SEVEN MEN CAME BACK

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By

WARWICK DEEPING

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SEVEN MEN CAME BACK

PRELUDE

PRIVATE KETTLE was laying the table. It was a very ordinary table in the room of a very ordinary French farmhouse, the floor of red tiles, the black stove just a black stove, the chairs plain and practical. Two family photographs hung on the wall, opposite the window, with a picture of the Bleeding Heart between them. One of the photographs had been smashed. It hung awry, and a piece of sacking applied to one of the lattices explained the disaster. At ten-fifty a.m. on that November morning, a German machine-gun, firing its last burst in the war, had put a stream of bullets through that farmhouse window.

Private Kettle, B Company officers' mess-orderly and cook, was alive to the significance of the situation. A lean, sallow, wiry-haired cockney with a long nose and a mordant mouth, he rubbed a knife on the sleeve of his brown cardigan and listened to the voices of the two Frenchwomen in the kitchen. Grandma and granddaughter were assisting in the preparation of that most dramatic of dinners. The granddaughter wore a black shawl, and was comely. Grandma was incontestably a hag, toothless, leathery and cynical. They chattered.

Kettle, laying the knife on the table, supposed in the deeps of his cheerful but sardonic soul that no strange occasion would silence a couple of women, and Frenchwomen at that. The outer night preserved the utter stillness of a misty, dead, November day, and Kettle, with his head on one side, seemed to savour that stillness. He went to the window, opened a lattice, thrust his head out, sniffed the air.

"Marvellous!"

Even to Kettle the stillness was tangible but incredible. He would have said that you could cut it with a knife, and that the night was like a black, moist cheese.

"Yus, marvellous!"

The farm was too small to house any number of men, and it had been assigned or been seized upon by the officers of B Co. The officers of B Co. were to dine *de luxe*. You could show a light and no one would take a pot-shot

at the window. Moreover, A and C Companies were responsible for a hypothetical front from which Jerry had retreated.

Kettle closed the window and burst into song. “I’m in love, I’m in love. You can tell by th’look in m’eyes.” Dinner was to be at 7.30, an affair of real plates and glasses loaned by grandma. Mr. Loviebond, the transport officer, was messing with Mr. Sherring’s crowd to-night, and if there was any wine to be scrounged in the village, Mr. Loviebond would produce it. Kettle picked up another knife and rubbed it on the sleeve of his cardigan. He stared at the picture of the Bleeding Heart, and being in every sense a modernist he could express surprise at the rummy placards they put up in this country.

“Oi, grandma, got those eggs for the omelette? Les oofs pour la omelette?”

Grandma had not. She brought to the communicating doorway a face that was like a creased and shrunken boot. She explained that all her hens had disappeared with the square-heads, but she was preparing some potage.

Kettle grinned at her. “Potage. Soup. Get a move on, old dear. Scootez vous. Got any vin rouge buried in the garden?”

“Pardon, monsieur?”

“Vin rouge. Jerry ‘ad it all, blast ‘im?”

He surveyed the table with its plates and cutlery. A clean sheet was serving as a cloth. Yes, it was to be some show, and Kettle, backing through the doorway into the kitchen, collided with the girl with the black shawl. Here was an opportunity that was not to be squandered.

“Pardon, mam’selle. Ain’t she sweet! Après la guerre finis.”

Grandma grinned at him sardonically.

“L’amour commence.”

“O, la-la! Got to take the bitter with the sweet. Right-o, grandma.”

His gallantry was not wholly successful, for the girl was holding fast to the soup tureen collected from the dresser, and it interposed itself between kisser and kissed. The piece of white china was as irresponsive as her pale face and her firm young bosom, and Kettle’s lean swarthiness was not her fancy. She shrugged him off. Her dark eyes were sullen.

Kettle, unabashed, supposed she was the haughty sort. It did not occur to him that she may have had a German lover. Also—that dinner was the serious business of the moment, and Kettle was very much responsible for it. The Q.M.S. department had sent up roast beef and one or two surprises, and Kettle

—with the aid of grandma—was preparing the unexpected, a jam roll. Welsh rarebit was to be served as a savoury. Kettle fancied himself as the producer of Welsh rarebit. Also, the beef was roasting in the kitchen stove; and the stove, like Mam'selle of the Black Shawl, was somewhat unsympathetic.

He got down to hard tacks.

" 'Ere, I say old dear, got any more charbon? This sanguinary stove ain't got the guts to finish off my roast beef proper. Charbon. What—finis? Gawd, then—wood, old dear, bois, even if we 'ave to break up the furniture."

Grandma produced some wood from an outhouse, and Kettle attended to the stove. He had become accustomed to producing hot meals under all sorts of conditions, and regarded as the workshop of the expert this French kitchen was by comparison equal to anything in Paris or London. Kettle's nose appraised the savoury smell.

"Bon, grandma; très bon."

The succulent roast would not be consumed solely by the officers. Kettle was proposing to enjoy in a corner of the kitchen what he described to grandma as "A damned good blow-art." Grandma understood. She showed her toothless gums to the Englishman. Age has its hungers and its passion for pickings, and grandma had known lean years.

Kettle had his head over his pots and pans when Captain Sherring came in out of the November darkness. Sherring's field-boots were muddy, and his trench-coat had been torn by barbed wire, and as Kettle turned to look at this beloved and familiar figure his lean face crinkled itself up into a smile.

"I've put your slacks out f'you, sir."

Sherring nodded at the Frenchwomen. He looked tired. He was carrying his box-respirator slung over his shoulder, and he unhitched it and passed it and his tin hat to the waiting Kettle. His steel helmet had left a faint red line on his forehead.

"We shan't want these damned things much longer, Kettle."

"Gawd's truth, sir."

"There will be six to dinner. Dr. Pitt is coming along from B.H.Q."

Captain Sherring went through into the inner room, and Kettle followed him.

" 'As Mr. Loviebond 'ad any luck with the liquor, sir?"

Captain Sherring was looking at the window with its patch of brown

sacking. He stood there as though listening for some familiar sound, and the night was soundless. His face was whimsical, sad, surprised.

“I don’t know, Kettle. It’s so strange.”

Kettle understood.

“Marvellous, ain’t it, sir?”

“This silence.”

“Might be the end of the world, sir.”

Their eyes met.

“It is the end of our world, Kettle.”

“There’s still ol’ Blighty, sir.”

Kettle saw Captain Sherring smile. It was not the sort of smile that you saw on the faces of other officers, but then, Captain Sherring was different from the other officers. To Kettle he was a bit unique, a queer, gentleman bloke who had curious quiet eyes and an almost gentle voice. Not one of your bucking, busy sort, but tough and quiet in a tight corner. A tall, thin, dark man who looked delicate and wasn’t, judging by the way he had stuck things. A bit mysterious to the Kettle mind, but none the less remarkable for that. Captain Sherring had a way of looking fixedly at a fellow and then saying something quite unexpected.

“It will be a different Blighty, Kettle, somehow.”

“Different, sir?”

“Not the place we went on leave to, but the place we’ve got to live in.”

Surprising but true! Kettle sniffed and looked thoughtful.

“That’s so, sir.”

Sherring went towards the door of the room that was to be his bedroom. Its colour was a utilitarian brown, and in Sherring’s experience all French doors were either brown or grey, but before entering the bedroom to pull off his field-boots and breeches and change into slacks he commented on the mess-orderly’s efforts.

“Real glass, Kettle, and a tablecloth! Good man.”

Kettle grinned with pleasure. Captain Sherring was that sort of gent. He always said something nice to you when something nice could be said.

“Speshul occasion, sir. Expect it will be a bit lively to-night.”

Sherring smiled at him and went into the bedroom.

“I expect so, Kettle.”

2

The mess-orderly, having brought his dinner to the parading point, hurriedly attended to his own person. The cook was to disappear in the waiter, and Kettle watered his hair and put on his tunic. It boasted two wound stripes, the battalion flash—a yellow diamond on one sleeve. Grandma was stirring the soup.

“You’re a ruddy ol’ witch, you are, muvver.”

The girl in the black shawl sat by the stove, farouche and silent, and taking no interest in the proceedings.

B Coy’s officers began to arrive: Lt. Crabtree and Sec.-Lt. Steel fresh from their billets; Crabtree, long, lean, red and very blue of eye—the countryman and farmer with big hands and bony wrists covered with brown hair; Mr. Steel, snub-nosed, round-faced and fair, with a cherub’s mouth capable of emitting the most mephitic language. Archie Steel was the mess’ barley-headed boy; Crabtree its philosopher.

Young Steel’s eyes were instantly on the girl.

“Bon soir, mam’selle.”

The girl looked at him, rose, and with an air of deliberate sulkiness, walked towards a door that opened on a staircase. Crabtree smiled, and clinched young Steel’s arm.

“Come along, my lad, keep off it.”

“Shut up, you old crabster. Mam’selle——”

The door opened and closed, and Kettle, buttoning up his tunic, looked sly.

“Nothin’ doin’, Mr. Steel. Prard and ‘aughty.”

“Personal experience, Kettle?”

“In a manner of speakin’, yus, sir.”

Crabtree and Steel found Sherring sitting by the stove.

“Hallo, Skipper, to-night’s the night, what!”

Sherring, with his hands spread as though giving the stove his benediction,

looked over his right shoulder at these two.

“I shan’t have to send you on any more dirty jobs, Archie. That’s one blessing.”

“You didn’t like it, Skipper?”

“What do you think, you babe? Crabbie, I suppose you’re dreaming of the farm?”

Crabtree, standing beside Sherring’s chair, had the air of a man who had escaped great perils and was glad.

“Yes—peace, Skipper. It’s pretty marvellous.”

Young Steel had a foot on a chair and was tightening the tape of a puttee.

“Marvellous! I should say so. What do you think Crabbie and I saw in the village?”

Sherring’s smile was whimsical.

“A woman.”

“O, better than that. The Old Man standing, all by himself in front of a crucifix with his tin hat off, saying prayers.”

“Why not, Archie?”

“O,—but hell, he’s——”

“Did he see you?”

“No; blind to the world, boozed on beatitudes.”

Sherring laughed and met Crabtree’s eyes.

“The infant doesn’t understand these things.”

Steel looked cheeky. “O, don’t I!—Kettle—I say, are you rising to this ruddy occasion?”

The black head of Kettle projected itself round the edge of the door.

“Sir?”

“What’s the menu? Tin hats on toast?”

“Soup, sir, roast beef and veg, jam roll.”

“Jam roll! Marvellous! I feel like a jam roll. What about drinks?”

Sherring tilted his chair.

“Lovie’s on the scrounge, Archie.”

“Good old Lovie! I’m going to get drunk, Skipper.”

“Oh, are you. Then Crabtree can spank you and put you to bed. Hallo, here’s the doc!”

Dr. Pitt, a short, stocky, sandy man with large front teeth, was being helped off with his British “warm” by Kettle. In the battalion, Captain Pitt, R.A.M.C., had the reputation of being something of a terror. No one had ever skrimshanked past the shrewd solidity of Dr. Pitt, but those of his intimates who knew him in expansive moments, had discovered that the doctor was ticklish. Young Steel and Crabtree mobbed him in the doorway.

“Hallo, doc. Quack, quack!”

They picked him up between them and carried him bodily to a chair, where Pitt, a very powerful man pulled young Steel across his knees.

“You’ve got a rowdy crowd, Sherring.”

“Spank him, doc.”

“I’m going to. Now, you young devil! Who’s ticklish; what?”

The face of grandma appeared in the doorway, a grotesque and grinning mask, but grandma was obstructing a person of peculiar importance. The voice of Kettle was heard.

“Clear the road, old dear. Mr. Loviebond, sir. The bar’s open!”

Steel was put back on his feet. Sherring, who had opened the flap of the stove and was staring at the fire, turned his face towards the doorway. It framed a “Young Master,” Lieut. Loviebond—the Battalion’s transport-officer and supreme knut, with his cap on the back of his head and his bosom full of bottles. A tall, dark, dandified young man with a little smudge of a moustache painted upon his upper lip, he possessed a sense of the dramatic. Mr. Loviebond had begun the war with a monocle, and was finishing it with bottles.

Steel, rather red in the face, yelped at him.

“Good old Lovie! I say, who’s been wrecking somebody’s cellar?”

Loviebond was feeling regal, the man of the moment.

“Not a word, young fellah. Kettle.”

“Sir.”

“Unload me, Kettle. My bosom aches.”

Kettle hurried to assist him.

“I wouldn’t ‘urt a ‘air of their pretty ‘eads, sir.”

Steel jazz-stepped.

“My God, fizz!”

“Fizz—one bottle, red wine—two bottles. Whisky——”

“Lovie, you’re a marvel! Better than your stuff, doc.”

“You wait till to-morrow, my child.”

Kettle, with the air of an auctioneer’s assistant displaying a special “lot,” placed the various bottles on the table.

“Dinner’s ready, sir. Are you waitin’ for Mr. Bastable?”

Steel’s combative round head went up.

“What!—We wait for that little blighter!”

Sherring admonished him.

“Quiet, Archie. Everything’s a wash-out on a night like this. You can serve dinner, Kettle.”

“Right, sir.”

“We don’t wait for Mr. Pork and Beans, Kettle.”

“Archie—shut up.”

“Sorry, Skipper. I shouldn’t be surprised if he doesn’t show his face. Bloody little funk.”

Kettle bustled round on his long, flat feet, shoving the chairs in their places. The mess seated itself, Sherring at the head of the table, Pitt on his right, Loviebond at the foot, Crabtree and Steel on Sherring’s left. Grandma’s boot-like face displayed itself in the doorway.

“Bon appetite, messieurs.”

Kettle laid a finger along his nose.

“She’s bin chasin’ me all rarnd the kitchen after some rum.”

Sherring bowed to the old lady.

“Merci, madame. Nous serions très gai ce soir. Give her some rum, Kettle.”

3

Kettle, with two very large thumbs in evidence, was placing soup plates in front of his officers when Second-Lieut. Bastable appeared in the doorway. He stood there hesitant, a sallow, swarthy, heavy young man not unlike the First Napoleon when the finer lines of his youth had been larded over. Steel, picking up a spoon glanced at Bastable over his shoulder, and Steel's eyes were not friendly.

"You're late, Pork and Beans."

The others ignored him, with the exception of Sherring who looked up not unkindly at this junior.

"Billets all right, Bastable?"

"Yes."

Before taking the vacant chair Bastable glanced in a peculiar way at the faces of these other men, and the look that he gave Steel was one of unblemished hatred. He sat down as though he was well aware of his superfluity. These other men did not welcome him. His massive face had a white stolidity, but its eyes were quick and intelligent. If he had suffered humiliation deservedly, the soul of him was turgid with defiance. The war had not taught him anything, and he had not permitted it to teach him anything. Embusque, and successfully so, for more than three years, he had been slung out to share in the last phase. A strong, selfish, forceful beast he had objected fiercely. He had not behaved too well. Out here in France he was—nothing.

The rest of the mess was finishing its soup, and Kettle, as disher-up and waiter had no time to bestow on an accessory like Mr. Bastable. Mr. Bastable would have to pick up the meal where he found it. Kettle was thrusting a plate full of spoons at grandma. "Wash 'em up, old dear. Lavez." But Bastable, conscious of having been accorded no soup plate and understanding the significance of the omission, was full of inward blazings.

"Kettle."

"Sir?"

"I want some soup."

Kettle had other responsibilities and a ready tongue.

"Sorry, sir, soup's horf."

His voice was politely casual, and Steel, enjoying the snub, grinned across the table at his *vis-à-vis*.

“Can’t hold up the transport, P. B.”

Bastable glared, swallowed, and crumbled bread with his thick fingers. Kettle, bringing in the roast beef, appealed to his great man for succour on this somewhat crowded occasion.

“Would you carve, sir?”

“Put it here, Kettle.”

“Thank yer, sir. I can go round with the veg.”

Loviebond had risen and was dealing with the champagne. He unwired the cork and was easing it when the thing blew out with a bang.

Steel pretended to take cover under the table.

“Christ—I thought the ruddy war was on again!”

Loviebond, attempting to block the bubbling fountain with a thumb, called for glasses.

“Glasses. She’s up.”

“She’ll soon be down, Lovie.”

Mr. Loviebond circled round the table pouring a little of the wine into each glass.

“Sorry I couldn’t get two bottles. We shall have to mix things rather badly, doc.”

Dr. Pitt held his glass to the light.

“No matter. Drink and forget.”

It was Steel who got on his feet, an ebullient, impulsive Steel.

“Gentlemen, being the youngest member of the mess, excluding our friend Napoleon here—I’ll give you the toast of the whitest man on earth, Captain Sherring, M.C. with Bar. Here’s to you, Skipper.”

They rose, and with glasses raised, looked towards Sherring. Bastable stood with the others, though he had been the last to rise.

“To you, Sherring.”

“Skipper.”

Sherring, looking up at them whimsically and a little sadly, had the air of a man who was shy in the face of favours.

“Thanks—everybody. We’ve been a happy crowd. And now this bloody old business is over—I wonder what Blighty is going to do for us?”

Steel laughed.

“Aren’t we the heroes?”

Crabtree, staring at the wine in his glass, spoke like the cautious rustic.

“Till the bills begin to come in.”

They were still on their feet, and it was Steel who discovered that Bastable was back in his chair, and munching meat; to Steel, Bastable was a perpetual offence.

“Hallo, B. P., who gave you permission to sit?”

Bastable’s upward look was a sulky glare.

“Not you, Steel.”

“Not bloody likely. When your seniors are on their feet.”

Bastable’s sallow face seemed to swell. The turgid arrogance of the man concealed for so long under that thick skin, showed a sudden, savage ooze.

“Indeed!—Seniors?—All that superstition was washed out at 11 a.m. I’m not taking orders from any bank clerk.”

Steel’s hackles were up.

“Oh, aren’t you? Then, you’ll take something else.”

The voice of Sherring interposed, quiet but insistent.

“Archie, please.”

“Sorry, Skipper. I’ll turn on the cold douche.”

They were back in their chairs and busy again with knives and forks, but Sherring sat with his hands on the table. He had something to say to that sallow junior.

“Bastable.”

Bastable’s glance was oblique, ugly.

“Yes.”

“The shells may have ceased, but we haven’t been given permission to do

or say just what we please.”

“O, quite, Sherring. You have three pips to my one.”

Pitt turned on him, and Pitt could be devastating.

“There’s a very good reason for that, my friend.”

Bastable swallowed hard.

“Oh, is there. But when we have done playing with crowns and stars, you’ll be back among the bottles, doctor, and Sherring——”

There was silence, and Sherring with his little, quiet smile, looked almost sadly at the objector.

“Bastable, just one moment—the superstition may last for a little while yet. You will continue to call me ‘sir.’ You will not address me as Sherring.”

Bastable nodded his head.

“O, quite so, sir,” and his tone was ironic.

Pitt, looking at him askance and with naked scorn, allowed himself to utter words that were unforgettable.

“No more palpitation, Bastable, now that the shelling is over.”

Bastable turned his head, looked into the other man’s eyes, half rose from his chair, sat down again.

“I’ll remember that, Pitt.”

“Captain Pitt.”

“Captain Pitt.”

“That’s right. Now, you can get on with your dinner.”

4

Reaction. Matters became merrier. Red wine had replaced the champagne, wine that had been buried in a garden for four years, and with it other disharmonies were laid to rest. Crabtree and Pitt begun an argument upon the possibilities of the world after the war. Crabtree talked “Back to the Land” philosophy, but the doctor would have none of it.

“Doesn’t it occur to you, Crabbie, that thousands upon thousands of men have had their souls so stuffed with soil, mud and misery, that they will all hunger for pavements and shop-windows.”

Crabtree would not argue.

“I am going back, doc. I—am—the soil.”

Steel leaned towards him.

“Good old Adam. I suppose that in a few weeks I shall be shovelling sovereigns and silver.”

“Not sovereigns, my dear” said Loviebond the stockbroker. “The gold quid has passed away with the world’s virtue.”

“If you get any good tips, Lovie, pass them on.”

“I have more respect for you, doc, than to do that. Take my tip and take no tips. The financial sea will be stiff with sharks.”

“I say, Lovie, that’s not business.”

“No, my lad, it’s the truth. Are you going to tell the truth, doc, to your patients?”

Pitt pulled a face.

“And lose my practice! I suppose we shall all put on the old blinkers, and fake our figures. What’s going to be your fancy, Skipper?”

Sherring looked meditative.

“That’s on the knees of the gods.”

Kettle was seizing plates and thrusting them at a grandma over whose forehead a wisp of grey hair had draped itself. Bastable was still eating; and Kettle, with a disgusted glance over Bastable’s shoulder, dashed flat-footed to the kitchen. He could be heard grumbling and apostrophizing grandma.

“Some blokes must keep their trotters in the trough. Hi, old dear, clean plates.”

“Comment?”

“Plates, assiets, ain’t yer washed ’em yet? Scootez vous.”

Sherring smiled. It occurred to him that he would miss Kettle in the life that was to be, and all the elemental robust realities of men and their affairs. Loviebond and Pitt were still arguing upon the hypothetical aspects of post-war morality, and Bastable, sitting like an overfed Napoleon, listened with an air of sallow smugness and avoided Steel’s eyes. Kettle dashed in and distributed plates and spoons, and reverting to the kitchen, returned proudly with the jam roll.

Steel drummed on the table with his spoon.

“Yoicks! Jam roll!”

“Will you serve it, sir?”

“Put it here, Kettle.”

The rare and delicious object was placed before Sherring. He cut it into sections, everybody leaning forward, save Bastable who helped himself to red wine.

Steel exulted—“Raspberry jam!”

“She simply oozes jam.”

“Congratulations, Kettle.”

Kettle looked hot and proud.

“I wouldn’t mind makin’ a puddin’ every year, gents, just to keep B Mess alive—so to speak.”

Crabtree looked at Sherring.

“Kettle’s forestalled me. We ought to do this every year, Skipper.”

Steel’s mouth was full of roll.

“Scrumptious! Great idea, Crabbie. Why not?”

“What do you say, doc? Would you join us?”

“I should say so.”

“Serious proposition. Private room in a London hotel. Celebrations. Yearly reunion—what!”

“How does it strike you, Sherring?”

Sherring appeared to reflect for a moment, for this proposition assumed that the future would possess certain qualities that were calculable, and to Sherring the future was far from calculable.

“The idea is that we should all meet every year on the night of November 11th?”

“There’s a sort of inevitableness about it, Skipper.”

Kettle was standing at the foot of the table behind Mr. Loviebond’s chair, watching Sherring’s face; and Sherring, in the act of speaking, met Kettle’s eyes.

“I agree; one might almost call it a sacrament. I propose that Loviebond acts as our secretary. I should like everybody who is here to-night to turn up. Kettle, you’ll come.”

“Me—sir? To wait on you?”

“No, no; to dine with us, Kettle.”

“Good business, good old Kettle.”

Kettle looked hot and gratified.

“It’s very kind of you gents. I will say I couldn’t ‘ave ‘ad a nicer lot o’ gents to do for——”

He became suddenly speechless, staring at Sherring.

