven."

"O, can't I, my dear? Why,—I'm his brother."

She looked him straight in the eyes.

"Yes,—I know. But doctor's orders. I'm sorry."

And with gentle ruthlessness she closed the door on Brother George's polished, proletarian boots.

Later, she was asked a question.

"Who was that, Mary? I thought I recognized a voice?"

She answered, mysteriously smiling.

"Mr. Blunt. I sent him away."

His eyes were bright and mischievous in his disfigured face.

"Don't you think Brother George is good for me?"

"No."

"You insist upon my concentrating upon the confounding of the critics?"

"Yes,—dear."

CHAPTER XXXIV

If Mary was a little afraid of her new world, and how it would accept her transfiguration, she did not betray her fear, either by being too consciously dignified or too condescendingly familiar. Karl was in a laughing mood over their conspiracy. “We’ll elope from Tite Street. A special licence. And—afterwards?” She divined the afterwards as her immediate problem, the confounding of the world’s cynicism. “Heard the news? Young Kesteven has married his housemaid!” A sentimental honeymoon? Perhaps? Cocktails and social celebrations? No. After all, was it not the month of June? And then an illustrated journal reminded her that it was Passion Play Year at Oberammergau. She passed the inspiration to her husband.

Bavaria in June, flowering meadows, memories of his post-war emancipation and his first play!

“Mary, it’s an omen. We’ll go.”

He had sent her away from Tite Street to stay in a quiet hotel.

“Clothes, Mary. But I’d like to be with you when you get them. I’ve a flair for clothes.”

So had she, and she knew how to carry them. June found her flowering into exquisitely simple frocks. Then, suddenly the two of them vanished from the world of the flesh and philosophy. They travelled by way of Flushing, Cologne, Nuremberg, Munich, leaving behind them two or three personal confessions. Euphemia, when she read her letter, let fall the characteristic “Coo,—well I never!” and then burst into tears. Euphemia was a warm-hearted and sentimental soul. “You won’t desert me, Phemie, will you? I want to go on being friends.” Mr. Smith, when the astonishing news was announced to him, had an attack of dignity. Was he to be expected to open doors for a fellow-servant, and adjust a rug over her knees? He did not hold with such social upheavals. Most certainly he would obtain another situation.

“Well, if you’re feeling like that, pudding-head,” said Euphemia: “don’t stay on and look ’aughty. After all, Mr. Karl wasn’t born in Buckingham Palace.”

Smith, having registered a personal protest, and listened to what Lavender had to say on the subject, proved that he carried something better than a pudding on his shoulders. And having accepted the new dispensation, he became one of its most solid supporters, even contriving to address Mrs. Kesteven as madam. In fact, in the not so far future Smith was to address her as “Your Ladyship.”

Nuremberg, that goblin city, with memories of the Meistersingers; Munich with

its island and the thunder of the river, and then, the mountains and Mary's Passion Play. They had strawberries and cream on the train from Munich to Oberammergau. As for the play, if it was more than a piece of beautiful symbolism, she could weep for the Christ with the Magdelene, and be blessed in her faith. It seemed so strange to sit with that silent crowd in a building that was like a railway terminus, and watch the background of soft, grey cloud become sunlight, mountains, sky. She was moved profoundly, as was her husband, by the parting at Bethany, the washing of feet, the agony in the garden, the disciples asleep.

"Could ye not watch with me one hour?"

The little black and yellow figure of Judas!

The descent from the Cross, the most beautiful picture of them all, the White Christ, blue robes, old Nicodemus's face, John's fair hair. Seven hours on a hard seat and a not too sympathetic cushion. Karl became a little bored with the chorus, the dramatist in him resenting its obstructing the inevitableness of the divine drama. A Church of England parson behind them would fidget and sniff. Karl could have slain the poor cleric. Then, the resurrection scene in the garden, the Magdelene's poignant cry—"Master."

Mary held her husband's hand.

Mountains, blue sky, green slopes, grasses thick with flowers. Early in the morning cowbells ringing and a herd of fawn-coloured cows passing their little caravanserai. An austere room, sunlight, other passion.

"O, Mary, how different! I wonder why?"

A moment of quick breathing while she lay with her arms around him.

"Don't you know—why?"