“Well, that settles it, Kettle. You’ll come. And Bastable too. What about you, Bastable?”

Bastable had his glass at his lips. He was slightly flushed. He gave Sherring a look, the inwardness of which was veiled.

“Yes—I shall come.”

It was Pitt, who, after glancing round the room as though he were counting heads, drew the attention of the party to a mystic coincidence.

“The Symbolic Seven! Has anyone realized that we shall dine under the mystic sign of seven?”

Crabtree smiled—“We are seven.”

“Let’s call it the ‘We are Seven Club.’ ”

“An inspiration, my lad. Then I take it we elect Captain Sherring as our president, and Mr. Loviebond as our honorary secretary?”

Loviebond rose to the occasion.

“Gentlemen, the We are Seven Club. We will pledge ourselves to meet every year in London on Armistice Night. Fill us up, Kettle.”

They rose. Kettle went round with the second bottle of red wine, a pontifical Kettle. Sherring raised his glass.

“Gentlemen, the We are Seven Club. Every year on the night of November 11th we meet and dine.”

“The Seven Club.”

Kettle, having found a glass for himself, dribbled the lees of the bottle into

it and drank.

“Gents, I’m a prard bloke to-night.”

“Good old Kettle.”

Bastable was lighting a cigarette. He spoke, “I’m the junior member, but if I may say so, we may expect to see some interesting changes in the future.”

Steel grinned at him.

“P. B. in a white waistcoat, what!”

Bastable was laconic.

“Oh, something more significant than that, Steel.”

5

The party was breaking up. Sherring, standing with his back to the stove, watched Crabtree and Loviebond dealing with a fuddled and garrulous Steel. Kettle was helping Captain Pitt on with his British “warm.” Bastable, smoking a cigarette in the doorway, looked with contempt at the drunken Steel; and Sherring, observing that look of scorn, was challenged by it.

“Mr. Bastable.”

“Sir.”

“I shall inspect your platoon at nine to-morrow. Good night.”

Bastable was no fool. The implication of the order was obvious to him. He was reproved and dismissed because he had looked with amused contempt at that rowdy young ass—Steel. A little sallow smile seemed to trickle from his mouth.

“Very good, sir. Good night.”

He went out, leaving with Sherring the flavour of faint irony. Steel was in a quarrelsome mood, and struggling with Crabtree and Loviebond.

“Where’s that little blighter, P. B.?”

Sherring spoke to him quietly.

“Archie, don’t spoil a happy evening, there’s a good chap.”

Steel, even when drunk, could never resist Sherring.

“Sorry, Skipper. Quite all right. I’ll—go—t’bed. Come on—Crabbie.”

Captain Pitt, with an amused and tolerant glance, and a wink at Sherring, followed them out.

“Good night, old man.”

“Good night, doc.”

Their voices died away in the deep silence, for grandma, having been given her tot of rum, had groped her way mumbling beatific nothings to bed. Kettle was in the kitchen, and Sherring sat down by the stove, and opening the flap, saw that the fire had gone out.

Kettle came in from the kitchen, and smothering a tremendous yawn, looked lovingly at Sherring.

“Some show, sir.”

Sherring glanced over his shoulder.

“That you, Kettle. I thought you had gone to bed. Yes, you gave us a great show.”

Kettle began to collect glasses.

“Thank you, sir. Were you gents in earnest about my bein’ a member?”

“Of course, Kettle.”

“Well, I’m prard, sir. Me in civies sittin’ down to grub with the likes of you.”

Sherring turned in his chair. His face was both smiling and serious.

“Kettle—what are you in civil life?”

“Me, sir?”

“Yes.”

Kettle looked embarrassed, his hands full of glasses.

“ ‘Ficially—I’m an ‘awker, sir.”

“You go round with a barrow.”

“Yus, sir.”

“So, you’ve got a job to go back to.”

“Lots of jobs, sir.”

“Well, you are better off than I am. I was never much good at keeping a job. Rolling stone, Kettle. Couldn’t stand dull things—routine. I never found

anything to suit me till the war came.”

“You put up a pretty good show at that, sir.”

Kettle drew closer, glancing at the doorway. His voice was husky and a little mysterious.

“I’d like to tell you, sir, what I am—reely—at ‘ome. Well, you see—out ‘ere—things ‘ave been different. It didn’t matter a tuppenny damn what y’d been in Blighty.”

“That’s so, Kettle. The only thing that has mattered out here has been—guts.”

“Pardon me, a bit more than that, sir. When a bloke’s lived with a gentleman like you——”

“Don’t make a song about me, Kettle.”

“I can’t ‘elp m’feelin’s, sir. You’ve treated me white.”

“Same to you, Kettle. But what is your real job at home?”

“ ‘Ouse breakin’, sir.”

“A burglar?”

“That’s it. So now, you know. I’ve always wanted to tell you, sir. Not that it’s of any himportance to you, sir.”

“I don’t know about that, Kettle.”

Sherring rose, and going to the window, stood staring at the piece of sacking.

“Machine-gun bullets. It only happened this morning, and yet it seems years and years ago.”

He opened the window and leaned out.

“No Very lights, no machine-guns. Just silence, just nothing. Ever been in the country before dawn, Kettle?”

Kettle was watching him intently.

“Yus, sir, professionally—so to speak.”

Sherring closed the window, and turned and smiled at him.

“Of course. I understand. While people are asleep, and the garden is all grey with dew. I suppose, Kettle, you’ll go back to that.”

“I might, and I might not, sir. Yer see, I got married just afore I joined up. Two kids now. Makes a bloke fink, sir. If I got put away—— Besides, me and the missus ‘ave a little money put by, and I might join what you’d call the respectable classes.”

“Yes, respectability, Kettle!”

“But fur the sake of argiment, sir, supposin’ I went back to the old job and you met me in Oxford Street, would you give me the go-by?”

Sherring smiled at him and returned to his chair by the stove.

“Hardly. You see, Kettle, I have a feeling that all the things that happened before the war and all the things that are going to happen after it—somehow don’t matter. Four bloody years. We’ve been real. We haven’t had to lie to live. And the only thing that mattered was whether a fellow was white or yellow.”

“I see what you mean, sir. So—I’d always be Kettle to you.”

“Exactly.”

Kettle looked at him lovingly.

“And you’ll always be Captain Sherring M.C. to me, sir, a gent as ‘as showed me things.”

The stove was still warm though the fire was dead in it, and Sherring spread his hands to it.

“Well, we will always think of each other, Kettle, as we are to-night—and not as what we may be. What do the gods care? We may find Mr. Bastable a boss in the post-war show.”

Kettle was contemptuous.

“ ‘Im, sir!”

“Yes.”

Sherring yawned and spread his arms.

“I think I’ll turn in, Kettle.”

“I’ve put a ‘ot bottle in your bed, sir.”

“A hot bottle!”

“Yus, grandma ‘ad one of them there stone things, and I pinched it.”

“A hot bottle! That means peace—peace, prosperity and all the virtues.

Peace?”

He rose and went slowly towards the bedroom door.

“Good night, Kettle.”

“Good night, sir.”

PART I

I

A LITTLE GOTHIC figure like some bronze out of a saga swinging a hammer amid a shower of autumn leaves. The hammer was a wooden mawl, and that which was smitten a sweet chestnut post. Crabtree was putting up wire along the southern edge of Darrel's Wood.

The day was very still, and yet there seemed sufficient wind to bring down the beech leaves. They lay under and about his feet with the dry mast of the beech trees and the yellow fronds of the fern. In May there were bluebells here in azure sheets, and on this November day the little valley that fell away from the high wood had a distant tinge of vapoury blueness. The chimneys and roofs of Darrel's Farm and its byres, barn and outhouses lay half-way down the valley. There was a length of black, close-boarded fence, a thorn hedge with a white gate in it, an orchard. South of the farmstead a very green field contrasted with the pale shimmer of a larch-wood.

Crabtree put down the mawl, and going to the pile of posts, chose one, and turning it on end, bent to sharpen it with a billhook. The white flakes fell away from the steel edge. He set the bill on an old tree stump that he was using as a block and straightened himself. He looked into the deeps of the wood, and that which was mysterious and beautiful in it was reflected in his eyes.

He thought—"I'm losing my flabbiness. The old cunning has come back. It's marvellous—that bracken."

Pacing off the distance he tossed the heavy post from his shoulder, kicked a mark with his heel, went for the crowbar that he had left lying among the leaves, and returned to the spot where the post was to stand. With three or four plunges of the bar he made a socket in the soil to receive the pointed end of the post. He paused and stood at gaze.

He was looking towards the white gate in the thorn hedge.

It was November 11th, 1919.

He saw the white gate swing open. His sister was standing there. She had an old Sussex sheep's bell in one hand and a handkerchief in the other. Crabtree's wrist-watch had failed him that morning.

He heard the ringing of the bell, and saw her wave. She had promised to come and give him this signal. She was not a woman who forgot or who failed.

It was one minute to eleven on Armistice Day.

Crabtree walked out from under the splendour of the beech boughs with the crowbar in his hand. He shouted.

“All right, Una. Thanks.”

He stood there where the grass met the wood, the crowbar over his shoulder. There seemed to be no movement anywhere save the flutter of the falling leaves. He could see his sister’s figure at the gate, her yellow knitted coat and black skirt. She seemed to be looking towards him and the domed splendour of the wood.

Two minutes’ silence. Crabtree made it more than two minutes. He was thinking of names, faces, the names and faces of men. He saw sandbags, yellow mud in a trench, shell craters. Now—stillness, peace! Behind him those towering trees.

His lips moved.

“Thank God.”

He came out of a kind of dream. His sister was waving. He heard her voice in the November stillness.

“Elevens, Dave.”

He planted the crowbar in the ground, went for his coat that hung over a bough, and walked long-legged down the meadow to the farm. He was wearing out a pair of army breeches and puttees that were beginning to fray, and as he went down the field he thought—“I shall see all those chaps to-night—Sherring, Archie, the Doc.—Damned good.”

Una Crabtree waited at the gate. She was like her brother, but that which was virile and convincing in him became in the sister a pathetic plainness. She was one of those women with no definite colour, save in her eyes. Her hair was brownish and without lustre, her hands large and red, her shoulders too angular, her neck too long. There was about her an air of vague and honest awkwardness both in posture and in movement. She held herself rather like a man. She was freckled. Her only beauty lived in her eyes.

Within her—it was otherwise. She waited at the gate for her brother. She had shared the two minutes’ silence with him even as she shared the life of the farm, and to Una her brother was a creature of infinite simplicity. He had all the patience of the man who lives with the soil and loves it. His serenity in the face of life’s exasperations had often filled her with wonder. Like a tree he accepted the seasons. To Una, who was so much more subtle and restless than

he was, his simplicity could be as consoling as music. Also, there was about him a quaint and admirable austerity that smiled gently at provocation, yet never stooped to meanness. She had come to understand just why he was so successful in his handling of men and beasts and that new servant of the soil—the machine.

A brick-paved path led from the white gate to the porch of “Darrels,” a home-made porch built of Scotch fir and roofed with weatherboard. To Una this path was so like her brother in its directness and its weathered colouring. She paused half-way up the path to pull a chrysanthemum that had survived the frost. Her brother, behind her, pausing when she paused, reached over to touch the branch of an apple tree.

“I’ll winter wash these if I get time.”

She could have told him that half these old trees were grey lichened pensioners, and should be cut down, but he knew that as well as she did. He rather liked the tangle of these old trees, and their spreading, unpruned shadows. She liked him for liking such things.

“Have you dug me out a boiled shirt, Una?”

Yes, she had. It was a pre-war shirt and rather old-fashioned, and in those respects would keep his dinner-jacket in countenance.

“You’ve only got black boots—your Sunday boots.”

He said it wouldn’t matter. One did not worry about such trifles when you went up to dine with a lot of fellows who had been lousy with you, and who had laughed with you, and felt windy with you. Had her brother felt windy? She couldn’t quite believe it. She led the way into the sitting-room, where a log fire was burning in the open brick hearth, and his glass of hot milk and a slice of cake waited on the table. In the window stood his bureau, meticulously neat, as neat as his barn and his tool-house. He kept his letters and bills and catalogues in three shallow deal trays. The desk was as much his as her bookcase was hers. He read very little; she read everything that she could come by. He would have said perhaps, had he said such things, that he preferred living to reading. He was a man of his hands.

He sat down in front of the fire, glass in one hand, slice of cake in the other.

“I shall catch the 5.37 from Midworth.”

She stood at the window.

“I suppose they will all be there?”

He was certain of it.

“All those who matter. I wonder what old Sherring has been doing.”

“You’ll have so much to talk about.”

“Oh, rather.”

She turned and looked at him over her shoulder. She had been a V.A.D. nurse during the war at a base hospital, and she had come back to this quiet corner of the world where Sussex meets Surrey, and where so little that the modern world craves for ever happened. Only natural things happened. Its rhythm was like that of deep and quiet breathing.

Did he ever suspect her of restlessness? Did he guess how she had had to fight herself, clench the fists of her soul? She was a plain woman with a capacity for profound passion, and all such elemental things had passed her by.

“I wonder whether you will find them—just the same?”

He munched cake.

“What, the old crowd?”

“Yes.”

“Well, they’ll be in dinner-jackets.”

She laughed softly and gently at him, and bitterly at herself.

“Just that.”

He had finished his milk and the cake, and he got up and took a pipe and a tobacco tin from the high, black mantel-shelf.

“Does anyone change much, Unie?”

“Not you.”

“Oh, I’m a bit of a clod, I know.”

She was thinking that both to change and not to change might be tragic. To feel the cold, sweet anguish of the spring in winter! She looked at her bookcase and frowned.

Her brother could go back to his work in the wood.

2

Dr. Pitt, his fingers on the lady’s wrist allowed his attention to pass from

the minute to the hour hand of his watch. Three minutes to eleven in a St. John's Wood bedroom. A perfectly normal pulse, and so far as his patient, Mrs. Silver was concerned—a perfectly normal fug. Pitt would have written the prescription as follows: "Recipe.—One huge coal fire, Fleur de Trefle, face powder, cigarette smoke. Mix. To be taken daily with little drinks—Dubaret, gin and bitters, whisky flam—ad infinitum." Mrs. Silver's hand flopped gracefully and languidly over the edge of the pink quilt. She was as plump and black-eyed and sleek as the most desired of any oriental harem beauty.

"I get such awful heads, doctor."

"Quite."

"I'm at my worst in the morning. I don't want to get up."

"Let's see your tongue."

Its pinkness was but faintly furred. Dr. Pitt left his chair beside the bed, and walked across the Chinese carpet to the window. He stood there, looking out at the bare branches of two plane trees and the grey fronts of the houses across the way. Boom! The maroons!

"Doctor, you're not going to tell me——"

His voice was curt.

"Eleven o'clock. Armistice Day. Excuse me."

But how absurd! Should celebrations be allowed to intervene between doctor and patient? Mrs. Silver had experimented with doctors in sequence. She was rich, and in a sense—famous. She sometimes appeared at charity matinées. Her taste in doctors rather resembled her taste in wine. She liked her vintage to be rich and fruity.

She examined the finger-nails of her right hand. She was aware of Dr. Pitt's uncompromising back. She decided that he would soon be bald. He had that sort of head. Two minutes' silence. She would get up presently and go down to Ravel's and try on some new frocks.

Meanwhile, to Dr. Pitt the grey faces of the houses opposite had become a clay bank, part of a sunken road. There was a roofing of some grey substance. Twilight, deep gloom under that improvised shelter, and protruding from the dimness a row of feet and of legs, mud-stained boots with the toes everted, dirty puttees. The feet and legs of dead men.

Boom!

The silence was broken. He seemed to extract himself from the deeps of it

as he had pulled field-boots out of glutinous, tragic mud. He moved.

“Doctor, I’m always getting palpitation.”

He went and stood at the foot of the bed. His face had the whimsical bleakness of some other memorable and macabre occasion. For the moment he was the battalion M.O.—yes, wilfully so.

“What you want is exercise.”

She stared at him.

“Yes—exercise, dear lady, work. You’re living a perfectly rotten life. Cut your cigarettes to ten a day. Drop all your little drinks.”

Her shocked and offended face delighted him.

“Doctor—really!”

“You pay me to tell you the truth, I suppose.”

“I’ve never been so—— Rotten—did you say?”

He nodded. He was not dreaming. He had uttered those words. She wanted spanking. And he, in a moment of fierce and mischievous candour was allowing himself the liberty of saying just what he wished to say.

“You don’t like my medicine?”

She sat up suddenly in bed. He expected an explosion. Instead of that she smiled at him.

“You are—a truculent fellow! Must I—really—be good?”

He returned her smile. He had brandished a brick, and she seemed to like it. How unexpected!

“If you want me to look after you—you—must—do-what—I tell you.”

She lay back on the pillows. She looked at him as she might have looked at a Paris model or a puppy while exclaiming—“How perfectly sweet!” Seductive severity! Ravishing rudeness! Something bitter and fresh to the palate. No other medical man had ever dared——

She smiled at him.

“Really—you are rather a lamb. I’ll be good.”

He gave her another flip.

“You’d better. Remember the wolf in Red Riding Hood.”

“But it was the grandmother who——”

“You’re not a grandmother, dear lady. Get up and go for a walk.”

3

Eleven o’clock had surprised people in all sorts of situations and held them posed rather like figures in a waxwork show. Mr. Archibald Steel, serving behind the counter of Narbiton’s branch of the Midland Bank, was busy with one of those little copper scoops that remind one of the shovel attached to a Victorian coal-box. A young person had come in through the swing-doors with a bag. She had deposited on the counter a wad of cheques, a packet of notes, a canvas bag full of silver and another canvas bag full of coppers. She was a rather attractive young person, black and buxom and gaillard, and Mr. Steel, in checking the money, had slipped into inaccuracies.

He had consulted the paying-in slip.

“Your silver’s wrong.”

“I’m quite sure it isn’t.”

As an expert in the handling of cash Mr. Steel should not have faltered. He had recounted the silver and found that Miss Black and White had been both accurate and confusing. He had apologized.

“Sorry.”

And she had smiled upon him.

Mr. Steel was in the act of scooping up that silver when the local fire-syren warned Narbiton as to the hour. Archie Steel stood to attention. He held the scoop—shovel end upwards—rather like a regal sceptre. The young person stood opposite him with her hands on the counter.

Archie’s blue eyes met the brown eyes of the girl. In spite of, or perhaps—because of the solemnity of the occasion, there was a gladness in them. She wanted to giggle. She was minx enough to know that she had disturbed the cashier in his calculations, and that she was disturbing him as he stood at attention grasping that absurd copper shovel. Archie was disturbed so easily, in spite of that new little villa—“Clovelly” in Radnor Road. He had come back to Blighty to serve decorously behind a mahogany counter, a married man with responsibilities.

There were days when he felt far from responsible.

There were moments when he wanted to cheek the dry and bespectacled manager of the local branch.

There were days when he was tempted to grab a wad of notes, leap over the counter and rush out upon adventure.

Six months of married life, a chocolate-box affair that was emptying itself of chocolates, the romance quite stale, supper a meal of pressed beef and pickles. One small maid, and a wife who loathed cooking. Girls! Archie had never been anything but susceptible.

This young wench on the other side of the counter! She had a skin like cream, a broad nose, a big and inviting mouth, bold eyes. She disturbed him. He would like to have had her with him on the river in a punt, both of them on cushions. Something soft and solid to clasp.

O, damn!

Well—they would have a ruddy beano to-night. He would see old Sherring, and Crabbie, and the Doc. Yes, and old Kettle of B Company Mess. He would get merry, but not too merry.

Irene had been rather peevish about the show. Suspicious, yes, that was the word. Irene was becoming uncomfortably possessive. She catechized him. “Where have you been. Where are you going?” She was a regular little colonel.

He was staring at the opposite wall. People were coming into the bank. The young person giggled.

“I’ll have my canvas bags, please.”

So, the silence was over. Canvas bags! Surely those exciting members of hers were not sheathed in canvas?

He passed her the bags, and she glimmered her eyes at him and departed.

Two elderly women took her place. This was reality. A hand in a black glove pushed a cheque at him.

“I want one pound note, two ten-shilling notes, ten shillings in silver, a shillingsworth of coppers.”

Archie Steel’s eyes stared.

“I beg your pardon, do you mind saying it again.”

The old lady said it again and with severity.

4

In the Essex Road, not far from the Islington Free Library, a man in white overalls mounted on a ladder was painting a name upon a fascia board.

“Tom Kettle—Greengrocer.”

The letters were in white upon a green ground. Meanwhile, the shop itself was very much in action, and exposing to the public view piles of cabbages, brussels sprouts, cauliflowers, and potatoes, boxes of oranges and apples, ropes of bananas, pomegranates, squdgy cubes of dates. Mr. Kettle, wearing a bowler hat on the back of his head, a brown cardigan and black trousers, was offering a cabbage to a lady in an ulster.

“ ‘Eart, mum? It’s all ‘eart. Feel it.”

A voice from above, the voice of the man in the white overalls, warned those below.

“There go the maroons, mate.”

Mr. Kettle, caught in the act of proffering the cabbage to the lady, withdrew it so that the green growth had the appearance of an excrescence protruding from his rather hollow tummy. Kettle remembered to remove his bowler hat. Up above, the painter leaned motionless against his ladder. The lady in the ulster, self-consciously conventional and fighting a cold in her head, sniffed audibly. Her string bag, loaded with a pound of tea, a wedge of cheese, and something wrapped in a piece of newspaper, swayed very gently.

A tram had stopped ten yards away. The people on the top were standing. The sniffings of his customer aroused in Kettle’s long nose sympathetic emotion. No doubt, the lady was a widow, and had reason to regret the Flanders mud. Or had it been a cause for rejoicing?

Most strange silence, the life of that shabby, palpitating street suddenly congealed. It was past. The tram moved on; the painter dipped his brush in the pot; the woman in the ulster gave one final sniff. The sympathetic Kettle once more proffered the cabbage.

“I’ll make yer a present of it, mum. It’s the only cabbidge in my shop that’s taken its ‘at orf.”

“You’re a gen’leman,” said the lady.

“Good for custom—what! Always at your service. I take it you lost somebody over there.”

“My ol’ man. ‘e was in a Labour Company.”

“Ah—I thought you was a bit upset.”

“Me?—I’ve got a cold in m’ead, that’s all.”

And the cabbage went into the string bag.

She departed, and up above someone chuckled.

“Wasted your sympathy, mate, what!”

Mr. Kettle pressed his bowler hat on the back of his head.

“Well, if ‘er ol’ man’s twanging an ‘arp somewhere—‘e ain’t to be pitied.”

Yet another voice hailed Tom Kettle, the cheerful, pragmatical voice of his wife speaking from the doorway of the little room at the back of the shop.

“Tom.”

“ ‘Allo.”

“Come here.”

“ ‘Alf a mo. Lady waitin’—Three bananas, miss. Best bananas in Blighty. Anyfink else? Good morning, miss.”

Mr. Kettle went to the back of the shop and Sarah his wife asked him a question.

“You haven’t got a pair of black boots fit to be seen.”

“I’ve got a pair of brarn ones.”

“You can’t go and dine with gentlemen in brown boots.”

“Why not? It ain’t a crime.”

“Corse you can’t go in brown boots and black trousers. Go and buy yourself a pair of black boots. I’ll mind the shop.”

“O, you’re a bloomin’ oracle, muvver, yer are. Where did yer learn the business?”

“Wasn’t I in service up at Highbury Terrace?”

“ ‘Igh life, what!”

But he went and bought the boots.

Mr. Loviebond, of Hurst, Loviebond & Loviebond, thrusting into the turmoil of the “House” on urgent business, met one of the firm’s authorized clerks retreating from the purlieus of the Rubber Market. The clerk had been dispatched to spy out the land, for business was both active and jumpy.

“Got a price, Smith?”

“Buzzing about like mosquitoes, sir.”

“Yes; but what’s the market for Mindovas?”

“They are quoting seven-nine at the moment, sir.”

Loviebond strolled on. Already he was noted for his air of dignified languor, and an attitude of sententious self-importance. He was very much the son of his father, capable of confronting friendly chaff, and of carefully concealing his intentions. The jobbers were familiar with the little bored smile of the Loviebond firm. It was as perfectly tailored as their persons, and might have been decorated with a monocle.

Loviebond sparred with three jobbers before he extracted a price that should please a very important client.

“Right, five thousand Mindovas, $1^{15}/_{32}$ to 1½. Chalk it up.”

Loviebond went on to do a little business in the Kaffir Market, and having accomplished it to his satisfaction, he had reached Drapers Gardens when the Silence fell. He stood there very correctly, hands pressed to the seams of his trousers, his chin well up. Two clerks stood close to him. A red-nosed commissionaire had been caught in the act of blowing that particular organ. He had crumpled up the cambric in a big fist and remained rigid.

The Silence passed, and the motionless figures came to life. Loviebond entered a doorway. The firm’s offices were on the ground floor, and pushing through the swing doors, he passed through a room crowded with clerks into his private office. He sat down at the desk and, picking up the telephone receiver, rang up the Hallam Hotel.

“Hallo, that the Hallam? Mr. Loviebond speaking. I want the manager or the head-waiter.”

There was a pause.

“Hallo, is that the head-waiter? Good. Mr. Loviebond speaking. Everything O.K. for to-night? Yes. Seven. I said seven. Got those oysters? Right, I shall be along about seven-fifteen. Yes, four bottles of champagne. Right.”

He smiled a little crisp smile and asked the exchange to put him on to

another number. There was some delay, but presently a voice challenged him.

“Who’s that speaking?”

“Hallo, is it you, Bernard? Yes. I got the Mindovas all right. Yes, managed to cut it close, fifteen thirty-two to a half. Satisfied?—Splendid. You’re coming to-night. What—busy—— I—know—you are. But you’re coming? Great. So long, old man. Yes, the Hallam’s not quite your beat, but they’ll give us a good dinner. Yes, one had to keep the price down for some of the others. Finding their financial level, what! Right ho. See you to-night.”

6

Mr. Bernard Bastable, of Affleck, Jeans & Bastable, Challis House, E.C.2, rang for his secretary.

“I want that Universal Match prospectus, James. I told you to put it on my desk.”

Mr. James was elderly and grey and full of the propitiatory politeness of an employee who feels himself shivering on the edge of forcible retirement. He glanced nervously at Mr. Bastable, the firm’s potential Corsican. Circumstances had yet to prove whether young Bastable was a bandit or a great man, but to Mr. James he was Minos.

“I thought I put it there, sir, in the tray.”

“It isn’t there.”

Mr. James legged it into an outer room rather like an elderly and ragged rooster alarmed by some strange pother in the farmyard. He returned with a white paper in his hands.

“I’m extremely sorry, sir, I had put it aside—ready for you.”

Bastable was laconic.

“All right. I don’t want to be disturbed for twenty minutes.”

The secretary had retrieved his own narrow niche in the scheme of things when the Silence fell. He sat very still. He was conscious of his heart beating hard and fast, his own particular alarm signal. He was sixty-one and married, and with three children still to be placed in the world, and his accumulated capital amounted to £735 10s. 0d.

He sat and reflected.

“I was too old for the war. I’m getting too old for this job. Youth—bustle!

Mr. Jeans didn't put me out of my stride—but this—youngster! A holy terror. He gives me indigestion."

Bastable, sitting well back in his padded chair, was scanning the prospectus. His room was silent, but not with the silence of a people's sacrament. He read, and the prospectus provoked him to a little, sneering smirk.

O, yes, a copy of this nice proposition had been filed with the Registrar of Joint Stock Companies. And the directors! Among them Old Carbut, and Sir Nathaniel Bertram, Bart! Bertram, indeed! Notorious guinea-pig? Flotation costs estimated at £50,000. Humbug! Somebody was being comfortably floated. And the brokers? O, those people! Regular shysters. The company proposed to acquire the assets—but what were the assets? The statement with regard to the assets was both vainglorious and vague. Probably this document would read quite nicely in a country parsonage. It might appeal to credulous old maids.

Mr. Bastable sat up and dropped the thing into his waste-paper basket. At the age of thirty-one he knew as much about waste-paper as any man in the City.

And then his telephone rang.

Loviebond? Yes, Loviebond had got those shares, and the margin was excellent.

Dine at the Hallam with those rowdy asses? O, yes, he was going to teach men like Sherring and Steel a thing or two.

7

Leaning against the front wing of a secondhand car exposed for sale in an open-fronted shop in Great Rutland Street, Sherring watched the world go by. It paused quite often to speak to him, for there was a shortage of cars and the world was car-mad, and had made much money. These secondhand cars daubed with new paint, and exposed to view like poor, elderly harlots, were not Sherring's property. He had been engaged by a certain Mr. Bliss on a commission basis to foist these vehicles upon a feverish public. He had a good appearance, reassuring manners, and if the secondhand car market flourished upon mendacity, well—what of it?

Sherring wore no hat and no overcoat. He was dressed in dark trousers with a faint white line in them, black vest, black coat. He might have been

somebody's private secretary or a shopwalker. His boots needed resoling, but the soles were not exposed to the public. The shop was draughty and cold. The particular car against which he was leaning had had its body painted a pale and sickly puce. The new black enamel on the wings had a smeary look, and the brass radiator, carefully polished, seemed to grin at the world like some cynical face full of gold teeth.

A couple paused to look at the cars. The lad, pleasant of face, with sanguine blue eyes, had the appearance of a young country doctor. The girl was obviously his wife, and a recent acquisition.

Sherring smiled upon them. The young man reminded him of Archie Steel.

"How much for that 'Merlin'?"

"Four hundred and fifty pounds, sir," and he wanted to add—"it's a sanguinary swindle."

"I say that's rather steep!"

"There is a serious shortage of cars, as you know, sir."

The two entered the shop. There were some six other cars for sale, two-and four-seaters, and a vast and clumsy old limousine. The young man climbed into the "Merlin," tried the gear-lever and the steering-wheel, and spoke to his wife.

"Get in—Marjorie."

Marjorie joined him. The car had been a good one in its day, and its upholstery and seat springs had been renewed at some period.

"Jolly comfortable, what?"

"Yes, really quite comfortable."

Sherring, listening to the chatter of these two nice children knew in his heart that he was the worst possible business man. Moreover, he happened to know that the Merlin's interior was not what it should be. Their trade driver and mechanic who had collected it had uttered sceptical brevities.

"Regular old bag of bones. Her back axle won't last another hundred."

The young things got out of the car and walked round it. The young man examined the tyres.

"Rather badly worn. What about her gear-box?"

Sherring blew two gentle notes on the car's bulb horn. Mr. Bliss was not within earshot.

“To be perfectly frank—I don’t think she is worth the money.”

The young man stared at him.

“You mean——?”

And Sherring nodded.

Ten minutes later an overblown person walked into the shop. He had a face like a round of beef. He was abrupt and arrogant. He wanted a large car; he was determined to have a large car. He looked at the limousine.

“What price that old bus?”

“Six hundred and seventy-five pounds.”

“Tell me another. What’s ‘er year?”

“Nineteen thirteen.”

“Six years old—and she looks it. What’s your guarantee?”

“A test drive, sir.”

The overblown person got into the car and sat in it.

“Not so bad. She’d look quite lux-oorious with a little new leather and a coat of paint. I’ll give you six hundred for ‘er—if I like the way she rides.”

“We can send you round Regent’s Park, sir. We have a driver on the premises.”

At 10.50 a.m. Sherring had sold the overblown person that car, nor did he regret it. Why pity a man like that, or attempt to prevent him from wasting his money? The limousine was to be delivered that afternoon at an address in Highgate, and the office held the overblown person’s cheque.

Sherring leaned gently against the left wing of the car the young things had failed to buy. The fingers of his left hand seemed to caress the brass radiator cap. He was glad that he had not lied to those youngsters.

But what a life! He looked what he would always be in these days after the war, whimsical, aloof, like a man who had lost something and dreamed of the thing he had lost. Peace, prosperity, business, an infernal restlessness gnawing at your vitals!

The voice of Mr. Bliss scolding the young woman in the office. Clocks striking—an explosion, sudden silence, traffic at a standstill, human figures motionless upon the pavements.

Sherring stood rigid beside the puce and black car, and all through that

silence his face wore a look of sad and whimsical surprise.

II

HALLAM'S HOTEL flattered itself that it had remained shabbily and indifferently English instead of becoming indifferently and cheaply French. Everything about it was shabby, the carpets, the waiters, the decorations, and this very shabbiness was supposed to add tone to the hotel's atmosphere. Even as there is no indignation like the indignation of a rogue who has been called a liar, so there is no impertinence to equal the impertinence of a tradition. "The Hallam" met you like some supercilious and complacent manservant, and offering you everything that was second-rate at first-rate prices, assumed that you knew that for nearly seventy years the Hallam had housed people who were "county." The baths might be somewhat smeary and inadequate, but then they had sufficed for a Victorian generation that had said its prayers more often than it had sponged itself. The Hallam remained supremely Hallam. Almost, its distinguished shabbiness was charged for in the bill.

Loviebond had selected the Hallam, because he was Loviebond, and knew a little about the West End. The Hallam might be shabby and casual to the point of impertinence, but it was still the thing. Bounders did not go there to splash, because the exhibition would have suggested an aquatic display in an old-fashioned stone sink instead of in a marble bath. The American invasion had not yet compelled the Hallam to call in the plumber and the decorator and an Italian director, or expire in the odour of its sanctimonious shabbiness.

Loviebond's taxi deposited him outside the white portico at 7.15. He had changed in his office, and it was a very correct and man-about-town Loviebond who walked into the badly-lit vestibule. Loviebond lived at Chislehurst and had married a wife, one of the Chislehurst "Crackenthorps." Everybody in the City who was worth while knew of the Crackenthorps.

Loviebond spoke to a young woman in the office.

"The Seven Club. We're in the 'Beaconsfield,' I believe?"

The young woman had not yet absorbed the Hallam's air of austere indifference.

"Yes, the Beaconsfield."

She smiled upon Loviebond, for he, too, was young; and Loviebond smiled back at her.

“Oh, about the bill, I’ll come down and settle when the show’s over.”

“That will be quite all right, sir.”

The “Beaconsfield,” one of the Hallam’s private rooms, was on the first floor, and Loviebond climbed the stairs. A depressed waiter of uncertain age was attending to the fire. The room had red plush curtains at the windows, solid mahogany furniture, a Turkey carpet, a chandelier that had been adapted to electric light. The wallpaper was a pale green.

The waiter, returning the shovel to the brass coal-pot, emitted a sound that seemed to mingle a sigh with an eructation. Loviebond addressed him.

“Take my things, waiter, will you.”

The waiter took Mr. Loviebond’s hat, coat and scarf, and placed them on a table in the corner on the left of the door.

“Champagne all right, waiter?”

“Four bottles of Heidsieck 1913, sir.”

“Got it in ice?”

The waiter eyed him with tired superciliousness. Who was this young swell who was trying to teach “Hallams” the elements of its business.

“In ice, sir.”

Loviebond scrutinized the table, and then went to examine himself in the mirror over the mantelpiece. He gave a tweak to the bows of his black tie, and then stood to warm his hands.

“Beastly cold. My taxi had a window that wouldn’t shut. Half your taxis, waiter, ought to be on the scrap heap.”

“They’re not my taxis, sir.”

Loviebond turned and surveyed him. This spirit of sulkiness was all too prevalent.

“Look here, my man, are you going to wait on us?”

“I am, sir.”

“Well, this is going to be a cheerful evening, so you may as well try and look cheerful—Hallo, Doc, old man!”

Dr. Pitt was the complete civilian. He had been poured into his dinner-jacket. He was sleek about the head, and his manners were—at any rate for the moment—more professionally tailored.

“Hallo, Mr. Secretary. What do we do with our clothes?”

The waiter had disappeared, and Loviebond looked annoyed.

“Damn that waiter! Half these people at home are Bolshie. Shove them on that table, Doc.”

They shook hands, scrutinizing each other as though mutually aware of some subtle change in the once friendly and familiar figure.

“It’s the same old Doc, and yet—different. I suppose it’s the clothes.”

“Did you expect me to go bald in a year?”

“It might be ten years.”

“Has life been so crowded for you, Lovie?”

Loviebond’s smile was self-conscious and complacent.

“Well, in a way—yes. I’m doing pretty well. Of course this damned taxation hits one rather badly.”

Pitt’s eyes were mischievous.

“Supertax, I suppose.”

“Yes, worse luck. Doesn’t worry you, Doc.”

Pitt answered drily—“Not yet.”

He stood to warm himself, and also to enjoy the post-war Loviebond.

“Married, aren’t you, Lovie?”

“How did you know that?”

“I think I saw a picture in one of the magazines.”

Loviebond looked pleased.

“O, probably. My wife’s a Crackenthorp. Money of her own, you know; it makes my dashed super-tax all the heavier. Still, I suppose one mustn’t grumble.”

“No, Loviebond.”

Archie Steel was the next arrival, wearing a grey overcoat and a Trilby hat. His blue eyes had lost some of their assurance. They had begun to focus the social problems of life, and to be puzzled and worried by them. Like Loviebond he had become a suburban figure, but not on the Crackenthorp level.

“Hallo, Doc. Hallo, Lovie.”

His enthusiasm for the evening was obvious. This was escape, one of the good old rowdy beanos resurrected. He dashed at the other men, gave Pitt a playful jab in the ribs, and tweaked Loviebond’s meticulously hand-produced tie. Pitt laughed and softly cuffed Archie’s head; but Loviebond, full of a new, civic dignity, turned to the mirror to readjust his tie.

“Still the babe. Aren’t you going to grow up, my lad.”

Steel was far too full of the occasion to appreciate the finer shades of evolution in temperament. He grinned at Pitt.

“Good old B Mess. My tie came out of a box. Old Lovie was always particular.”

Dr. Pitt smiled at him.

“Loviebond has responsibilities. High finance and a wife.”

“What, spliced! So am I. Talk about a C.O.! Fancy seeing old Sherring again. All the old crowd.”

He flung his hat and coat on the table.

“Doc, you look absolutely—it. What’s old Sherring doing these days?”

Loviebond, having attended to his tie, assumed that it was his privilege to answer that question.

“No one knows. I had some trouble in getting Sherring’s address. He appears to be in rooms off Baker Street.”

“He’s coming all right?”

“I have every reason to believe so.”

“I say, Lovie, someone has starched your shirt for you. Is old Kettle turning up?”

“I understand so. Fact is, Sherring is a little mysterious these days. I asked him to lunch at my club, and he sent me some excuse.”

Dr. Pitt smiled his dry smile.

“Mysterious! Some diagnoses are so obvious. Everybody knows where you live, Loviebond.”

“I hope so.”

Steel stood with his heels on the fender and his back against the

mantelpiece.

“Clovelly—Radnor Road, Narbiton. That’s me. Hallo, here’s old Crabbie.”

He rushed at Crabtree, a Crabtree who sported a hairy coffee-coloured overcoat and a hat that had spent the war shut up in a drawer with moth-balls. Crabtree’s eyebrows seemed to have grown as bushy as his coat. A brown, woollen army scarf protected his shirt-front and collar.

“Hallo, Archie. Hallo, Doc.”

Steel grabbed the brown scarf and pulled out lengths of it.

“Same old scarf! You bought this at Amiens.”

“And same old Crabtree. You look damned fit.”

“I am damned fit, Doc. It’s a good life on a farm. Sherring’s coming, I suppose?”

“O, rather.”

“Here, my lad, mind my collar.”

“The babe is still a babe, Crabbie.”

“So it seems. Let me go, child.”

His brown overcoat and hat joined the other coats and hats upon the table. The sleeves of his dinner-jacket appeared to be too short for his long and powerful arms.

“Doc, you look pretty prosperous.”

“Necessity, old man; appearances.”

Crabtree gripped Steel by the shoulder and looked at him.

“You haven’t been to see me, you young blighter. Any week end.”

“Steel has a wife.”

“Wives can be included. Still a bachelor, Doc?”

“Yes, thank God.”

“Same here. Is Kettle coming? Yes—splendid. And our friend Bastable?”

“By Jove, Lovie, I had forgotten Pork and Beans.”

Loviebond, standing rather straight, like a man about to make an after-dinner speech, gave a tug at his waistcoat.

“As a matter of fact I have been seeing a good deal of Bastable. First-class

man of business. I don’t suppose any of you chaps have heard of Affleck, Jeans & Bastable.”

Steel looked cheeky.

“I haven’t. What are they? Tripe merchants?”

“Bankers and bill-brokers, my lad.”

Dr. Pitt had lit a cigarette.

“I’ve heard of them, Loviebond. Old Jeans had a house in Regent’s Park. He was supposed to be worth half a million.”

Loviebond nodded with the air of a man of affairs, a man who was in the know.

“Every penny of it, Doc; big finance; and Bastable——”

Steel showed signs of restiveness.

“You seem to be bucking a lot about Bastable, Lovie.”

“I happen to know the men in the City who count, and who are going to count. Lombard Street, Steel, isn’t quite Narbiton.”

Steel flushed up.

“Hardly; I’m only a bank clerk, but out there in the bloody old war——”

A somewhat tense situation was eased by the appearance of Kettle, a grinning and self-conscious Kettle wearing a dark blue overcoat with a velvet collar, and carrying a bowler hat. His black head had been well oiled and was as polished as his new boots.

“Good evenin’, gents. I’ve taken you at your word.”

Obviously, the Essex Road was feeling a little embarrassed in the presence of a dinner-jacketed Chislehurst and St. John’s Wood, and inclined to remain hesitant in the doorway.

“Hallo, Kettle. Splendid!”

“Come in, Kettle. I’m jolly glad to see you.”

Crabtree and Steel shook hands with the cockney.

“Well, this is a bit of all-right, gents.”

Crabtree, kind soul, helped Kettle off with his coat, and placed it on the table with the other coats. Dr. Pitt held out a hand.

“Kettle, you were one of the men who never went sick.”

Loviebond, more aloof, nodded at the mess-orderly. “Glad to see you, Kettle. Quite like old times.”

Kettle, reassured, and beaming upon them all, held on to Dr. Pitt’s hand.

“Well, I ain’t exactly in the fashion, doctor, but I’m feelin’ fine inside.”

“You look A 1, Kettle.”

Kettle eased his neck in its starched collar and looked at the sleeves of his blue suit. It was a very new suit, and Kettle was proud of it.

“Well, things ain’t so bad with me, gents. I’ve got a little business of m’own.”

“Where, Kettle?”

“Islington. Essex Road. Greengrocery.”

Steel patted him on the back.

“Selling spuds instead of cooking them, Kettle.”

Kettle beamed upon him.

“Just the same, Mr. Steel. As full of mischief as a wagon-load of monkeys.”

“I hope so, Kettle.”

Pitt produced his cigarette-case, opened it, and offered it to Kettle. The waiter, appearing in the doorway, cast a supercilious glance at the Essex Road, and addressed Loviebond.

“Party complete, sir?”

“No, two more gentlemen to come. I’ll ring the bell, waiter, when we are ready.”

The waiter disappeared, and a moment later the frame of the doorway was filled by another figure. There was a shout from Steel.

“Skipper!”

They stood looking at Sherring, momentarily mute, for Sherring was the man who somehow made the night complete. To Crabtree, Steel and Kettle he was more than mere man, the same and yet different, thinner, a black overcoat over one arm, his dinner-jacket well cut, his tie tied by hand. His eyes smiled at them all, whimsically, and with a little glimmer of wistfulness. Almost, he

looked shy.

“Skipper, old man.”

His motionless figure came to life and stepped forward out of its frame, and the figures of those other men flowed towards him. They surrounded him; they touched him; they looked into his face. They uttered his name, blurted out a few simple words.

Sherring’s face seemed to shine.

“By Jove, this is—good.”

Kettle was taking his coat from him.

“Kettle, how’s life?”

“Champion, sir.”

Steel, an almost emotional Steel, relieved Sherring of his hat.

“All the little Kettles are full of steam, Skipper, and Kettle’s selling sprouts and spuds.”

“Splendid.”

Pitt held his arm.

“And I’m quite an Agag, Sherring.”

“Smooth as silk, Doc, what! Hallo, Crabbie. Good old Adam.”

“The red man.”

“Hallo, Lovie. How’s the House?”

Loviebond was the only pompous member of the party.

“Quite bullish, Sherring. My firm represents a certain tradition. Come and get warm. I’ve arranged everything. We are waiting now for Bastable.”

Sherring, with one arm round Crabtree and the other round Steel, moved to the hearthrug.

“Bastable. Of course. Late—as usual.”

Steel’s eyes met Loviebond’s.

“Do you mean to say we are going to wait for Pork and Beans?”

Loviebond, chin up, tugged at his waistcoat.

“Of course. The Seven Club does not sit down to dine until its number is complete.”

“Well, I’m damned! Is the Skipper to stand about——?”

Sherring gently cuffed his head.

“All right, Archie. I have kept you all waiting.”

“That’s different. But Bastable——”

As though answering to his name, Mr. Bernard Bastable, of Affleck, Jeans & Bastable stood in the doorway. He had left his scarf, coat and opera hat in the official cloak-room below, and he displayed to his fellow-members tails and a white waistcoat, and a shirt rather resplendent as to studs. The black and whiteness of him were obviously polished and prosperous, his self-assurance slightly studied. By arriving late he may have intended to suggest that he was to be the most important person present, and judged by some post-war standards—he was.

“Evening, everybody. Afraid I’m late, but I had a board-meeting at half-past six, and had to change in my chambers.”

He nodded at Sherring and the doctor, and shook hands with an affable Loviebond who crossed the room to meet him. The sallow solidity of him was very sure of the floor and poised on patent leather shoes. A successful young man, and becoming so singularly successful that his swagger would pass with other men as one of the privileges of power. To a fascinated Kettle he displayed diamonds of the first water in his shirt studs.