"Perhaps."

She was teaching him how one woman could be different from all those others, even in the pale intensity of her tenderness. Was she a prude? Hardly. She would love him with understanding, as his mother had loved him, and far more than he deserved.

Then, their home-coming, an evening late in June, Smith at Victoria with the Rolls, a Smith whose round face was correct, and yet friendly. Inside the Rolls a great bunch of red roses, Euphemia's inspiration.

"Glad to see you, sir. Glad to see you,—madam."

She looked at Smith with a sudden shine in her eyes, and somehow the man understood that look.

"Thank you, Tom."

He opened the door of the Rolls, and the lady-seat was hers.

At Burntshaw she left her husband and ran into the kitchen. Mrs. Lavender's sister had been persuaded to fill a gap, and was helping Smith with the hand-luggage. Euphemia and Mrs. Charles Kesteven rushed at each other and embraced.

"O, Phemie, you won't leave me? I won't make any difference. I shan't give you orders."

Euphemia blubbered, and patted Mary's back.

"There, there, dearie. Now, you've just got to be happy."

"I—am—happy," said Mary.

"Well,—I—do—know what both of you like to eat."

And then Mr. Kesteven appeared in the kitchen. He shook hands with Euphemia.

"How do you think Mary's looking?"

"A picture, sir."

"Like one of your special puddings, Euphemia."

"Better than—pudding, sir."

But, perhaps, Karl's most singular conversation was with his gardener. He did not see Lavender until the following morning. Lavender was cutting the grass.

"I suppose you are going to stay with us, Lavender?"

"I don't see any reason for going, sir."

Karl smiled at his gardener. Why embroider reality? The peasant mind comprehends the virtues of candour.

"I think I have done rather well for myself, Lavender."

"You might have done worse, sir."

Karl laughed.

"O, come—now——"

"Well, seeing how girls are these days, sir, I should say you couldn't have done better."

2

It was the première of Mary's first play.

The first act of "Paradise Row" had drawn only moderate applause, and as the lights went up Karl had slipped out of their box and gone in search of Sir Oscar. That this particular box was Kesteven's had been self-evident to the people who knew, and Mary had been conscious of curious glances and interested stares. Binoculars were turned on her.—"So, that's the parlourmaid!" But, in the nature of things Mary had nothing to be ashamed of. She was more than a pretty creature

exquisitely gowned; she could sit there and confront the world's curiosity, and let it play about her pale serenity.

Karl had found Sir Oscar in the wings, a Sir Oscar whose hair fitted him now like a white skull-cap; Karl was on edge, worried, watching the scene-shifters at work.

“A little bit thin, Oscar?”

Sir Oscar gave him a paternal look.

“Wind up?”

“Absolutely.”

“Good for you.—But don't worry.”

“You think?”

“If the second act does not get 'em, I'll have my head shaved.”

Karl gave a little, stilted laugh.

“I'm going back to my wife, Oscar.”

“Quite the best place for you, my child.”

The lights dimmed as Karl slipped into the box. He sat down beside his wife, and saw her eyes dimly shining.

“I'm in a devil of a funk, Mary.”

As if she did not know! As if she——! Yes, in spite of pale serenity and that perfect frock. His hand found a rest in her lap and held tight to her fingers. The curtain was up. He remembered the first night of “Golden Rain” when he had sat alone just like this with his mother.

Was he pleased with the second act? He had seen too much of the damned play. He was completely confused as to its values, though—during rehearsals he had thought the second act rather telling. What did the silence of the house hold for him? Yes, and for Mary? Unless the second act moved this sophisticated crowd——But were they all so sophisticated, and did it matter? He felt the pressure of his wife's fingers, and then a curious relaxation. Something had happened to Mary. Her eyes were wet.

Lights up. Applause, increasing applause. A flutter of clapping hands. Someone was waving a programme at him. Max Sartoris.

He was aware of his wife, sitting very still with a crumpled handkerchief in her hand. And then Sir Oscar came into the box, and with amused kindness observed the two of them.

“All right, Karl.”

“Think so, sir?”

“Well, yes, my lad. You've made your wife cry.”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Inconsistency in accents has been retained.

[The end of *Sackcloth into Silk* by Warwick Deeping]