“Suppose I need not call you sir, now—Sherring! Ah, Steel, how’s the bank?”

He took the centre of the hearthrug, and warming his hands, held the centre of the room’s attention. Steel’s blue eyes were on stalks, Dr. Pitt’s eyebrows ironical. Sherring observed him as though it piqued him to compare the Bastable of yesterday with the Bastable of to-day.

“You can push on dinner, Loviebond, if you want to.”

Steel, who had been struggling towards self-expression, began to speak: “Jolly condescending of you, P. B.,” but Bastable ignored him, and went on addressing the company as though he was speaking to a gathering of shareholders among whom Steel was a mere dead-head.

“You see, I have to go on to another show, a function run by a lot of society dames——”

Steel, red with insurgent self-regard, managed to get out four words:

“Hence the diamond studs!”

Bastable looked at Steel as though he found Steel very amusing.

“Yes, hence the diamond studs, Steel. Mark it up against my grandfather. They were his.”

Loviebond rang the bell, and assumed temporary control of these discordant temperaments.

“We can sit. Yes, waiter, we’re ready. Sherring, you’ll take the head—of course. Doc, on Sherring’s right. I’m at the foot. Bernard, I’ll have you on my right. Crabbie, you had better sit on Sherring’s left. Kettle next. Steel, the Doc will keep you in order.”

They took their seats, and a little self-consciously so. The atmosphere had lost its fluidity. It was as though Bastable had somehow congealed it, and changed it from a liquid to a colloid. Steel’s rather crude soul was seething. He wanted to kick the swine. Crabtree had grown silent, like a countryman sensing rough weather. Dr. Pitt’s eyebrows remained ironic. Kettle’s eyes were beady, like the bright eyes of some intelligent animal in the presence of a natural enemy.

The waiter shuffled round with oysters. A second waiter appeared with brown bread and butter, lemon and etceteras. Bastable refused oysters.

Loviebond looked concerned.

“Best Whitstable, Bernard.”

“Thanks, no, Loviebond. Fact is—I have to be careful. When a man has to use his head he can’t let go over the flesh-pots. I expect you know that, doctor.”

Pitt’s glance was ironic.

“Not—till one owns the flesh-pots.”

Crabtree nodded. He would never get fat on the flesh-pots.

Steel’s lower lip was combative. His blue eyes stared.

“Some chaps have to diet. I suppose the P. B. type——”

Bastable boomed through him.

“I fence every day, or play squash. My pros help me to keep in condition. I get my chauffeur to rush me up to ‘Queens.’ Of course, the ideal thing is to have a squash court of one’s own.”

“Squash,” said Steel; “I should say so.”

Kettle had been put out of countenance by his oysters. Nature would have prompted him to pick up the shells and slide the bivalves into his mouth. He had sat and watched Sherring, and his eyes had met Sherring's. They had smiled at each other.

"You've given me a start, sir. Never seen so many ruddy forks."

He became conversational.

"My missis thinks me so hignorant. She said to me, 'Alf, d'you know what a table-napkin is?' and I said, 'Cheese it.' And she said to me, 'Don't you go tuckin' it into y' collar.' "

The table had paused to listen to Kettle, and Kettle, becoming self-conscious, grinned apologetically.

"Beg pardin', gents."

Steel saluted him.

"Glad your missis isn't here to shut you up, Kettle."

"I take some shuttin' up, sir."

The waiter offered him brown bread and butter and he eyed it suspiciously over his left shoulder.

"What's this?"

"Brown bread and butter, sir."

"May as well do the job thoroughly, what?"

There was laughter, and Sherring smiled upon the greengrocer.

"Kettle, you make me feel happy."

"That's what we're 'ere for sir, ain't it!"

With the soup the conversation tended to run in couples. Bastable and Loviebond were discussing some financial affair; Kettle, after blowing on his soup and meeting Mr. Loviebond's shocked and curious stare, seemed to fall shamefully into his soup plate and had to be rescued from it by Steel. "Remember the cellar at the Red Château, Kettle——?" Pitt and Crabtree, both bachelors, were arguing for and against marriage. Sherring, passing his spoon to and fro through his soup, glanced from face to face, and smiled gently and whimsically. Kettle was making moist noises and grinning delightedly at Steel. "Remember your billet in Bethune, sir. Bit of all right, what!" Loviebond was deferring almost obsequiously to Bastable. Sherring watched him, and becoming conscious of being watched in turn met Dr. Pitt's eyes. They

exchanged a little, significant smile.

“Rather intriguing, Sherring, this reassembling and reshuffling of personalities.”

“We may think we don’t change, Doc, but we do.”

“Sure?”

Sherring glanced again at Bastable and Loviebond.

“Or was it that we were all stuffed into brown sacks, so to speak.”

Pitt nodded at him.

“Our bill-broker was always a bill-broker. But generalizations are so damned cheap.”

There was the popping of a champagne cork, and Steel ducked his head.

“Christ! Zero hour. Where did that one go?”

Kettle waved his table-napkin.

“Over the top for the glory boys.”

Bastable, feeling the draught, turned and looked at Kettle as he might have looked at a performing monkey. Steel thrust at him across the table.

“Remember our last zero hour, Bastable?”

Bastable ignored him.

“What year, Loviebond? 1913? Yes, not a bad vintage. I was lunching with Sir Guy Garnet yesterday at the club. He was telling me that if you want the best fizz—— O, by the way, Steel, Sir Guy’s your chief, I believe?”

“He is.”

“Ever met him?”

Steel’s eyes were combative.

“Ask me another!—You haven’t answered my question.”

Sherring straightened in his chair. It had become obvious that inevitable discords threatened this love-feast.

“It’s rather early, you chaps, but I’ll give you a toast. His Majesty the King.”

He rose, glass in hand, and the others rose with him.

“Gentlemen, the King.”

Kettle flourished his table-napkin, and it flicked Bastable's ear.

"The King, gawd bless 'im."

Bastable was the first to resume his seat. He had conformed to a convention. But Kettle had treated an unfamiliar drink with insufficient respect, and was coughing and spluttering.

" 'Scuse me, gents, reg'lar gas attack."

Six foot-one Crabtree looked down at him benignantly.

"A bit lively, Kettle."

"And I'm a bit hinnocent, sir."

They seated themselves, and Loviebond once more deferred to Bastable.

"What were you going to say about Sir Guy Garnet, Bernard?"

Tactlessly tactful fellow! Bastable, turning his glass with thumb and finger, spoke like a man of authority.

"He gave me the address of his wine merchants, Manson's in Piccadilly. Sir Guy's a man who has twenty thousand down in wine. Quite a sound idea."

Kettle made a mouth like a fish.

"Blimey, twenty tharsand quid in booze!"

"Yes, Kettle."

Steel splurged again into aggression.

"Well—I call it a damned shame. That sort of thing makes one feel red."

Bastable gave him a sallow, shimmering smile.

"With envy, Steel?"

"I'm not out to envy any profiteering blighter."

Bastable was contemptuous.

"Do you think, Steel, that the head of the bank of which you are—shall we say—a humble member——"

"Look here—I'm not taking any cheek from you, Bastable."

Again Sherring intervened.

"Archie, this is a peace celebration."

"Sorry, Skipper. But if my friend across the table——"

“I am saying the same thing to Bastable. We came here to enjoy ourselves ____”

Bastable looked amused.

“Our friend Steel is so thin-skinned. I’ll try and remember it, Sherring.”

The dinner passed through the first stage, sole with sauce tartare, and Kettle was once more in trouble with his tools. Having selected a steel knife, he discarded it after a glance at Crabtree’s right fist.

“Reg’lar guessin’ competition for me, Mr. Crabtree.”

Crabtree’s eyes were kind.

“Haven’t forgotten how to make Welsh rabbit, have you, Kettle?”

“Not me. Ev’ry Saturday night I makes the missis and meself a reg’lar mustard plaster.”

Dr. Pitt smiled at him across the table.

“Hot stuff, Kettle.”

“Rawther, sir.”

The champagne was beginning to exert its influence in certain quarters, especially so in Archie Steel. Steel, when primed, became a giggler, a creature of the demonstrative affections until the argumentative and quarrelsome phase arrived. At the moment he was bubbling with the desire to express himself for Sherring’s benefit. He got up, raised his glass, and looked at Sherring.

“We’re a bit early with the toasts, you chaps—but I want to get in first with this one. Skipper—Captain Sherring, M.C.”

Kettle was up like a flash—and thumping the table.

“That’s the stuff, Mr. Steel.”

Crabtree and Pitt rose together. Loviebond got up with the air of a man who was slightly bored, perhaps because he had been proposing to offer that toast himself. Bastable was the last to rise.

“Skipper.”

“Good luck to you, Sherring.”

“The best orficer the old batt ever ‘ad.”

They drank to him, and Sherring smiled up at them rather shyly.

“Thanks, you chaps. You don’t want me to make a speech, do you? I’m not

much use at standing on my hind legs.”

Bastable was the first to sit down.

“I agree, Sherring. Oratory can be rather boring.”

The waiters proceeded to serve roast duck, and green peas that had come out of bottles. Meanwhile, other bottles were producing other forms of inspiration. Kettle was wondering whether a fellow ate green peas with a knife. Sherring’s mood was tinted with a pale seriousness, a meditative shade of eau de Nil.

“I say you chaps, isn’t this rather a solemn occasion. The second Armistice Night. We have had time to look at the post-war world and reflect a bit. I would like to put a question. Let’s all try and answer it—honestly. What is the most potent force in post-war England? Supposing we begin with you, Kettle.”

Kettle grimaced, and held his knife and fork at the present.

“The most himportant thing, sir?”

“Yes, Kettle.”

“I should say—grub, sir. I don’t mean to say that my gawd’s my stomick, so to speak, but if your Little Mary ain’t got no fillin’——”

“Kettle’s a realist,” said Pitt.

“You, Archie.”

“The most obvious thing, Skipper?”

“Yes.”

Steel giggled.

“Well, if you ask me I should say that the most startling thing I’ve seen is the leg-show. Talk about revolution!”

Pitt chuckled.

“Or—evolution. As a doctor I hold that health is the soil out of which all good things grow.”

Crabtree nodded his countryman’s head at him.

“Absolutely, Doc.”

Loviebond, fiddling with his tie, was more sententious.

“If a man has large responsibilities as a citizen, he can’t be always running round the corner, Steel.—Personally, I don’t like all this socialism. Bad

discipline. People ought to stick to business——”

Bastable, who had been listening with the complacent air of a man who could correct them all, drank, put down his glass, and looked at Sherring.

“There is only one god to-day.”

He paused, and Loviebond was attentive, ingratiating.

“Go on, Bernard. You’re always interesting.”

Bastable assumed an air of arrogance.

“Money, capital. Economic law. Money is the master. You may hear the highbrow theorists talking tosh on ten quid a week. That’s about what they are worth in the world. But offer one of the gentlemen a fat job in the City and see what becomes of his idealism.”

Loviebond tapped the table with gentlemanly enthusiasm.

“Splendid, Bernard. My views—exactly.”

Sherring looked grave.

“Sex, soil and sovereigns! One sometimes reflects upon a certain state called happiness. I don’t know that I have ever found it. But what is one’s idea of happiness?”

Crabtree’s blue eyes were staring at the opposite wall.

“I’ve caught it sometimes, Sherring, very early on one of those dewy mornings just before hay harvest.”

“Assuming, Crabbie,” said Loviebond, “that your hay crop is a commercial proposition.”

“Not necessarily. Life isn’t all hard cash. I take it that Bastable’s idea of happiness is the acquisition of cash.”

“That’s a rather crude statement, Crabtree.”

Pitt joined the debate.

“I’ll give you something even cruder, Bastable. My experience has shown me that even our most eminent citizens are mostly tummy and testicle. If we are not after cash——”

Bastable corrected him.

“Power, doctor, power, and the symbol of power.”

“The Napoleon of Pork and Beans,” said Steel.

Bastable looked tired.

“Waiter, give that gentleman some more champagne. He may find a fresh egg somewhere.”

Once more Sherring parted these two conflicting spirits.

“Yes, more champagne, waiter. As a matter of fact, I think I agree with Crabtree. Life on the land.”

“O no, Sherring,” said Loviebond. “I’ve heard it described as muck and misery.”

Crabtree’s eyes smiled from among kindly wrinkles.

“You’re an urban soul, Lovie. You were born to wear spats.”

The post-war Loviebond was a person lacking in any sense of humour. His self-regard was always pulling sententiously at its waistcoat. It was easily offended.

“I rather flatter myself that in financial affairs—one has to be urban, Crabtree. Bright brains in the City, what! I’m not a theorist or a sentimentalist. I agree with Bernard that—all modern tendencies are economic.”

Sherring laughed gently.

“You’ve got Bradbury on the brain.”

“Here’s a rhyme to that,” said the doctor—“And idealism down the drain!”

Bastable thrust at him aggressively.

“How much idealism is there in a bankrupt business, doctor?”

“All and none, Mr. Financier. To learn the art of being human one has to begin by being poor.”

Both Sherring and Crabtree applauded that saying.

“Wise man, Doc.”

Meanwhile, the club had been consuming Pêche Melba and the plates were being changed. Kettle, who had been solemnly mute during the debate, threw up his head and sniffed.

“Blimey! What price toasted cheese?”

The whole table laughed.

“Welsh rabbit!”

“Kettle’s a humanist.”

Kettle leaned back and spoke to the waiter.

“ ‘Ave you put plenty o’ pepper on it, old lad?”

“I’ll find you a pepper pot, sir,” said the grinning waiter.

“Good egg! None of yer warm wet flannel.”

Sherring’s face looked happier than it had been all the evening. He smiled at Crabtree, pushed back his chair and rose.

“I should like to give you a toast, gentlemen—our champion toaster of cheese, the man who looked after us like a mother and father—Private Kettle.”

Steel rose with enthusiasm, if somewhat unsteadily so.

“Good old Kettle.”

“Oh—oi say, sir—I ain’t got a breath in me. I’m full of Welsh rabbit. But I’m prard to be ‘ere,” and with a grin at Sherring he became inarticulate.

“Good luck to the shop, Kettle.”

“Kettle, may life be all toasted cheese.”

Said Bastable, sitting down with the air of having conferred a favour upon somebody—“There’s a moral in the story. Statecraft has to busy itself with seeing that all our Kettles get sufficient toasted cheese to keep them from making trouble.”

“Just enough—and no more?”

“The eternal carrot.”

“You’re the complete cynic, Bastable.”

“And what are you, doctor?”

“There is one thing that I pray I may not be—a prig.”

Bastable looked amused.

“No—I’m not a prig, doctor. I’m perfectly honest. I respect power. I want power. I mean to possess power.”

“Reminds me of the thing we learnt at school,” said Steel, “Veni, vidi, vici.”

Bastable smiled at him indulgently.

“Quite so, Steel; but not all men are Cæsars.”

The waiter had placed a port decanter on the table on Sherring's right, and Sherring having filled his glass, passed the decanter to Crabtree. Loviebond was speaking to the waiter concerning the cigars that had been ordered. Steel had brought out a cigarette-case and was preparing to light up.

Loviebond looked shocked.

"Steel, you ought not to smoke before the port."

Steel was nearing the quarrelsome phase. He flared.

"Why the hell—not?"

"O, well, if you've no palate. This port is about the best thing of its kind in London."

The decanter had reached Bastable, and as he filled his glass he added a spice of venom to it.

"I don't suppose Steel has made much opportunity for acquiring a nice taste in port."

Sherring looked sharply at Bastable.

"Excuse me, Bastable, but I can't let that pass."

Bastable sipped his port.

"Yes, quite a good vintage. Sorry, Sherring, but Steel and I have been exchanging squibs all the evening. It is supremely unimportant."

Sherring was angry.

"Indeed. A year ago you would not have made a remark like that."

Bastable was unabashed.

"O, yes, a year ago! Those were the days of stars and ribbons."

"We are here to-night to celebrate those days."

Pitt looked dryly at Sherring.

"I agree. I presume that Bastable is celebrating—other things."

Bastable smiled at the doctor.

"O, possibly. Some of us are very simple souls. I may bow to the majority—but——"

"There is no but about it," and Sherring's voice was sharp; "we are not here to buck about ourselves. O, well, let's draw down the shutters. Pass the

port along. If I have said anything silly I apologize.”

“That’s the captin’, all over,” said Kettle. “Yes, I’m ‘avin’ some more port.”

Crabtree had pulled out a pipe and pouch, and he displayed them to Loviebond.

“All in order, Lovie?”

“But I’ve ordered Coronas.”

“Sorry—I’m a son of the soil.”

“O, as you please. Waiter, hand Captain Sherring the cigars. Will Coronas do you, Bernard?”

“As a matter of fact, I usually smoke Partagas; but a Corona will satisfy me.”

“Magnanimous fellow!” said Pitt.

The cigars had reached Bastable, and he took one between finger and thumb, rolled it, and smelt it.

“Do you mind if I have my coffee now”—and he looked at Sherring—“I have to rush on to this other function. My car’s waiting.”

Sherring nodded at him.

“No apologies needed. What’s your car, Bastable?”

“O, there’s only one car worth having.”

Sherring lit his cigar.

“I see; I’m thinking of getting a Rolls myself.”

Bastable struck a match.

“Secondhand?”

This was too much for Steel who, mute after the last explosion, had been re-approaching boiling point.

“You are a swine, P. B.”

The whole table stiffened and was silent, and Sherring, with a quick glance at Steel, seemed to seize a lashing tiller.

“Apologies all round—please. I’ve no objection to a secondhand Rolls, partly because I don’t suppose I shall ever own one. Yes, I’ll take a brandy,

waiter.”

Crabtree looked at him affectionately.

“Great man, Skipper.”

Coffee and liqueurs were served. Crabtree lit a big, bulldog pipe. Kettle spread himself and sniffed the smoke of his cigar.

“Well—I guess this is the best blow-art I’ve ‘ad since I was born. I look towards you, Mr. Loviebond.”

Loviebond bowed and smiled self-consciously.

“Thank you, Kettle. I hope everybody is satisfied. I arranged that the dinner should cost twelve and sixpence a head, but that does not include the drinks. I should like to stand the drinks and the ‘extras.’ ”

“O, we can’t let you do that, Lovie,” said Sherring.

“Very generous of you, Lovie.”

“ ‘Ear, ‘ear,” from Kettle.

Loviebond adjusted his waistcoat.

“But I should like to. It’s a gesture. I propose that we pass round a plate. Each member can put down his dinner-money and something for the waiters. It will save letter-writing, and I can settle with the hotel before I go.”

Sherring produced a wallet and placed a pound note and a ten-shilling note on a plate.

“All in order, Lovie. Next year the drinks must be my affair. Kettle, you’re my guest to-night.”

“No, sir, I’m not spongin’ on you. I’m prard to be ‘ere, and I’m prard to pay.”

“As a favour, Kettle.”

“If you put it that way, sir, I ain’t got a word t’say, but I thanks yer.”

“Good man.”

Steel had nothing but a pound note, and was wanting change, which Pitt managed to provide, and while the bank-cashier was making up his account, Bastable was peeling a five-pound note from a wad he had produced. Kettle appeared interested in that mass of crisp paper. He chewed his cigar, and watched Bastable’s fiver crown the plate.

“I’ll take four pounds from you, Loviebond.”

“You’ll break the bank, Bernard.”

Bastable slipped the wad of notes back into his breast pocket, and rose, and Kettle with a kind of sigh, seemed to settle himself deliberately into his chair. What an opportunity to follow a swell like Bastable, hustle him and pick his pocket! But Kettle had become a respectable citizen with a little shop in the Essex Road.

Bastable made his apologies.

“Sorry to have to break away, but I must show up at this function.”

Loviebond rose with an air of a man eager to please and conciliate a friend who could be useful. He laid a hand on Bastable’s shoulder.

“I know what a man of affairs you are, Bernard. What about lunching with me at the club next week?”

“I have to go to Paris next week. Rather a big flotation. Make it the week after.”

“Splendid. I’ll ring you up.”

Bastable nodded and smiled at his fellow-members.

“Good night—everybody. Till next year.”

Sherring was the only one who replied.

“Good night, Bastable.”

Loviebond went out with Bastable, holding him affectionately by the arm. There was silence. Kettle blew smoke. Crabtree and Pitt looked at each other. Steel blurted out what some of the others were thinking.

“Fancy Lovie turning ‘toady’!”

Pitt laughed dryly.

“Business, my lad.”

Steel jumped up and made for the door.

“All right, Skipper. I only want to see whether the blighter really has a Rolls.”

Dr. Pitt smiled across at Crabtree.

“Some peace celebration—this! One is beginning to learn who are the important people. That’s why our friend Bastable joined us to-night.”

Sherring knocked cigar ash into a saucer.

“I expect there is some good in Bastable.”

“So long,” said the doctor “as things are good for Bastable. I bet you he’ll turn up again next year—to take it out of us. He’s stiff with assurance.”

Steel reappeared, an outraged Steel.

“Christ! Loviebond’s down there helping the blighter on with his coat.”

“More business, my dear. What about the car?”

“It’s a Rolls all right, with a chap in livery. Damn it, I wish I could put the clock back.”

“One never can, Archie.”

“Pork and Beans! And I had to threaten to kick him out of a hole that morning when we went over the top near Ronsoy.”

Steel sat down in red disgust, and Sherring smiled at him.

“Never mind, Archie, you did the job and you did it damned well.”

But the evening had lost its bravura. These other men seemed to be reflecting upon certain unexpected realities. Sherring sat silent, watching the smoke rise from his cigar. Steel looked depressed. Pitt was frowning as though some professional problem had cropped up to plague him. The room was voiceless when Loviebond returned, a Loviebond who looked pleased with life. Cheerfully and complacently he resumed his place at the table.

“Great lad, Bastable. Fact is—we didn’t get to know him properly out there.”

Steel was in a bad mood.

“I did—old man. Our business was to do the job and not to lickspittle.”

Loviebond’s shirt-front was a surface of shocked, white hauteur.

“What d’you mean? Bastable and I do business together.”

Sherring looked suddenly and strangely tired.

“Now then—B Mess! Doc, you had better prescribe for us.”

“Another war—I think. Look here you two, seriously, I’m not coming here next year if we are going to squabble.”

“Well, if Bastable is going to turn up,” said Steel sulkily, “I shan’t be here.”

Loviebond snubbed him.

“If Steel can’t keep his temper he had better stay away.”

“No—I’m not much use to you, Loviebond, am I? I don’t produce much business.”

“Archie!” said Sherring reproachfully, “don’t talk like that. I’ve been looking forward to this night. It’s being spoilt.”

Steel became emotional.

“Sorry, Skipper. I’m a bloody little fool. I’m going. I’ve got to catch the 11.30—anyway.”

Crabtree rose to intercept him as he went towards the table where the hats and coats lay.

“Come on, Archie, don’t be an ass.”

Steel flared at him.

“Let me alone, damn it. I want to go.”

“Well—I’ll come with you. Waterloo’s my station too.”

Crabtree looked rather wistfully at Sherring, and Sherring nodded at him. “Yes, go with the child.” Steel was hunching himself into his coat, and Crabtree paused between the two tables.

“I wish you’d come down, Sherring, and spend a week end with us. My sister lives with me, you know.”

Sherring rose.

“I’d love to.”

He found Steel almost in tears, making a grab at his hand.

“Sorry, Skipper, you have always been such a sport to me. Good night, Doc; good night—Kettle. Good night, Lovie; sorry I was peevish.”

He was in a hurry to escape, and both angry and ashamed. He caught hold of Crabtree’s arm and almost dragged him to the door. “Come on, old man.” He was afraid of making an even more childish fool of himself, and Crabtree understood. He threw a backward glance at the others as he passed through the doorway.

“Good night, everybody. Till next year.”

Pitt had risen; he strolled across to the table and picked up his coat.

“I have a bad case to look at before I turn in.”

Sherring’s face was the face of a man who was trying to conceal profound disappointment.

“All right, Doc. What, you going too, Lovie?”

He helped Pitt on with his coat.

“Doing pretty well, Doc?”

“As a matter of fact—I am. St. John’s Wood seems to like me and, so far as it goes, I like St. John’s Wood.”

“Do you find it difficult, Doc?”

“What, old man?”

“Telling people the truth.”

Pitt smiled dryly.

“What is the truth, old man? Sometimes—one has to lie to people in order to make them feel good.”

Sherring watched Pitt arranging his scarf.

“I lost one job through trying to be truthful. People who are hard up can’t always afford to tell the truth.”

Pitt looked at him sharply.

“Not that way—are you?”

Sherring’s smile was whimsical.

“No, Doc; I’ve got a job.”

“Look here, if you ever want vetting, send for me. I’ll tell you the truth. No, and no bill, my lad.”

“Then—I shouldn’t send for you, Doc.”

“Don’t be an idiot. I’m not out merely for filthy lucre.”

Kettle was helping Loviebond with his coat, and Loviebond spoke to Sherring.

“I’ll settle everything downstairs. I take it we all wish to repeat the show next year.”

“Of course, Lovie.”

“A blow-art like this,” said Kettle; “I should say so.”

Loviebond shook hands somewhat condescendingly with Kettle.

“I’m glad you have enjoyed yourself, Kettle. Coming, Doc? Good night, Sherring. Come and have lunch with me one day. What’s your telephone number? Not got one? Well—I’ll drop you a line. Same address?—Good.”

Pitt gave Sherring a warm grip.

“Good night, old man. Don’t forget.”

“Thanks, Doc. Seeing you would do me good. Cheerio. Till next year.”

Sherring and Kettle were left alone together, and Sherring, taking his chair, stood it in front of the fire. He looked tired. He sat and stared at the fire. Kettle, on the hearthrug, looked down at him lovingly.

“Don’t seem like a year, sir, does it?”

Sherring’s eyes remained fixed on the fire.

“No, Kettle; it might be yesterday, and it might be a hundred years ago. By the way, still in the same—business?”

Kettle grinned.

“No—I’m a reformed character. My missus wouldn’t stand for the job. Besides, with a couple o’ kids. Fact is, sir, I brought off one flash job and nearly got pinched. My nerve ain’t what it was, and we ‘ad a little bit of all-right put by.”

“So you started this shop.”

“Yus; I blows down to th’ Market each mornin’. Yus, I’ve got a bit of transport. The missus is ‘ot stuff in the shop.”

“Doing well?”

“We ain’t grumblin’.”

“I’m glad.”

Kettle, with the end of a cigar tucked in the corner of his mouth, turned over the money in his trouser pockets, and looked at the clock.

“Well—it’s bin a marvellous evenin’, sir. Got t’catch an Islington bus. Wish you’d give us a call, sir, sometime.”

“I will—Kettle.”

“You’ll see the name up in the Essex Road. We’d be prard. Well—I must be slopin’. Suppose you’ll be goin’ ‘ome in your car, sir.”

Sherring turned and smiled at him.

“I haven’t got a car, Kettle.”

“I thought you ‘ad, sir.”

“No; I sell cars, and sometimes I drive them to sell to other people. That’s my job.”

“I see, sir. You’ll be takin’ a taxi.”

“Probably. I am going to stay here for a few minutes and sit by the fire. Give my love to Mrs. Kettle and the kids.”

“I will, sir.”

Kettle went for his coat, and Sherring, rising, helped him on with it.

“Fancy you givin’ me a ‘and, sir! If you’d drop in on us, the old woman would be prard to give you a cup o’ tea.”

“I won’t forget, Kettle.”

They shook hands. Kettle walked to the door, turned, put his heels together and saluted.

“Good night, sir.”

“Good night, Kettle. Mind you turn up next year.”

When Kettle had gone, and he was alone, Sherring sat down again in front of the fire. Bending forward, he stretched out his hands to it. There was no smile in his eyes now. He was alone with himself. If he saw pictures in the fire, they were pictures of the past rather than glimpses of the future. And suddenly he looked frail, and shadowy and sad.

He was thinking—“It would have been better if I had died out there.”

III

It was March.

She looked out of the window and saw a few Lent lilies flattened by the wind, and the tragic desolate gestures of the old fruit trees. A scud of rain struck the window. The little valley looked grey, narrow and shabby with the deplorable shabbiness of an English March. There had been a month of drought and of bitter north-east wind, and the field below High Wood might have been a vast and frayed old sack which some giant tramp has tossed contemptuously aside. No greenness anywhere save a faint feathering on the elders. By the black fence of the farmyard you might find nettles sprouting blackly through rubbish, old wire, scrap iron, rusty machinery, the dumpings of years which in summer the nettles would conceal.

She laughed at the illusion of spring and at herself. She made herself laugh on occasion, for otherwise she would have been the victim of one of those storms of suppressed sex which cause mere man to blaspheme in perplexity and exasperation.

“What the devil’s the matter—now?”

Hysteria! She went back to the kitchen and with a gesture that was almost gay slapped a lump of pastry on to the pastry board. The Sunday tart! It occurred to her to gibe at the suggestion. “A tart? Yes—I should be quite ridiculous—in that profession. No. S.A.! And my vast face!” She became busy with the rolling-pin. She could suppose that people said—“O, yes, Una’s such a good sort. Always—so cheerful. Such common sense.” And that was just what people did say, for, after all, a plain and unattractive woman with no money might be expected to regard housework as her destiny. Lucky to have a home. What else could she expect?

Yes, what else? A hostel in town or a cheap boarding-house and a job as a typist or a clerk. To be just one of the multitude of anonymous, drab women whom men treat as card-indexes, or letter-books, or hat-stands. But why man—at all? If you had a temperament and a brain? Why not fly to Australia, or drive a car across the Sahara? Accomplishment, creation, adventure?

She rolled out her slabs of pastry and trimmed them with a knife.

The Sunday apple-tart.

In June it would be gooseberries.

In July, raspberries and red currants.

In the autumn—plum and apple, or apple and blackberry.

Sudden sunlight rushed into the kitchen. March was melting into April in the matter of its moods. The raindrops hung glistening on the window against a blue rent in the sky. The waving branches of an old pear tree flashed its swelling flower-buds at her.

She saw her brother's figure pass across the window, an old army tunic thrown over its shoulders. He was coming in for his elevens, and being a considerate soul he would enter by the back door when the day was mucky. She heard him kicking the toes of his boots against the step.

She smiled.

"Poor old David."

But—why—poor old David? There was nothing poor about her brother save his balance at the bank. He reminded her somehow of the English infantryman of history, the Waterloo redcoat repulsing interminable cavalry charges, blue eyed, stolid, cheerfully ironic. "Here come these fools again!" For, to her, a farmer's life appeared to be a continuous battle against the cussedness of things animate and inanimate. If he was not fighting Nature, he was repulsing those bandits, the dealer or the butcher. A sow might fall to eating her progeny, or the weather play Old Harry with your hay. And yet, David——

He came in looking as though he and March had been laughing together round the corner. The wind was in his blue eyes, his breeches dark with the rain. He swung his old tunic over the back of a chair.

"Just a bit rough to-day."

His glass of milk and slice of cake were ready. He sat down by the fire with the glass on the floor, and the plate balanced on one knee. She did not say: "You're wet, Dave; you ought to change." She knew now that she might just as well have used such words to a tree.

She went on with her work, and he, munching his cake, glanced with an air of approval at a sky that was darkening for another shower.

"Jolly good rain. We wanted it."

She supposed so. She was in the habit of thinking of him as a simple soul, and yet he was no more simple than the seasons. The subtlety of the soil! His

acceptance of all natural phenomena was—somehow—more profoundly subtle than her restlessness. There were moments when she could have wished to be like him, inevitable, blue eyed, silent, striding straight into the wind and loving it.

He was watching her hands.

“Going into Midworth this afternoon?”

She paused, looking out of the window.

“Yes, possibly.”

“Do you good.”

Her eyes and mouth were momentarily poignant. Could Midworth save her soul with its sleepy shops, its cinema, its one circulating library? Tea at the local tea-shop! She strove against a little inward bitter tempest as more rain splashed upon the window.

“What about tobacco?”

“Yes—I’m nearly out. I’ve got a pair of boots that need seeing to.”

She would catch the red bus at the end of the lane, carrying his boots and her books in a shiny black shopping bag. What high adventure! Saturday afternoon in Midworth!

Her brother had emptied his glass. He placed it on the table, and she was aware of his tanned and hairy forearm. It was very much a man’s arm. He got up and reached for the tobacco tin. Tobacco was his only luxury.

“I wrote to old Sherring last night. You might post it, Una.”

She was shaping the sheet of pastry over the sliced fruit in the pie-dish. Her face had a kind of haggard cheerfulness. Why did men always refer to their friends as Old This or Old That? She had never seen Captain Sherring. He was an almost mythical person like some hero out of a saga, one of her brother’s war relics. She could suppose that those war friendships had been rather elemental affairs, boyish and uncritical.

“I’ve asked old Sherring down for a week-end in May. Can you manage it?”

She was wiping her hands.

“Won’t it be rather primitive for him?”

Her brother looked amused.

“No need to worry. I don’t suppose Sherring’s lost his war-sense. I think you would like Sherring, Sis.”

She looked at the streaming window.

“What does he do for a living?”

Crabtree sucked at his pipe.

“Some job in town. I believe it’s an agency. Sherring’s not a man who talks much about himself.”

“Like you.”

“O, no, he’s not the clod I am. Fact is—there’s something a little mysterious about Sherring. Most lovable chap I ever met, a bit aloof and silent. You had to see him in a tight corner. It used to make me smile—somehow.”

She was interested. She could imagine men twisting themselves into a variety of emotional knots in tight corners.

“Just—how?”

He was smiling.

“O, Sherring was always the gentleman—yes—I mean the real thing. When things were really bloody—he seemed to get as smooth and as calm and as—benignant—as a bishop confirming a lot of kids. Polite—almost gentle. No shouting, no frightfulness. It used to make me smile.”

“Rather helpful, wasn’t it?”

“I should say so. It had a most wonderful effect on the men. Imagine a chap walking coolly down a perfectly bloody trench and remarking to a sergeant: ‘Things seem a little upset to-night, Sergeant Smith. I expect it will soon blow over.’ You would see him strolling about with a whimsical look when everybody was wanting to grovel.”

“Was he afraid?”

“Of course he was afraid—we were all afraid.”

“He did not show it.”

Her brother laughed.

“Yes—by behaving like a kind of super-gentleman, a fellow who was utterly at his ease.”

The shower had passed, and sunlight poured in.

“Rather an intriguing person.”

Instantly, she despised herself for those words. How cheap and modern they were! But then, she too was tied into spiritual and emotional knots, and was afraid of betraying agitated fingers.

She allowed herself to be more human.

“He sounds rather a dear. I’ll try to efface myself while you two yarn.”

Her brother glanced at her as he sometimes looked at a beast that was ailing. There were moments when he was troubled about his sister.

“Well—I’ll be getting back to the job. I wish you would get out a bit more, Sis. Are you going to play tennis this year?”

She coloured up.

“My tennis isn’t—exactly—it.”

She would have said that she was one of those clumsy and unconvincing people whose hands fumble at life, while the rich world of an inner consciousness glows like a wounded and unheeded sunset.

She laughed.

“But—I’m not a bad cook.”

Her brother went out with the air of a man who had found something to perplex him. What sort of life was this for a woman—unless——? But what was the alternative? Una was not the sort who seemed to marry. Men were not interested in her. But was she——?

He put on his coat in the porch.

After all, life was a matter of compromise. You could not help people to transcend their faces.

Poor old Una! She ought to have been a man. The Crabtree stock was successfully male, all sinew and leather. Poor old Una!

2

Dr. Pitt was washing his hands in the bathroom of a patient’s flat. He looked tired, and he had not shaved, for the hour was 7.25 a.m. In the doorway stood another man who had not yet used his razor.

“Have a spot of something, doc?”

Dr. Pitt eyed himself in the mirror.

“Not at this time of the morning, Fothergill. I’ve got a pretty heavy day. Yes, there’s nothing for you to worry about.”

The other man was not worrying. His wife had just presented him with a baby, a most unfashionable act, and he was not interested in babies, and not particularly interested in his wife. In fact he was one of those men with private means who—in less fortunate circumstances—would have hung about at street corners waiting for the pubs to open. His club in Pall Mall was his pub.

Pitt did not like Fothergill. He saw Fothergill’s face reflected in the mirror, pink and flabby and foolishly cynical. Mrs. Fothergill was of different texture. It occurred to Pitt to wonder why on earth she had married this fellow whose head was like a pink wen.

“I don’t want your wife—disturbed, Fothergill.”

The man smiled his silly, sly smile.

“I shan’t disturb her, doctor. I shall just drop down to the club. The superfluous male, what!”

Dr. Pitt put on his coat.

“Yes, that’s the idea—superfluous.”

Fothergill’s slow, sly smile trickled down the stairs with him. It flowed like some gelatinous substance. It even accompanied Pitt to the vestibule where a porter in his shirtsleeves was manhandling a coal-box.

“Sorry you wouldn’t have a spot of anything, doctor.”

Pitt went briskly and solidly down the steps. Had he had a mouth at the back of his round and capable head it might have emitted the one word —“Ass.” The best service that Fothergill could perform would be to drink himself to death as quickly as possible and remain celibate during the process. Pitt walked briskly along the April street where the privet hedges and a few sooty lilacs were doing their best to celebrate the spring. Fothergill, finding the doctor so unfacile, turned his slippers towards the porter, and presented him with a ten-shilling note and a sample of that same sly and succulent smile.

“Have a drink, Bates.”

“Thank you, sir. Congratulations, sir.”

Mr. Fothergill went up the stairs in his slippers. Congratulations indeed! O, well, there might be something in it after all, something to keep Octavia occupied, and prevent her from posing before him as a sort of Tragic Muse.

Why the devil couldn't a woman let life be all slippers and sherry? So damned psychological! Yes, like Sarah Siddons in a white sheet attending a meeting of the Theosophical Society. Well, she could experiment on the young soul.

He decided to have a hot bath.

Pitt walked with solid briskness to his house—No. 5 Chandos Place. His very walk was both hygienic, efficient and prosperous. His brass plate bore the name of Dr. Penrose Pitt. He had become officially Dr. Penrose Pitt, and the alliteration was apt and rotund. It was spatted and clean and polished, a smooth chin, a confident forehead, a humanity that was both ivory and honey. A woman in a blue linen apron and cap was polishing the metalwork of No. 5's apple-green door. She was a fresh-coloured woman, big, blue-eyed, deep-chested, and her smile was the smile of health.

"Good morning, Mrs. Woodhill."

"Good morning, sir."

She let him pass, and then closed the door, and sailed past him. She was one of those big women who can float like thistledown. Pitt went up to his bedroom to change his shirt, and by the time he had reached the bathroom his shaving water was in the basin, covered with a clean white towel.

Yes, that was the sort of woman a man wanted about the house, a supremely healthy and sunny person, not one of your moody whimperers, a rag-bag, full of emotional odds and ends. Health was so supremely important, especially to a man like Pitt whose day was dedicated to disease.

Pitt shaved himself. He had one of those plump faces that are easy to shave, and he used cream on his skin. An effeminate practice? Not a bit of it. More than three-quarters of his patients were women, and Pitt, shrewd ambassador from the Kingdom of Aesculapius, understood women. He understood the supreme importance of skins and scalps, and the disasters that are caused by gastric discords and inhibitions. Sunlight. Violet rays. A doctor had to provide vitality.

He was prospering. He had educated himself to be an expert in the matter of skins and diet. Many a medical reputation can be wrecked on an unresolved acne spot. Prove yourself sympathetic towards a woman's complexion as well as to her temperament, and she will swear by you. St. John's Wood was swearing by Dr. Penrose Pitt.

His breakfast was ready. Woodhill, the husband of Mrs. Woodhill, removed the lid from Dr. Pitt's porridge plate. Woodhill had been in the navy. He understood discipline.

“There was a telephone call last night, sir.”

“A patient, Woodhill?”

“No, sir; a gentleman named Steel wanted to speak to you on the phone.”

“Steel?”

“Yes, sir, rang up from Narbiton. He wouldn’t leave a message. Said he would ring up again.”

Dr. Pitt sugared his porridge.

Steel! What was the matter with young Steel. In trouble of some sort?

For, to Dr. Pitt, the telephone was associated with appeals for help. Occasionally, people rang him up to ask him to dine with them; but more often the message concerned itself with the disharmonies of unwise dining.

3

Archie Steel arrived at the gate of “Clovelly.” This gate was a gate of moods and of white paint, and far less innocent than it appeared, for it had been assembled in its raw state by a firm of local builders. It shrank in dry weather, and swelled when the air was humid. It refused to be properly and decently latched, or it jammed itself so securely that some force was required to overcome its contumacy.

Archie Steel was not happy, nor was he in a temper to suffer the gate’s misplaced fooling. The day had been wet, and the night equally wet so far as Steel was concerned, two double whiskies in the “snuggery” of the Royal George. Inspired by those drinks he had attempted to ring up Dr. Pitt at St. John’s Wood. A rather desperate occasion! The voice of Woodhill had informed him that Dr. Pitt was out. Would the gentleman leave a message? Steel, his blue eyes set in a stare, had returned to the snuggery and ordered yet another whisky-and-soda. How could a fellow leave a message to the effect that he was financially embarrassed, yes, and disastrously so?

He gave a push to the gate, and the gate remained closed. He got hold of the iron ring of the latch, and twisted it, and so savagely that the flimsy fitting came off in his hand. He flung it into the front garden, said “Blast you,” and swarmed over the top.

But this attacking spirit faded away in front of “Clovelly’s” door. Steel found his latchkey and fumbled his way in with surreptitious carefulness. He closed the front door very gently, and as he did so he realized that the drawing-

room door was open, and the room illuminated. Irene was sitting up.

A voice challenged him.

“That you, Archie?”

Of course it was Archie. Why did women indulge in the obvious?

“Yes, old thing.”

He put his hat and coat away in the hall cupboard, and confronted that open door. Irene had been sitting up for him; Irene would say things to him. He eased his collar with a rotatory movement of the head and entered the domestic orderly-room. His wife was sitting in front of the fire, with a book in her lap. She was a little woman, a brunette with an arched nose, patches of high colour on her cheeks and small, bright eyes. The daughter of a prosperous tradesman in a south-coast watering place she had brought into the partnership a hot temper and three hundred a year.

She said—“Where have you been?”

Steel saw his wife in profile, and her nose was a little, angry beak. He was afraid of Irene. It was ridiculous but true. She dominated him. She was as sharp as a razor. Blandishments had ceased to have any effect on her.

Steel came round from behind her chair, and bent down to poke a depressed fire.

“Oh—I met old Gregson. He wanted a game of pills.”

“I suppose you forgot?—Leave the fire alone.—It’s nearly eleven o’clock.”

“Forgot!”

“The Humphreys were coming in for bridge.”

“Good lord, so they were!”

He replaced the poker in the fender.

“Awfully sorry, old thing.”

He was aware of a foot in a black satin shoe jigging up and down.

“You were at the Gregsons, were you?”

“Yes.”

“That’s rather funny. I rang up the Gregsons.”

Steel felt an ass, and he looked it.

“Well, that’s a spoof. Fact is——”

But he was not to be allowed explanations. The offensive was Irene’s.

“You’ve been out—with a girl.”

He assured her that he had done nothing of the kind.

“Yes, you have. I’m fed up with you. And you’ve been drinking again.”

He could not deny that accusation. His blue eyes looked resentful and a little fuddled.

“Oh—all right, all right!—I suppose a fellow——”

“The Royal George—I suppose?”

“Yes, if you must know——”

She got up and shut the door. It was a prophetic gesture. She was not the sort of girl who dissolved into tears. She became like an angry bird, chattering and flapping her wings.

“It’s—simply—disgusting. It’s—it’s—impossible! What’s the use of my telling you—? What’s the matter with you?”

He looked at her sulkily.

“We don’t seem to agree very well, old thing.”

“Whose fault is that?—I’ve tried to make a social position here.—I tell you what it is, the war spoilt you.—You can’t live decently.—You’re simply mad for sensation. O, yes, that’s what it is. You’re a fool—always after women and excitement and horses. You’re bored with me and this house. And—I tell you—my lad—I’m pretty bored with you. I’m through with the show. I’m going back to my people.”

He sat down in the other armchair. He looked scared.

“I say, kid, don’t be so—quick with me—I know I’ve been a bit of an ass. Fact is——”

She got up and gave the chair a push.

“You’ve said all that before. I’m sick of it.—O, go to hell. You can sleep in the spare room.”

“Irene!”

But she was out of the room and had banged the door. He heard her run up the stairs, and the quick, angry passing of her feet overhead. He put his hands

in his trouser pockets. His face looked swollen and glum. His blue eyes stared.

So—that was that! He was in a nice mess, yes—pretty completely so. It was quite true what she had said of him. After six months of marriage and civic responsibility he had begun to lust after the larger liberties. He was an expansive person, a genial sensationalist, and “Clovelly” had proved itself so limited. The sex in Irene had ceased to pique him, perhaps because she was rather over-sexed. His wife was a snob. She had a small car of her own, and gave little dinners at “Clovelly,” and treated her friends to the two shilling fauteils at the local picture-house. She had made Archie join the Narbiton Tennis Club. She had even taken him to church. She smoked a great number of cigarettes, and talked vivaciously in a high-pitched voice, and was determined to be considered smart. She would try and talk “books and theatres.”

Bored? Yes, he had been profoundly bored, and not a little rebellious. She was so bossy, and she had objected to some of his friends.

“Have a drink, old lad.”

He was always ready to stand a fellow a drink, and even to lend him a quid. He had a high colour. He liked to swagger, and swagger can be expensive.

But what about the present mess? He had been out with girls. He had been betting. He had been drinking and playing billiards. One particular girl was in trouble and beginning to make trouble.

He had borrowed money from his wife.

“Lend me a fiver, darling.”

Later, Irene had refused to lend him money.

He had borrowed money from——.

“O, damn!”

Yes, he was in a devil of a hole. He had thought of the various people who could extricate him, some of the old crowd. He had written to Sherring, and the letter had been returned to him—“Address unknown.” Confoundedly awkward that! Some blighter in the Post Office had read that appeal for help. He had written to old Crabbie, and Crabbie had sent him a candid and friendly refusal. “I’m sorry, Archie, but I’m not a capitalist. Everything I have is in the farm.” Lastly, it had occurred to him to ring up Dr. Pitt. Pitt was a prosperous fellow and a good sort.

But what about Irene? Yes, obviously Irene had her suspicions. She had

been repulsing him lately, and refusing to be intimate in bed. There was a resentful rigidity about Irene.

Was she in earnest about going to her people?

If so, what was to become of him?

The thing was absurd.

He rose, went to the door, turned out the light, climbed the stairs and paused outside their bedroom. He tried the door. It was locked.

He began to feel very full of emotion. He was sorry for himself, and sorry for Irene.

“I say—Kid.”

“What d’you want?”

“I say—I’m sorry. I’ve been a bit of a bloody fool. I wish you’d let me ____”

Her voice was refined and caustic.

“Why—bloody?—Why be—vulgar? I want to go to sleep, please, if possible.”

He slunk away to the spare bedroom.

Well, really, this was the ruddy limit! Things seemed to have conked out rather badly. He would get up bright and early, and see if the dawn could produce less hopelessness. If Irene would let him into her bed—their bed—he might be able to thaw her.

4

Mr. Lionel Loviebond was a little anxious. Shareholders meetings can be uncomfortable affairs when two or three disgruntled gentlemen rise to ask awkward questions, and not only ask them but insist upon their being answered. “Imperial Utilities” had disappointed the public. The company had had a bad year, and it was said that the directors had decided to pay no dividends upon either the ordinary or the deferred stock. Unpleasant rumours were in circulation, and the general meeting promising to be a sea of trouble. Loviebond was worried. Would Mr. Bernard Bastable be able to hold the meeting? Bastable was a very young chairman; he had infinite assurance, but in a crisis such as this mere bluff might not succeed. The Loviebonds were interested in “Imperial Utilities.” They had helped to place a portion of the

stock; they had advised clients to buy “Imperial Utilities,” and the firm was receiving some unpleasant letters.

Loviebond rang up Challis House.

“I want Mr. Bastable.—That you, Bernard? Yes—I shall be at the meeting. Some of our clients have been playing at Auntie Fuss.—I hope you will be able to give us something to reassure them. What?—You don’t mean to say—? What,—you are going to declare a dividend?—By George, that’s splendid! But my dear chap, it was supposed to be known unofficially that you were going to pass—What?—Oh—I see—. Well—I’m damned! What a joke! Got ’em stiff, haven’t you? Great man.”

Mr. Loviebond walked across to Gresham Street with his tail very much up. He felt that he was going to enjoy that meeting. The people who had been put up to make trouble would be made to look damned foolish.—The big room was crowded, and Loviebond was unable to secure a chair, so he stood with his back to the polished panelling, his monocle in his eye. The place hummed, and Loviebond was wise as to this inducement of sound. Just like a lot of angry bees! Well, it was going to be rather funny. He stood there feeling superior and sardonic.

A little waspish person next him, one of those hairy, be-pince-nezed fellows with ragged eyebrows, held a paper of notes and a pencil like a monkey holding a nut. One of the curmudgeons obviously! Loviebond tried to read the little man’s notes, and he became suddenly suspicious and glanced up irritably.

Loviebond smiled at him.

“Going to be—rather lively—I think.”

The little man snarled—“I should say so—Interested?”

“Slightly.”

“We’ve got some voting strength here. We mean to push for a poll if necessary.”

Loviebond removed his monocle and polished it.

“That may not be necessary.”

It was not. When those august citizens took their places on the platform Loviebond saw that Mr. Bastable was wearing a white carnation. There was no welcoming applause. The meeting was grim and expectant, rather like a disillusioned dog chained up in an area.

The chairman’s speech!

“Gentlemen—my task to-day is both pleasant—and a little difficult——”

The voice of an interrupter rose from the centre of the room.

“I should like to say that we want facts—not eye-wash.”

The chairman smiled.

“Will the gentleman be patient and wait for the facts.”

Loviebond stood and watched Mr. Bernard Bastable. By George, Bernard was exquisite; he had the right manner, debonair, shrewd, dignified. A humorous and almost paternal suavity! Clever devil! Mr. Bastable began by being calmly gloomy. He produced to the meeting all the adverse circumstances that had balked the activities of “Imperial Utilities.” Yes, flotation costs had been heavy. They had had to write off——

The meeting murmured. It shuffled. The little hairy man next to Loviebond fluttered his notes. He was eager to yap.

The chairman raised a glass of water from the table, sipped it leisurely, put it down again.

“Gentlemen—that is the worst.”

He smiled like a beneficent sallow god.

“Now, as to the future. I am glad to be able to tell the meeting that our company has secured certain contracts. Yes, signed contracts.—I will give you a few of the details. They have not yet—appeared.—May I say—that our directors have wished to put before you—sincerely and honestly—the position as it was. We did not wish to humbug our shareholders. But—now—gentlemen——”

There were other murmurings, smiles, an expectant restlessness. The little hairy person stood with raised eyebrows.

Bastable continued. He was like a pontifical godfather dropping plums out of a bag: ripe, rotund, luscious plums.

He grew expansive.

“Well, gentlemen, we were prepared for a little criticism to-day. In view of our prospects we propose to pay a dividend of 5 per cent. on the ordinary shares, and 2 per cent. on the deferred shares. The directors feel that they are justified by the prospects of the company. And now, with these considerable contracts before you, we are prepared to listen to any criticism——”

There was none. The disillusioned dog was off his chain and out of the area, and ready to paw and to lick. There was a congratulatory hum, a satisfied, sibilant murmur. The little hairy man was twitching his eyebrows and looking cross and perplexed.

Loviebond heard him say—“There’s a ramp somewhere.” And Loviebond, flicking a little dust from a lapel of his morning coat, smiled at the figure of Bernard Bastable, and slipped away to dictate mellifluous letters to sundry discontented clients.

5

In the Essex Road Mr. Kettle had a neighbour, a ginger-haired man with a bottle-brush moustache. Kettle’s neighbour kept a fish-shop, a most unsalubrious fish-shop. It smelt, and it smelt considerably. Its haddocks were too haddocky for words, and Kettle asserted that they were so phosphorescent that if a string of them had been suspended along the Essex Road the Borough lighting costs could have been amended.

Moreover, Mr. Higgins’s manners were as haddocky as his haddocks. He was a scornful, slap-dash, cross-eyed merchant. He had a voice like a motor-horn with a cold in its head. He had blue hands with the nails worn to the quick. In cold weather he sniffed perpetually.

Kettle complained about his neighbour’s fish. He began by being jocular if caustic, but Mr. Higgins was not jocular. He told Mr. Kettle to go to hell and boil himself in oil.

There were words.

Kettle said that he had no intention of living next door to a ruddy refuse dump. Mr. Higgins’s haddocks made some of his lady customers feel quite faint.

Mr. Higgins sniffed at him, and was truculent.

“You mind your ruddy business.”

Kettle retorted by asserting that unless Mr. Higgins ameliorated the odour of his fish and his manners, he—Kettle—would see what the Borough sanitary authorities could do about it. Also, Mr. Higgins could keep a civil tongue in his head. And that was that.

Mr. Higgins said something about punching Mr. Kettle’s head.

Mr. Kettle took his coat off.

“Come on—then, try it.”

In the subsequent scrap Mr. Higgins lasted just fifteen seconds, and was knocked into one of his fish trays. A police constable appeared and insisted upon peace.

“Peace!” said Kettle scornfully—“you smell ‘is ‘addicks, orficer. ‘e’s a public noosance.”

Kettle’s blood was up, though he had tapped Mr. Higgins’s claret and blacked his eye. He put on his Sunday clothes and attended at the Borough buildings. As a respectable citizen and ratepayer he insisted upon a medical officer coming to smell Mr. Higgins’s fish.

His protest proved itself effective. A surprise visit was paid to Mr. Higgins’s premises. The authorities sided with the greengrocer.

Mr. Higgins was told to amend his methods.

Mr. Kettle allowed it to be known that he would make it his business to amend Mr. Higgins’s manners.

But the fishmonger was as financially unsound as his fish. He disappeared, and Mr. Kettle, who was prospering, took over the additional shop and filled it with fruit.

6

Standing between the snouts of two secondhand cars, a wistful, whimsical and slightly shrunken Sherring looked at the flowers in the shop window across the way. Great Rutland Street was draughty and cold in March, and little eddies of wind and dust would dance into the open shop and play round the feet of the gentleman in the black coat and vest and striped trousers. Sherring looked neatly shabby. That buccaneer, old Bliss, had accepted him as a commission man, and the bloom had faded on the secondhand car market.

The flowers over yonder did not fade. Narcissi, violets, anemones, hyacinths, tulips, sprays of mimosa, they came from that southern coast to which the fortunate few fled. Once during the war Sherring had been hurried to Italy with his division and those flowers called up memories of a blue sea, and a blue sky, olive trees and mountains, little white towers brilliant against blue horizons. There was nothing shabby or secondhand about those flowers. They blazed their colours and their beauty at him. They were like lovely children in this grim, commercial street where business gritted its teeth and was plausible and unctuous.

Mr. Bliss was always preaching at Sherring.

“Why don’t you tell them the story? Shove in a little colour. Tell ’em the old bus could do sixty at Brooklands.”

Sherring was not very good at telling a story. Not that he had any great respect for the world’s veracity, but certain inexactitudes stuck in his throat. He could not produce the proper, professional bombast. Had he been appointed to sell the world’s best car he would have sold it with success and like a gentleman. In pushing what was second best he was a creature of fastidious inhibition.

There was a patch of blue sky overhead when the girl swung round the corner on her long, slim legs. Sherring peered up at that shred of blueness rather like a bird in a cage, and then looked at the girl. His eyes had a certain shyness. She passed that way every morning, and usually she paused outside the flower shop window.

He wondered about her.

She was rather like a dark violet, pale, with smoky eyes, and very black hair. She did not look quite English. Her movements were quick and vibrant and almost birdlike. The curve of her chin was beautiful, and so was the sweep of her neck. She interested him. She dressed smartly but quietly in black, with a touch of cerise in her bosom. Her lips were red threads. She had for him the quality of mystery, the allure of those flowers. He noticed that she did not look at people, but would sail away with a suggestion of self-conscious aloofness. Her temperament seemed both dark and vivid. She had the pallor of her pride.

On this particular morning, as though becoming conscious of the pressure of his gaze, she turned and looked at him. It is possible that she looked at him longer than she need have done. Her eyes were dark and unsmiling. Then, with head up, she passed upon her way, mysteriously moving from the whence to the whither.

Sherring’s hand gently caressed the hard, cold radiator cap of one of the cars.

The girl interested him.

Moreover, the dark mirror of her youth had flashed no message, but he interested her.

An invisible thread had joined them across the street. It trembled. The spring was near.

IV

SHERRING walked to the back of the show-room where his hat and trench-coat hung on a black peg attached to a green door. The greenness of the door was soiled and shabby, and not like the face of April. In the glass enclosure that served as an office Mr. Bliss was dictating letters to the girl clerk. He possessed a voice that grumbled like some subterranean mechanism.

Sherring opened the door of the glass box.

“Going out for half an hour.”

Mr. Bliss stared at him. Mr. Bliss had a purple and pendulous lower lip.

“Going out! Why, it’s only eleven o’clock.”

Sherring smiled at him like a whimsical errant boy.

“Yes—I know; but I’m going out.”

He went before Mr. Bliss could gainsay him. He turned quickly to the right, his bleached brown mackintosh swinging in the crook of his arm. Rutland Street was very full of traffic for the moment, and blocking his view of the opposite pavement. He seized his chance and slipped through between a van and a large private car. His threading of the farther stream was equally swift and hazardous, an oblique dive that landed him on the pavement at the very feet of his adventure.

Her upward, startled glance arrested him. Almost he had blundered into her. He raised his hat.

“Sorry.”

For a moment her brown eyes had a liquid aloofness. She seemed to appraise him and his sudden nearness. He was no fortuitous creature thrown on the beach at her feet by the traffic’s tide. She belonged to the new world, a woman’s world that lived upon its wits, and carried the stiletto of a precarious pride.

She smiled.

“It’s quite all right.”

Her words diffused a more subtle implication. She had paused and was preparing to move on. She had looked at him as through a grille.—“Stranger,

what manner of man are you?” She had surprised in him a kind of shyness. He looked much older on this side of the street. She liked his eyes. She knew that she had but to show him a streak of ice, and that he would leave her.

She did not wish him to leave her.

He was watching her eyes.

“Is it—all right?”

She liked that whimsical note in his voice.

“It might be.”

“I’m going just a little way—up towards the Park.”

Her smile was quite open now like a flower with its petals spread.

“Business?”

He was walking beside her. She looked ahead, and he—at her face.

“No; I’ve cut business for an hour. Something more important.”

“Really!”

“Absolutely. I’ve been wanting to do this for weeks, and I hadn’t the cheek. That’s all.”

She swung along still looking into the distance. Their steps matched. The moment’s rhythm was mutual.

He said—“My name’s Sherring. Ex-officer—yes. I work on a commission job over there. Not much in it. Some of us came back and were landed on the rocks. Still—life’s rather good, or might be.”

She gave him a quick glance.

“Married?”

“No.”

“Are you any good at guessing?”

“Not a bit.”

“Well—try.”

“Stage?”

“No.”

“Hat shop?”

“Should I be—out here now?”

“Lady of leisure?”

She laughed.

“O, yes—sometimes. Ever heard of the Rutland Rooms?”

“I have.”

“I’m a dancing instructress there. Two to six, most days. Paid partner on Sundays. My share is a shilling for each lesson.”

They came to a crossing and paused on the brink of their intimacy. He looked at her with eyes that had ceased to smile. They were wistful, and quite clean.

“I say—London’s the most lonely hole on earth. May I come a little farther?”

She held her head slightly on one side, like a dark and listening bird.

“I think you might.”

“I’m not a cad, my dear.”

Her smile was poignant—bitter-sweet.

“I know something of cads.”

April was kind to them that day. It found a crown of pale gold for the young green of Regent’s Park and warmth for their youth and its desire. They sat on a seat sheltered by a bank of shrubs. Sparrows fussed round their feet, and fat wood pigeons paraded the grass. Beyond the trees the sunlight flashed upon the white faces of those immense and monumental mansions suggesting Nabobs and flowered waistcoats, and the brilliant, bombastic Brummell, and gentlemen in curricles. The girl sat relaxed, with her hands in her lap, listening to the bird notes in her heart. Sherring, one arm flung over the back of the seat, sat turned towards her. He wondered at the whiteness of her skin, and was lost in the blackness of her hair. The tremulous, sweet cold ecstasy of the prelude! Mystery! A blue sky patterned with white clouds. Shadow and sunlight on the grass.

He wondered at her and at himself. Why had it not happened to him like this before? He was thirty-five years old. This sudden, strange feeling of inevitableness! He looked at her hands. They were mysterious hands.

Her voice was deliberate and of low pitch. It did not jump hither and thither and up and down. He found the voices of most women so restless and

silly. He had forgotten all about Mr. Bliss and the secondhand car mart, for he had strayed into the Goblin Market.

2

She looked at him steadfastly with her dark eyes.

“Isn’t it strange that I should be telling you all this?”

For, quite simply and with an air of tranquil consent she told him her history. Her name was Manetti, Miranda Manetti. Her father had been an Italian ‘cellist in a theatre orchestra, her mother an Englishwoman, a farmer’s daughter from Wessex who had acted as a lady’s maid to various women of quality. Both her father and mother were dead. She had been an only child.

Sherring could match a part of her story.

“My father’s still alive. We never see each other and never shall. We did not hit it off. I was an irresponsible young devil. Wouldn’t stay put. We hated each other.”

“What is your father?”

“A country solicitor. Marvellous old man—in his way. Fine practice. Sent me to Winchester and Oxford. He expected me to join him. I was too wild for an office chair.”

“You never see him?”

“Never.”

She understood.

“You wanted—freedom?”

“That’s it. Most illusive thing on earth—freedom. You have to be a tramp or a millionaire. How long have you been on your own?”

“Five years.”

She had begun her training as a stage-dancer, at a professional school, but neither her temperament nor her physique had found the life of a ballet dancer sympathetic. It had been too crudely competitive, a jangle of strong young creatures, greeds and jealousies. A rather macabre affair unless you had a face of brass. She hadn’t. She was a little afraid of crowds. Yes, she had seen one girl kick another in the bosom. She had met a woman who ran a dance-school and club, and had worked with her for a while until she had realized that such a life expected you—— Yes, she confessed that she was fastidious. In that place

you had been hunted by any sort of man, surreptitious, elderly Juans. She had managed to get taken on at the Rutland Rooms as an instructress. There were six of them. In her present job she could to some extent steer herself as she pleased. At least—the surface of life was decorous. She went to her work and came from it. She confessed that she cultivated an air of casual frankness, and had taught herself to tolerate and elude errant tendresse. Her eyes and her mouth were whimsical when she described to him how she would romance to the client who was impressionable. She would describe herself as a married woman and a mother.

“I’ve got to rush home and put the kids to bed.”

Sometimes she was followed.

“But I can skate round corners, or disappear like that blackbird into a bush.”

She smiled at him a little poignantly.

“Running away from life—always.”

She lived in a bed-sitting room in Adam Street. Yes, she had one or two friends, girls, a dentist and his wife, a woman who ran a hat shop and supported an invalid husband. Her interests? Well, in the evening she was tired, and in the mornings she was preparing to be tired. Her feet troubled her at times. Yes, she loved the concerts at Queen’s Hall—but if you went to the pit at a theatre that meant standing. She liked a chair and a book, or a seat in the park. Her future? O, well, had the modern show any future? Talk about the futurists! You just fluttered from day to day.

He found her gazing at one of the big white houses beyond the trees. These houses looked like strong and secure cliffs confronting the crowd’s scramble.

“How would you like to live there?”

He laughed.

“I never shall. I’m much more likely to end up as a tramp, or in the Foreign Legion. But I’m a bit too old for the Foreign Legion.”

Her glance was innocent.

“You don’t make much?”

His answering smile was whimsical.

“No; I’m no catch, my dear; and somehow you’re not that sort, thank God.”

3

He waited for her in Rutland Street where the shops had closed tired eyelids and all the world was hurrying home. Home? It was a word which he had never quite understood since his mother had died when he was thirteen, and his father had turned the big red house at Murchester into a sort of legal penitentiary. He walked up and down, up and down, and the lights glimmered gentle eyes at him in the dusk. She had said that her day's work might be over at six, but she could not promise to be punctual. She might be assigned to a new pupil, some rejuvenated citizen who came to snatch a lesson before going home.

He was not impatient. Waiting for her pleased him, and life had a new reasonableness in that it was transfused with the mystery of desire. She was teaching someone to dance. The whole world seemed to be learning to dance. Even old Bliss put on a boiled shirt and a sly buxomness, and toddled off to a night-club.

No, in the future he would not wish her to go to night-clubs.

But, old Bliss! He laughed noiselessly. He had had trouble with old Bliss after his morning's passion in the park.

Old Bliss had bawled at him, "I say, my lord, what about attending to business? I'm not saying that you are much of a boy at business. But blowing off into the blue! I 'ad five buyers in 'ere while you were taking the air."

He had found a small piece of fluff on the sleeve of his coat, and he had flicked it at old Bliss.

"Quite abominable of me, wasn't it? And did you sell anyone a pup?"

He had expected an explosion that would extrude him into the street, but the thing had not happened. Mr. Bliss had swallowed his gay insolence. Almost, Mr. Bliss had seemed to like it, and to genuflect to it. He had guffawed and he had grumbled. Old Bliss wasn't a bad sort. He suffered from the illusion that it was rather chic to have a real gentleman about the place. It added lustre to his secondhand merchandise.

A slim, dark figure appeared on the pavement just when he was passing the side door of the Rutland Rooms. She was a little breathless.

"I'm late. So sorry."

She looked at him anxiously.

"I had to give a lesson——"

Two lamps lit the entrance to the Rooms, and she could see his face quite plainly. He was holding his hat and smiling down at her and his eyes were kind. She was conscious of relief. She was wise as to the difference between lust and love.

“Well, it’s worth while.”

He slipped a hand gently under her arm. His voice was gay, his touch delicate. Some men glared and were turgid.

“You’re tired, kid.”

She walked close to him, and consentingly.

“Just a bit. Two till half-past six, and my last—was a mastodon in spats.”

He laughed.

“Poor tired feet. Come along, we’ll go and get something to eat. There’s a place in Sancroft Street where you haven’t to pay for shirt-fronts and gilding. Know it?”

“Yes; a tea-shop.”

“They’ll give one eggs and bacon. Is that too——”

She laughed softly.

“I can just afford eggs and bacon.”

“Can you, young woman! Well, I can afford it for two once a week.”

She liked the gay touches of his tenderness. Strange, how swiftly this intimate sweet season had come to them. She drifted along at his side, soothed and happy, and in silence. It was not necessary to produce patter.

They sat for an hour in the tea-shop until the reproachful presence of a tired waitress moved them on. Out in the street he slipped a hand under her arm.

“Where can one sit in this damned city?”

“If we were children——”

“Which we are! But I’m not going to drag you about, my dear. You’ve been on your feet for hours.”

They wandered up the street and paused under a lamp. She could not go to his room, nor he to hers.

“Barred out.”

He looked down at her whimsically.

“I think I’ll send you home to bed.”

But she had an idea. She did not want to be alone yet.

“Come and see one of my friends. She has a shop in Quorn Street. She lives over the shop.”

“Will the lady——?”

“O, she’s rather a dear. Mrs. Flanders, the one with the invalid husband. I often go in there.”

“And how will you explain me?”

Her face had a soft sheen.

“Well—how?”

“Just as you please, Mira. I’m nothing and everything.”

“Mrs. Flanders would understand the everything.”

“That sort of woman. Woman—but not good.”

“She’s the kindest thing——”

“That’s what I mean, my dear. She doesn’t want to cover your soul with American cloth. Come along.”

The side door of Mrs. Flanders’ hat-shop in Quorn Street was painted green, and the woman who opened the door to them was yellow-haired and florid. She wore a pink kimono and blue slippers, but her colour was catholic.

“What—Mira!”

She observed Sherring.

“May I bring my friend in and introduce him, Connie?”

Sherring was holding his hat.

“I want to meet Mira’s friends, Mrs. Flanders.”

“Of course. Come in.”

“This is Captain Sherring, Connie.”

Mrs. Flanders held out a hand, and looking him straight in the eyes, she liked him. He was the first male thing that Mira had brought to her friend’s house. That was significant, and it was well.

The house and Connie Flanders accepted them. Mr. Flanders was

perpetually in bed, and the room in the first floor was full of Connie Flanders and her stocky, bland soul. It was untidy and shabby and comfortable, and containing without being crowded an incongruous collection of objects, a sofa, chairs, two hats on stands, two tables, a piano, a gramophone, a bookcase in which books stood and lay and leaned, a gas-fire, bead curtains over a cosy corner, innumerable photos, a pot of tulips, a fur coat flung over a chair. Like its owner it was a warm, comfortable, well coloured posy of a woman with an incipient double chin and the kindest of blue eyes. A green plush portière protected the door. Mrs. Flanders' front was rather like a portière.

"Sit down, my dears, yes—anywhere."

She pushed a box of cigarettes at Sherring, and again gave him a glance of rapid scrutiny. He smiled straight in her eyes. She turned to look at Mira. Yes; this man was all right.

"Have some coffee? I was just going to make coffee."

"We'd love it."

"I was evolving hats; but they can wait."

Sherring was looking at one of the hats, a black thing with a cerise flash. He lifted it off the stand, and seeing that Mira had removed her own hat, he—with an air of whimsical dignity—placed the other hat upon her head.

"Splendid! You ought to put her in your window, Mrs. Flanders."

Mrs. Flanders' ruddy face crinkled itself up.

"Now—I wasn't quite sure about that hat."

Sherring smiled at her.

"Sure—now?"

"Quite. But—I think she's in somebody else's window!"

"Wise lady. And I'm the urchin out in the street."

Mrs. Flanders left them alone together for ten minutes. Mira lay back relaxed in a chair, and Sherring stood smoking his cigarette and looking at her.

He said: "I ought to have been sacked to-day."

"Because?—Tell me."

He told her. Her face had a sweet seriousness. She could be very gentle away from the competitive crowd.

"Why do you do that?"

“Necessity, my dear.”

“But you are so much too good for it.”

He turned away for a moment and flicked ash into the tulip pot.

“I? O, make no song about me. I’ve always been an irresponsible ass. A playboy.”

She was grave with him.

“Yet—you are proud.”

“Am I? I was damned proud in the war, my dear. In civies I have always been a sort of misfit. Well, one can learn to laugh. Let’s laugh together.”

She looked poignant for a moment, and then her eyes lit up.

“Yes, so few people can laugh. Isn’t it strange.”

4

Mrs. Flanders gave them coffee and cigarettes and some conversation, and when they had talked for half an hour she asked them whether they would mind if she turned on the gramophone. It was her husband’s hour. If his bedroom door was left open he could hear the music, and apparently it helped him to go to sleep. Like Heine’s, his disease was some lesion in the spine, and it made of his bed a death-bed without suffering him to die.

Sherring offered to help with the gramophone and look out the records. They were stacked in a pile under one of the tables.

“What’s your husband’s fancy?”

Apparently Mr. Flanders favoured the classical formalists such as Bach, Haydn and Handel. Wagner was too utterly alive and sensuously rampant for a living corpse. Sherring, sitting astride a chair, fed the machine with Bach and Handel. Had he had his way the night would have danced in Vienna to the music of Johann Strauss. Mrs. Flanders went to and fro between the two rooms, leaving each door ajar. Apparently she made some confession to her husband, for she came back to Mira and Sherring with an air of jocund lightness.

“I’m afraid I shall have to turn you two out in ten minutes. But before you go—a little dance music.”

Sherring glanced at the door.

“What about your husband?”

“O, he asked for it.”

Mira, on her knees, found a couple of fox-trots and a waltz. She looked at her lover, and he nodded. O, yes, he danced, but there could be no dancing in this somewhat congested room. But the lilt of the music infected them. In those days that sick cow—the saxophone—did not make a melancholy mooing, and those dance tunes had lash and timbre. Mira, standing by the window, moved feet and arms and shoulders, the little sinuosities of sound seemed to ripple through her.

Sherring’s eyes met those of Mrs. Flanders.

“Yes, isn’t it a pity?”

“Yes—but if Mira and I were a couple of kids. The pavement.”

He threw up the lower sash and looked out.

“Not a soul. Should we scandalize Quorn Street?”

Mrs. Flanders shook her head.

“Hardly.”

It was more than a whimsy with him. He held out a hand to the girl. “Come, to the dance. Good night, madame, you have been kind to us. My child, can you tango?”

“Can you?”

“Try me.”

Like a couple of children they stormed down into Quorn Street. Mrs. Flanders did possess a tango record, and the vibrant, seductive swagger of the thing drifted down to them. Sherring had pinned his hat under the door-knocker. He fastened the lower button of his jacket. He was gay, gaillard, and she loved him for it. She snapped her fingers, tapped with her heels on the stones and swung to him. She dared him. Love danced.

Head back, swinging to the lilt, she looked at him.

“Why, you’re wonderful.”

“With you.”

Mrs. Flanders, head out window, watched them, and when the record ran itself out, she set it for an encore. The street was deserted. It might have been a piece of stage scenery for those two.

Neither of them saw the constable till he was close upon them. He had arrived on surreptitious if solid feet.

“Hallo—what’s the idea?”

They swung apart, Sherring head up and laughing. The officer flashed a light upon his face. Probably the gentleman was drunk. Sherring’s teeth were very white.

“Better be going home, my lad. You can’t do this here.”

Sherring stood still.

“No—I’m not—merry, officer.”

“Well, you can’t do this here.”

And suddenly Sherring laughed.

“Ye gods, is this our world? If we sing and dance in the street—we are drunk. We must just run along like tin toys. Don’t you ever want to dance and sing, officer?”

“You’re being funny, sir!”

“Funny! Ye gods, what did we mortals fight for. Dora and the Almighty Dodo?—Well, good night, officer. We’re really quite respectable people.”

He recovered his hat from under the door-knocker, put it on, gave a gaillard arm to his partner.

“Which way are you going, officer. O—that way? Then we won’t embarrass you. Good night.”

They raced off like a couple of children. She looked up at his face, laughing and loving his gaiety. Women do.

V

SHE was preparing the spare room at Darrels for Captain Sherring.

As a guest-room it had no airs and graces. It was small, with one lattice window. Its ceiling was halved by a white-washed beam, and the walls had been distempered a pale pink. When you walked towards the door the floor discovered a sympathetic tilt in that direction and appeared to walk with you. As for the door, it was so frank and unconventional that when shut it would allow you to play peep-bo between its upper edge and the lintel.

The furniture was an old deal set painted white, the bed the plainest of cast-iron with a pink quilt. Una Crabtree had placed a tin of biscuits on the table by the bed, and a bowl of flowers on the dressing-table. Also, a box of matches and an ash-tray. She was a little anxious, slightly flushed, and her flush was not skin-deep. She passed a duster over the mirror and flicked the duster out of the window.

What a wonderful day! The bluebells were still faintly blue under the brilliant young green of the beeches. The white thorn was out in the hedges, and the field above the orchard buttercup gold. Stillness, serenity, a perfect sky, and late apple blossom falling. May tulips red-speared in the borders; a patch of honesty purple by the white gate. A blackbird singing.

Something sang in her heart.

She saw her brother leading the brown horse and the blue tumbril up the lane. Wasn't David ever going to find a mate? Lean, hard-bitten separatist, his beasts and the fruits of the earth seemed to satisfy him. Pigs, pigs, and yet more pigs. In her ironic moments she would say that the life-story of this Sussex farm was bound in pig-skin.

But there was no irony in this May day. She leaned out of the window, letting her blue-and-white duster hang like a flag in a dead calm. Some lines of Christina Rossetti's recurred to her.

“My heart is like a singing bird
Whose nest is in a watered shoot:
My heart is like an apple-tree
Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit;
My heart is like a rainbow shell
That paddles in a halcyon sea;
My heart is gladder than all these
Because my love is come to me.”

She felt the sun in her bosom. She was thirty-two years old, a green apple, yet with a hidden core of secret ripeness. Someone was coming to-day—her brother’s friend. She was conscious of excitement. This friend of her brother’s interested her. She felt that she knew the unknown man in him. Would he like her? She was so hungry for liking. Perhaps. She withdrew her blue-and-white rag, and in passing glanced at herself in the mirror. A word leapt to her lips.

“Idiot!”

She hated herself. She was suddenly ashamed. Pale hair, light eyelashes, sandy freckles, the chin of a man! Idiot!

She went down the stairs, the duster rolled into a hard ball in one hand. She had work to do in the sitting-room, flowers to arrange. Why—flowers? For him?—an anonymous stranger, a man’s man, a ghost, the unknown soldier! A photograph hung on the wall, a group of officers, and she turned to look at it. She had looked at it often before. Long ago she had picked him out as the one man who could interest her. His gravely ironic face looked at her; his eyes suggested that life was both a pathetic and humorous affair, as poignant a jest as an English April. What was he making of life now? How would he appear to her in the flesh?

With a sudden air of austerity she went on with her work. She was preparing all the food for the week-end, English food, a round of beef, rhubarb tart and custard, a steak-and-kidney pie, a sponge roll. Did he take porridge for breakfast? Was he a cold bath maniac? Would he want early morning tea? She had everything ready. The horseman’s wife was coming in to help her.

She glanced at her bookcase.

No, probably he was not interested in books. The English male preferred doing things to reading about them. He and David might talk interminably about the war, about Old This and Old That. Simple souls; and she was both so simple and so complex.

She stood and stared. Were not the complexities forced upon one? If life

satisfied you—probably you would be satisfied with its simplicity. Loving, and giving life to young things, and caring for those young lives. The illusion of maternity? But was it an illusion? Why did your poor flesh crave and complain?

She heard her brother's footsteps. He was too excited, eager for the coming of his friend.

"Everything O.K., Unie?"

"I hope so."

"Oh, it will be—with you in charge. Did the whisky come?"

"Yes, and four siphons. I've put out straight-cuts."

Her brother's eyes were happy.

"Old Sherring—I'm damned glad he's coming. I'm meeting the three-five with the trap. Real old English."

They had no car, not even a Ford, but he was talking of buying a tractor.

"No need to feel fussed, Unie. Sherring's easy."

"I'm not afraid, my dear."

But she was as frightened as a sensitive and dreamy young girl.

2

She had decided to give them tea in the garden. The table was ready under an apple tree. She sat in a deck-chair with a book in her lap. She had put on her light blue linen dress, and then—in a gust of impatience and as though accusing herself of being a fool—yes, and a wanton fool, she had changed that dress and put on black. She sat there looking plain and austere. Her book was an adventure in eugenics—its title—"The Unwanted Child." A blackbird was singing. She pretended to herself that she was absorbing those words, but her soul listened for other sounds.

She heard the clop-clap-clop of the pony's hoofs in the lane. Her brother drove straight into the stable yard, and left the pony to the horseman. She heard voices.

"No, you don't old man."

"I can carry my own suitcase."

"No you don't. Hand it over."

They were scuffling over that suitcase like a couple of boys. Apparently her brother had the best of the argument, for when they came round the house into the garden David was carrying the luggage. She heard Sherring say—“I didn’t bring war-paint, Crabbie. Is that all right?” “O, quite. What do you think!”

She had dropped the book on the grass, and she rose from her chair.

“Sherring—this is my sister. Another veteran.”

Need he have said that!

She felt stiff and awkward and self-conscious. She held out a hand. She was smiling into an east wind.

“So glad to see you.”

“Very good of you to put up with me, Miss Crabtree.”

He looked her straight in the face. He was instantly and kindly at ease with her. Crabbie’s sister, jolly good sort. Yes, no mystery, nothing to surprise a man or make him shy. She found herself full of self-mockery, and eager to escape.

“I thought we would have tea here, Dave.”

“Splendid. Remember that place called Le Vergier, old man?”

“Do I not! I say, can I help?”

“O, please don’t trouble. I have only to make the tea.”

When she reappeared with the teapot they were strolling up and down the orchard, diverging and then drawing together and smiling in each other’s faces. Their shoulders seemed to touch. They might have been back in France.

“What are you doing, old man?”

“Still selling cars.”

“I say, did you get a letter from Archie?”

“No.”

“The young blighter seems to be in trouble. He wanted fifty quid. I couldn’t do it.”

“But he’s married.”

“No salvation in marriage, Skipper, for lads like Archie.”

“No, I suppose not.”

They were facing about to walk back up the orchard. They had not seen her and the teapot. How superfluous she was!

She called—“Dave, tea.”

During tea she realized that Sherring was being polite to her, and bringing the conversation to his hostess. She was as gauche and as hesitant as a self-conscious and raw girl. She spilt the milk over her black skirt, and Sherring offered her his handkerchief. He was friendly and kind and impersonal.

“I hear that you were over at one of the base hospitals.”

“Yes.”

“Etaples?”

“Yes. Horrid, sandy place.”

He laughed.

“I was there once, and I thought it heaven.”

She flushed when he spoke to her, felt foolish, and then became cold as ice. She was congealing the atmosphere. Well she could go and wash up and leave them to smoke and yarn together. Would he take more tea? He would. He stood and waited for his cup to be refilled. His glance fell upon that unfortunate book. He bent down and picked it up. O, damn that book!

He was showing it to Crabtree.

“This yours, old man?”

“Mine. Good Lord, no; Unie’s. Una’s a bit of a highbrow.”

Her brother took the book from Sherring. He grinned.

“I say, sounds a bit—dreary, Unie.”

She looked hot and ashamed.

“It—is—dreary.”

She was glad to escape. She made some excuse about their wanting to gossip, and fled into the house. She sent Mrs. Godson for the tea-tray. She decided to get out her bicycle and to disappear for an hour. The party was so essentially male, and she a plain and petticoated adjunct. Why hadn’t she been born a man? But as a man wouldn’t she have been just as lonely? She had a temperament, brains. Yes, she was what her brother had said she was, a highbrow, and men loathe highbrows. She rode up the lane and into the main road, and half-way up the hill she met the rector’s wife, also on two wheels.

The rector’s wife gave her a cold, correct smirk.

“Good evening, Miss Crabtree. What a lovely evening.”

“Yes—perfect.”

They flashed past each other. The rectory did not approve of Una Crabtree. She was one of those awkward people who have views; she was too well informed; she was not orthodox. She could not sit out a sermon without fidgeting, because she wanted to contradict the preacher. The rectory understood that she bristled with atheistical quills. A rather uncouth young woman, who sat with her feet wide apart and stared at you. And so—very—plain.

3

She wandered into the garden, and suddenly he rose from a chair under one of the apple trees. How was it she hadn’t scouted from a window? She had proposed to be alone in the garden.

He smiled at her.

“David’s got chores to do.”

She stammered.

“Yes, there’s—so—much—on a farm.”

He stood and waited for her to sit down, but his formalism was friendly.

“Lovely spot you have here.”

He brought out his cigarette-case and as he opened it something fluttered to the grass and lay close to her feet, the photograph of a girl. She stared at it as her beloved “Christina” might have dream-gazed at some grotesque, jewel-headed toad. What an attractive face! He was bending to recover the photograph, and his eyes had an amused tenderness.

“Sorry, Miss Crabtree, but that’s a kind of informal introduction. I’m afraid I only have gaspers.”

He held out the case to her and her fingers fumbled out a cigarette.

“Oh—I like these.”

He slipped the picture of Mira Manetti back into the case, and the case into his pocket. He lit her cigarette for her, and sat down as though he felt at peace with this beautiful world. The purple patch of honesty close to the white gate

attracted his attention, for an oblique sun-ray was playing upon it and making it luminous.

“Rather an attractive plant—that. What is it?”

“Honesty.”

“Why—Honesty?”

She could not say. The name was somewhat sententious. Was there anything sardonic in the old nomenclature? Sweet William, and sops in wine, and shepherds bane, and love-lies-bleeding. But—Honesty! How right she had been to call herself an idiot. Reality had fluttered to her feet, or was it romance, some other woman’s romance?

He began to talk to her about her brother. He said that it made him feel happy to see David back in the world that was so obviously his. Yes, old David was part of the soil. Such a white man. He told her that David had been an absolute godsend to him over there in France, so reliable, so safe, so damned unselfish. Old David deserved everything that the world could give him. There was a pause, and he appeared to be waiting for her to agree with him.

She lay back in her chair and looked at the sky.

“Yes, it’s David’s life. He never gets blown over, and that’s so rare.”

“Well—I expect you help.”

“I?”

“Of course. He told me—that without you—he couldn’t carry on here.”

Inwardly she winced. What irony!

“Someone has to—accommodate. No—I don’t mean that. David’s such a dear. Of course—men——”

He was looking at her interestedly.

“We’re just like kids. We must have someone to admire our show. But—personally—I couldn’t farm. I don’t take root. If there’s a hill—I want to get to the other side of it.”

She frowned.

“Men can. But—a woman—is still nailed to a tradition.”

“Is she?—I wonder?”

“O, the new freedom! Yes, that’s all very well. The gate may be open—but ——”

“You mean, Miss Crabtree, that a woman can’t always will herself through an open gate?”

She laughed, but her laughter was tinged with scorn.

“The dear Germans had a way of referring to women as cows. It’s quite true. We—are—cows.”

He looked puzzled.

“Rather a primitive conclusion.”

She dropped the end of her cigarette into the grass.

“O, no. The calf complicates things; it isn’t always your own calf. Life may foist the creature on you. Our fatal feeling for sacrifice. Woman, Captain Sherring, makes a bad rebel.”

He sat and stared at the patch of Honesty. He was liking Crabtree’s sister. You could talk to her as you talked to a man.

He said: “I suppose that’s why women do such a lot of reading. They get life out of books.”

Again she winced, and bitterly so.

“Exactly—vicarious life. One hand in the linen cupboard, and the other —— O, here’s David—Dave, we were becoming quite highbrow here! Isn’t it nearly whisky time?”

Crabtree beamed on them both.

“What about a drink, old man?”

“Not a bad idea.”

Una was on her feet.

“You may as well have it out here. I have one or two things to see to.”

She brought out the whisky bottle, a siphon and glasses, and left them.

“Say when, old man.”

“Not too much, Crabbie. Quite like old times. Remember the orchard at Locon? Your sister has a head on her shoulders, old man.”

Crabtree pressed the trigger of the siphon.

“Jolly good sort, old Una. Looks after me like a mother. So—reliable. Doesn’t chuck her hand in or get funny.”

Sherring drank.

“Deep water—though, Crabbie. There’s a lot in her.”

“By Jove, I suppose there is. Always reading the most portentous books. Amuses her. Such sort of stuff gives me the doodahs. Well, here’s luck, old man.”

4

She was doing their guest’s room.

His poor pyjamas were very shabby. They were cotton pyjamas. But what were his pyjamas to her? And why should an intelligent woman be moved by such absurdities, the tricks of the trade as practised by shrewd sentimentalists and popular novelists? Nevertheless his pyjamas were shabby, and his suitcase even shabbier, and she liked him, even though he carried the picture of a handsome young wench concealed in his cigarette-case. She could have liked him so much more fiercely. Maternally? O, no, not that sort of humbug! She might be capable of reading and understanding some text-book of philosophy, but she was reduced to the elementals by a pair of cheap pyjamas.

Idiot!

Was it to be marvelled at that responsible women were rebelling against the honey-pots of sex? The man-thing, maternity, all the pleasant, subjective sensations that are supposed to be seated in the thalamus. Nevertheless, however impersonal you strove to be, the thalamus remained with you.

She fed the two men; she listened to their very simple conversation. Yes, normal man was a pragmatist, farmer, hunter, creator, player of games. He would always despise the creature who catalogued things, the card-index male, the donnish person, the critic of other men’s doings, the fellow who sat in a chair and to whom life was secondhand. Yes, most of the superior people were just keepers of secondhand book-shops. They knew all about books, and never produced a live book. Men like her brother and Sherring took life by the collar and made it theirs, and she knew in her heart of hearts that she would have piled all her prose into the dustbin and rushed out to play with these men creatures had they but called to her—“Una, I want you.”

Monday morning! A grey day. She was clearing away the breakfast things. He had gone. She could hear the pony clop-clopping up the lane.

He had looked her straight in the eyes. There was no mystery in her eyes for him.

“Good-bye, Miss Crabtree. I’ve loved being here. You have been awfully good to me.”

Just that! The frankness of man to man, or a salutation to a woman who was a damned good sort, a woman who could listen.

She piled his cup and plate on the tray. Somehow, she divined tragedy in him.

Idiot!

5

Sherring waited in Rutland Street. He stood hesitant and expectant outside the swing-doors of the Rutland Rooms. The vestibule was dim and empty. He could see a wide staircase going up, a kind of red plush scala santa. No porter was there to eye him suspiciously and to inquire as to an idle gentleman’s business.

He opened one of the doors and stepped into the vestibule. Someone was coming down the stairs on flying feet. She seemed to leap down the last three red steps.

He caught her; he kissed her.

“Mira.”

She laughed, turned a quick head this way and that.

“O, be careful. I might be——”

The place was a desert of discretion. She kissed him.

“Had a good time?”

“O, yes—just dreaming about the place and thinking of you.”

“Dear.”

VI

SHERRING came to the end of Radnor Road. He had caught the 6.4 from Waterloo, and at Narbiton Station he had asked the way to Radnor Road. It had been raining, and the evening was overcast, and the little red villas with their white facings looked like two files of infantry paraded for some rather solemn and dismal event. So, poor old Archie lived here in this suburban back street, an artery whose pulsations were expected to be regular in rhythm and of sober volume. Would the Archie of Narbiton ever remotely resemble the Archie of B Company mess?

Sherring found "Clovelly" half-way down the road. He gave a push to the white gate, and walking up a red-tiled path between two minute patches of grass he found himself on Steel's doorstep. He rang. No one answered the bell, and he rang again, and even while his fingers rested on the bell-push he was aware of a little surreptitious sound. Someone had raised the flap of the letter-box and peeped through it. The thing gave a faint click as it fell.

Sherring faced the door. If he had to deal with some scared and solitary little servant he might find his voice more reassuring than the bell.

"Is Mr. Steel in? I'm a friend of his."

A bolt clattered back, and the door swung open.

"Skipper!"

It was Steel himself, a somewhat dishevelled Steel in shirtsleeves and slippers. His face had a muddy look. He was two men in one at that moment, a sullen boy and the eager, impulsive sub. Sherring's hand went out. Yes, all was not well with the child.

"Hallo, Archie. Thought I'd look you up. Had to see a fellow down here about a car."

Steel held on to that hand.

"Well—I'm damned! Great business! Come on in, Skipper. Fact is, my wife's staying with her people."

Sherring smiled.

"Camping out?"

Steel was both effusive and embarrassed.

“That’s the situation. Actually—actually doing the Kettle stunt. Toasted cheese.”

Sherring went in with an arm over Steel’s shoulders.

“I’ll cheese with you, Archie. Splendid.”

“I say, old man, I haven’t a drop of whisky in the place.”

“Nothing to shout about. Tea will satisfy me.”

The door closed on them, and in that rather dim and narrow passage Sherring, with his hands on Steel’s shoulders, held him gently pinned against the wall.

“What’s the trouble, Archie?”

“Trouble?”

“Did you write to me about anything?”

“Yes; the letter came back.”

“I had changed my digs. I was down at Crabbie’s last week-end. Now, boy, what’s the trouble? You are not going to be afraid of me.”

Steel’s eyes were sullen and ashamed.

“Nothing to do with you, Skipper.”

“Don’t be an ass, Archie. I owe you one or two things.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. Remember that night at Zonnebeke?”

“O, rather.”

“Come along then.”

Steel hung his head. He did not resist.

“Oh—I’ve just been a bloody fool.”

“We’re all bloody fools on occasions. Feeling a bit bored with life and letting out—beanos?”

Steel was trembling.

“Yes; in off the deep end. Had rows with the wife. My fault. She’s blown off to her people. I’m in the soup, Skipper.”

“For how much?”

“Damn it—I’m not a sponge. Come on, inside. I’m busy in the kitchen, doing for myself.”

His slippers made a shuffling sound. He had the gas stove alight, and Sherring saw half a loaf of bread, a messy pat of butter and some cheese on the table. He was touched.

“Right ho, Archie, Welsh rarebit for two. We’ll have it in here. Now then, how much do you want to put you straight?”

Steel gloomed by the stove.

“Fifty quid would do it.”

“Right ho—I’ll write you a cheque.”

He sat down at the kitchen table, and produced a chequebook and a stylo. Steel stood and watched him. His face was getting out of control.

“Skipper, I——”

“It’s a loan, Archie. No interest.”

“O, hell, but——”

“Yes, O—hell—my lad. Get on with the Welsh rarebit.”

They sat opposite each other at the kitchen table, and Steel had the face of a man emerging from a debauch. He did not look at Sherring. He seemed to gulp when he drank his tea.

“Fact is, Skipper—I missed—all that—over there. All very nice for six months, and then—I felt—O—hell. I wanted to paint things red.”

“Rather rough on your partner, Archie.”

“Sure. You see—Irene’s rather refined; and she’s got a temper. She wouldn’t let me alone. I know I’ve been a bloody little fool.”

“Go and fetch her back, my lad.”

Steel stared at him.

“Crawl?”

Sherring passed him his cup.

“Look here, Archie, if one’s been a bloody fool, and I have on occasions, the most comfortable way out of it is to say so. I’m not pi, but some things are worth while and some aren’t. There’s a certain sense in settling down. There

won’t be any happiness for you in the wine and women game. Face up to it, boy.”

“How?”

“Join a golf club—have a family.”

“But Irene——”

“Doesn’t want—kids? Sure? Go and tell her you’re sorry. Are you sorry?”

“Yes; but if she’d——”

“Look here, Archie, go the whole hog. Go off the deep end with her. There’s not one woman in a hundred who won’t go off that way with a man—when she feels she’ll be in it with him. Tell her you know you’ve been an ass, and that you want other things now—the things that she and no one else can give you. You’d make a first-class father, Archie.”

“Me?”

“Of course. Kid’s hero and play-boy.”

Steel’s face was a droll mask set between laughter and tears.

“Archie—a kid’s hero! Say, Skipper, that must take some doing. Means you’ve got to——”

“Absolutely. Can’t fool kids easily. Try it. You’re not a cold fish, my lad. Try it.”

Steel stared at the loaf of bread, and then his gaze passed to the cheque lying on the table.

“By God—Skipper, I will.”

It was dark when they left “Clovelly,” for Steel wanted to walk with Sherring to the station. He had brushed his hair and put on a pair of boots, and some of the chubbiness had come back to his face. Steel knew a short cut to Narbiton station, and the last section of it ran as a path between the boarded fences of two rows of houses. This path was very dark, and just when the lamps of the station road began to glimmer at them, Steel stopped.

“I think I’ll go back now. You turn to the left, Skipper.”

“All right, Archie.”

He felt young Steel’s hands gripping his arms just above the elbows.

“Sherring, you’re a white man. I’ll never forget this. I can manage to pay you a fiver each month.”

“That’s all right, Archie.”

“No, it isn’t all right. I suppose I wanted the medicine, and I’ve had it. Good night, old man.”

“Go down to Hastings on Saturday, Archie.”

“I will.”

Steel’s hands relaxed, he drew back. He did not want to show himself in the light of the lamps because his face was out of control.

“Nobody else like you, Skipper. I’ll send you a line.”

The dark passage swallowed him up.

In the corner of a third-class smoker Sherring sat and smiled at a galaxy of little lights. He had been conserving the remnants of his war gratuity, some seventy-five pounds, and he had sacrificed two-thirds of it to stop a leak into that young fool’s fortune. He did not regret it. Possibly, Steel would pay him back, but that would depend upon whether the kid had the strength and the sense to save himself.

2

It was nearly eleven o’clock when Sherring reached Waterloo. He made for Hungerford Bridge, and half-way across he stood and looked at the lights and the river. He was in no hurry, for Mira was dining and dancing at The Green Cat Club with an elderly patron who was eager to practise his steps in public. Sherring smiled faintly. The embankment lights looped themselves round the vast throat of the metropolis. The brilliant bulk of the Savoy confronted him. Lights, precious stones, a night-club, people in search of sensation, a young woman with smoky eyes and a bobbed head of coal-black hair. Yes, he had begun to wonder whether Mira was not ambitious. Did not modern woman crave for a show of her own, to become a little more remote from the crowd while collecting her tribute from the crowd? “Miss Mira Manetti’s School of Dancing.” Excellent idea! But capital was needed, and—her lover—had not a hundred pounds in the bank. So, what were her prospects, unless she could interest some adopted uncle, some Obesicus Etruscus like the fellow who was perspiring at this club?

No, rather a rotten idea. He didn’t like it; he didn’t like it at all. He walked on across the bridge and down the steps into Villiers Street. A haggard street walker with golden hair stared in his face, and brushed against him. Some instinct made him raise his hat to her.

“Good night. Afraid—I have business.”

He walked fast up the slope to the Strand.

The Green Cat Club housed itself in Soho. Its front door was quite indistinguishable from the other front doors in Rufus Street, save that the management of the club made it difficult for non-members to pass that door. The Green Cat Club had no particular reason to fear the police; but it did cultivate an air of mystery and wickedness; and provide elderly gentlemen and very young gentlemen with a reason for believing that they were desperate fellows. It served up an indifferent dinner, a Russian orchestra, dubious wine at preposterous prices, and two or three quite mild ladies who were engaged to appear as vamps. Sherring was a member of the club, because membership was a more or less informal matter. It depended largely upon the management being assured that you would not make a nuisance of yourself, or introduce people who might be troublesome. The Club said to its patrons: “Yes, come and feel awfully wicked, and buy our liquor—but—after all—our establishment is a business proposition. You must not get drunk or be too rowdy. We may appear a little green and macabre, but really—we’re most carefully respectable.”

Sherring rang the bell. The door was opened by some invisible means, and within was a second door covered with green baize, and pierced by a brass grille in the shape of a cat’s head. A face could be seen through this grille, and Sherring spoke to it.

“Evening, Cragg. Yes, Mr. Sherring.”

The face grinned at him through the grille.

“Sorry, sir; but you know I can’t pass you in those clothes.”

“I’m not going into the rooms, Cragg. Miss Manetti’s here, isn’t she?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I arranged to call for her. Let me sit in your cubbyhole, there’s a good chap. I’ve been standing most of the day, and I want to sit down.”

Mr. Cragg, ex-guardsman and army heavyweight champion, opened the green baize door.

“All right, sir. I know you won’t make trouble for me, sir.”

“You are a sportsman, Cragg.”

The genial giant reclosed the green door. Mr. Sherring was all right, but there were occasions when Cragg’s geniality became grimly pragmatical.

Some idiotic youth became troublesome in his cups, and had to be put gently upon the pavement. Cragg never lost his temper or ceased to smile. He handled a rowdy as he might have handled a puppy. “You go home, sir. Yes, you’re a little bit gay. I’ll put you in a taxi.” The big man’s strength was persuasive. Even hilarious people surrendered to the inevitable.

“Gay night, Cragg?”

“Much as usual, sir. A few old gents, and two or three young splashers.”

At the end of the vestibule Mr. Cragg had his cubbyhole, a capacious glass box with a sliding window and a counter upon which a ledger lay open. Members had to sign their names in that Domesday Book, and also enter the names of visitors whom they introduced. There were two chairs in Cragg’s office, and Sherring sat down in one of them, and lit a cigarette.

“Have one, Cragg?”

“Against orders, sir, for me.”

“Of course. Cerberus can’t smoke. I shan’t be here long. Miss Manetti is leaving at twelve. What time is it?”

“Just gone half-past eleven, sir. I might manage you a drink, if you’d like one.”

“No, thanks, Cragg. I’m on the water-cart these days, save on special occasions.”

“Same here, sir.”

“Have to keep fit. How’s your boxing school going?”

“Not so badly, sir. I’ve got one lovely lad, but he’ll never be more than a welter, worse luck. The welter’s about the worst weight to match.”

“What’s your weight these days, Cragg?”

“Fourteen-seven, sir, stripped.”

“No fat.”

“Not much, sir.”

Sherring smiled at him.

“I wonder what you really think, Cragg, about some of the flabby idiots who come here?”

“I don’t think about them at all, sir.”

The bell rang, and Cragg went to the grille in the green door. He pulled a lever and the front door swung open. Sherring heard voices.

“Evening, sir.”

“Many people here, Cragg?”

“No, Mr. Bastable; rather quiet.”

Bastable! Sherring rose from his chair and won a glimpse of Mr. Bernard Bastable passing with a very cosmetic creature past the green door. Sherring sat down again abruptly, turned his chair, and picking up Cragg’s evening paper, became a listening-post. Bastable approached the office window and recorded his name and that of his partner. He did not look at the obscure person in mufti who was reading the racing news.

He turned away and rejoined the lady. Cragg was unlocking the door leading into the rooms. Sherring jumped up and saw Bastable’s large white hand resting against the folds of the lady’s black cloak. She was a superior product, very black and white save for a vivid mouth.

They disappeared within, and Sherring turned the ledger, and examined the entries—“Mr. Bernard Bastable—Mrs. Grylls.” Cragg, coming back, glanced at him a little reprovingly, and restored the book to its proper position.

Sherring laughed.

“Quite all right, Cragg. Curious coincidence. That gentleman was one of my subs.”

“Was he indeed, sir.”

“Yes. Does he come here often?”

“Oh—about once a month, sir.”

“Same lady?”

“No, sir—usually a different lady.”

“Ingenious fellow!—Doesn’t believe in keeping them too long.”

“There’s wisdom in that, sir.”

3

At five minutes past twelve Mira appeared in the vestibule with her Obesicus Etruscus. He was short and square with a kind, pink face, and in his way a figure of pathos. In fact he was an old man who was lonely, but not so

lonely that he was prepared to make a doting fool of himself. He helped Mira on with her cloak.

“I’ll drive you home, my dear. My man’s outside.”

“O, please don’t bother.”

Cragg was relocking the door leading to the “rooms.”

“Mr. Sherring’s here, Miss Manetti.”

At the same moment Sherring emerged from the porter’s box and Mira made haste to introduce him to her patron.

“O, Mr. Mason, this is my partner, Captain Sherring.”

Mr. Mason held out a warm, pink hand.

“Glad to meet you. Come to take care of her? Quite right.”

He was not piqued by the intrusion of youth. He offered to drive them both to Adam Street, and Sherring thanked him. It was kind of Mr. Mason; Mira had been on her feet most of the day, and no doubt she was tired.

“Yes, and an evening with an old heavyweight like me.”

“We got on splendidly.”

“Ah, you are being kind to an old man.”

Cragg had called up Mr. Mason’s car, and Mr. Mason put them into it like a father. He was proposing to sit on one of the squab seats, but Sherring would not hear of it.

“Absolutely no, sir.”

Mr. Mason patted his arm.

“O, very well. We won’t quarrel.”

His cheerfulness was not that of an elderly *tertium quid* making the best of an unflattering situation. He talked to Sherring more than he talked to Mira. He was lonely, and he wanted the people he liked to like him. He told Sherring that he had a flat in town and a little place in Bucks—yes—on the river. He said that he would be pleased if these two young people would come down and spend a Sunday with him. He would send the car for them.

In Adam Street he insisted on getting out of the car, and saying good night to them on the pavement.

“Now—remember—any Sunday. Let’s see—I have another lesson on

Wednesday? Good night.”

“Good night, sir.”

His car carried him away, and Sherring, with his arm linked in Mira’s, watched the red tail-light disappear.

“Tired, Kid?”

“No.”

“What about a five minutes’ ramble? You’ve had a pretty long day—though.”

“I’ve been sitting most of the evening, Jack.”

They walked along Adam Street. His arm was round her. He had certain things to say to her.

“I’m feeling possessive, Mira. These old gentlemen——”

“No harm in him. He’s rather an old dear.”

“O, yes—I pass Mr. Mason. Nice old boy. But I should have thought he would have had his feet on the fender.”

“He’s lonely.”

“Oh?”

“Lost his wife two years ago. Both his daughters are married, and I should imagine they are rather——”

“Fierce?”

“Yes.”

“Poor old lad. But, Mira, fact is—I’m getting prejudiced against the casual partner. Silly, but natural. And I’m not in a position to be prejudiced.”

“Why not?”

“I have just blued fifty quid upon a poor silly young ass who was with me in the war. In trouble—yes. That leaves me with twenty-five pounds of my little hoard. You can’t marry a silly ass—of that sort.”

She said—“I think that is the sort of silly ass I should like to marry.”

He kissed her, and turned her about.

“Time for you to go to bed. No—I’ve got peculiar views about marriage. The responsible half of me is a bit of a puritan. The other half is much too

much of a drifter. I don’t suppose I shall ever make much money. Marriage, my dear, is a financial commitment. I’m prejudiced against involving a woman in a permanent show unless I’m in a position to put up a good show for her.”

“You could.”

He smiled at her upturned face.

“Think so? I don’t. I’m one of the social misfits in this modern world. I’m in love with you—and I won’t marry you. You had better say—good-by-ee.”

She clung to him suddenly.

“I won’t. I don’t care. Does it matter? O, my dear, if we are—so much to each other——?”

“Just give and take? I don’t know, kid. What I do know is that it may be more caddish to marry a woman than not to marry her. The new morality! If you are a failure she can cut you adrift.”

“O, my dear, you mustn’t say that.”

VII

SHERRING explored the Essex Road on a Saturday afternoon late in May. If Great Rutland Street had put up its shutters and locked up its show-rooms and rushed off to the road, the river, and the playing field, the Essex Road had other enjoyments. It was attending to business. It was selling the world its Sunday dinner, and suggesting that it should buy gramophones and new clothes and cheap jewellery. It seethed and it shouted, and Mr. Alfred Kettle, having procured an early consignment of gooseberries, was offering them to the world. He had a rival across the way, some thirty yards nearer the Angel, and they crowed against each other like a couple of cocks. The other merchant might be nearer the Angel than Mr. Alfred Kettle, but most certainly he was not nearer Heaven.

Kettle wore a white sweater, coffee-coloured trousers, and no hat. His kinky black hair gleamed; his skin glistened, for he was hot. Yes, hot stuff, cheerfully combative, and with a bright eye for the ladies.

" 'Ere you are, mam—what price a Sunday tart? Fine gooseberries, first gooseberries in Islington. No, you won't get green goosegogs from the gent over the way. He ain't got none. I collared the market."

Kettle was doing good business, with Mrs. Kettle and a young woman to assist him. He was doing good business every day of the week save Sunday. If he subscribed to the credo of Peace and Prosperity he honoured it because life was still something of a combat. If Professor Elliot Smith tells us that the primitive community is essentially peaceful, and that commerce has made man combative, both combat and commerce are with us—like the unemployed. Man is for ever deluding himself. He shouts peace and wants war, not necessarily a war of gas and high explosive, but the battle of business. Communism waves a red rag and raves of an ultimate and sickly serenity, a brotherhood that would burst into blows from sheer boredom. India, blessed with the Pax Britannica, revolts out of absolute drab ennui. Ireland still seeks heads to hit, and if the head is English, God bless the shillelagh. Youth fights the air, or other youth on the football field. Man's passion for self-expression has become so strenuous that it cannot be painted in neutral colours. The struggle may be sublimated, but the strife is there. Combine clashes with combine. Socialism grows a red wing. The American gangster shoots up the city for graft and adventure. Nations manœuvre for markets.

Sherring found Kettle's shop. The late mess-orderly and cook was absorbed in trying to persuade a woman that fresh gooseberries were better value than Canadian apples. The whole of him was voluble and persuasive. Even his white sweater was eloquent. Sherring stood on the pavement just behind Kettle's business-like back. He listened and waited.

The lady purchased gooseberries. Kettle, ingenious fellow, had a wad of paper bags attached by a threaded string to his belt. He plucked a bag, blew into it, filled it, placed it on a pair of scales, threw in three or four extra berries, gave the bag a twist and handed it to the lady.

"Try Swiss milk with 'em, mam."

Sherring spoke.

"I think I'll have a pound of gooseberries, Kettle."

Kettle spun round, smiled all over his face, and saluted.

"Lord love a duck—you, sir!"

Sherring held out a hand.

"You seem full of business, Kettle."

"Full of beans and business, sir."

"I seem to have struck the wrong afternoon. My lazy time's your busy one."

"Saturdays, sir. Never you mind. Yes, mam? 'Scuse me just one moment, sir. Hi—muvver, come art 'ere, please."

Kettle was like the drummer in a Victorian German band. He could play several instruments at once, use hands, a foot and elbows. He served the crowd, introduced Sherring to Mrs. Kettle, talked to both of them, and attended to business.

"Marvellous, sir. You'll 'ave a cup of tea."

Mrs. Kettle was fair, blue-eyed and buxom, with a snub nose and a universal smile. She had more feeling for the conventions than her husband, and possibly she had social ambitions and ideas upon aspirates and loud language.

"Won't you step inside, sir?"

Sherring had raised his hat to Mrs. Kettle. So this was the lady who had insisted upon the house-breaking husband becoming a sedulous and respectable purveyor of spuds and sprouts. She looked it. She was one of those

solid, cheerful, roundabout little persons who are powerful persuaders. Ten years hence she would be sitting in a saloon car driven by Alfred on the Brighton road.

Said Sherring: “You’re much too busy, both of you. I shouldn’t think of wasting your time. How long does this go on, Kettle?”

“Till we drop, sir, or the stuff’s sold art. But we manage a bit of tea—by sections. I can scrounge ten minutes at five o’clock. Can’t I, mother?”

Mrs. Kettle nodded her solid head.

“I can manage for ten minutes, sir.”

Sherring had an idea, and it piqued him. He looked at his wrist watch.

“Four o’clock. Look here, Kettle—I’ll be amateur salesman with you for an hour.”

“You, sir?”

“Why not? I’d love it—but I don’t know the price of anything.”

Kettle grinned at Sherring.

“You’d be a babe, sir. ‘Scuse me——”

But Sherring saw that Mrs. Kettle did not approve of the idea. No, not at all. What might be a beano and comic for a couple of men was not chic in the feminine world.

“We have a nice sitting-room upstairs, sir. Alf, there’s a fellow with evening papers. Get one. Captain Sherring can be comfortable and read the paper.”

Kettle shouted at the newsvendor.

“*Evenin’ Liar*, old lad. All the runners, what!”

Sherring was given the *Evening Liar*, and was conducted upstairs by Mrs. Kettle who bounced up ahead of him like a cheerful rubber doll.

“Make yourself at home, sir. There are some of Alf’s fags.”

“You’re being very kind to me, Mrs. Kettle.”

She wriggled and beamed on him. His politeness seemed to tickle her, and to give her thrills.

“It’s a pleasure, sir. You sit down and make yourself at home.”

Sherring found the Essex Road and the interior of the Kettle sitting-room

much more interesting than the evening paper. Mrs. Kettle's culture had arrived at the aspidistra phase, brass-potted on a pedestal table. The Kettles possessed a gramophone and a piano, also a china cupboard and a mahogany purdonium. The old-fashioned arm-chairs and sofa had been supplied with loose covers in flamboyant cretonne. When the slub-rep age arrived, Mrs. Kettle would be slub-rep. There were an extraordinary collection of photos on the walls and the mantelpiece, but the room did not contain a single book.

Obviously, the Kettles had a liking for being photographed. The family history, romantic and commercial, was placarded upon the walls, Mr. and Mrs. Kettle walking out, Mr. and Mrs. Kettle in a marriage group! Mr. and Mrs. Kettle at Southend, Mr. Kettle with a donkey and cart, Mr. and Mrs. Kettle with the first little Kettle, Mr. and Mrs. Kettle with the second little Kettle, Mr. and Mrs. Kettle with both little Kettles. The Kettle family on Hampstead Heath. Mr. and Mrs. Kettle outside the shop. And over the mantelpiece an enlargement of Kettle in khaki, the hero, the "What did you do in the Great War, Daddy?"

Sherring was going round the picture gallery when he heard the buxom bounce of Mrs. Kettle upon the stairs. He returned quickly to his chair, and was found decorously reading the *Evening Liar*. Mrs. Kettle entered with a black japanned tray and her special china.

"Would you like an egg with your tea, sir?"

"No—thank you very much, Mrs. Kettle."

Tea was to be a solid meal, bread and butter and jam, and cherry cake and tartlets, radishes, and a fresh lettuce. Kettle's special Saturday delicacy was shrimps, but shrimps had been excluded from the afternoon's menu. Mrs. Kettle's solid, small hands put everything in order.

"I'm sending Kettle up, sir. Me and Molly can manage for half an hour."

"I ought not to have come on a Saturday, Mrs. Kettle."

"Don't you worry, sir. Kettle's jumping around like a pea in a pan—at having you here—at all."

"I am glad you are doing so well with the shop. Where are the kids?"

"Oh—I sent them up to play in Highbury Fields. Kids can be a noosance, sir, on Saturday afternoons. Sunday's their day. Sure you won't have an egg, sir?"

"Quite sure, Mrs. Kettle, thank you."

Kettle arrived in high fettle. He had put on a blue silk scarf and a black coat. He carried up the teapot.

“This is a bit of all right, sir. Not a bad little dugout?”

“Absolutely it—Kettle. Your wife must be very proud of the show.”

“She’s a caution to snakes, she is. Keeps me in order. Gives me lessons in deportment. Two lumps o’ sugar, sir. I ain’t forgotten. ‘Ave some radishes. Art of the shop.”

The good fellow was completely happy. He pushed bread and butter and jam at Sherring, and was so eager an host that had Sherring chosen to consume radishes, lettuce and jam all together in one green and red mess Kettle would have been delighted. Obviously, Kettle was finding life in the Essex Road full of adventure. He owned a Ford van, and careered down to Covent Garden in it, and played the skin-game with the bloomin’ wholesalers. He engaged in back-chat with the porters and other gentlemen who bought fruit and vegetables. He was the proud possessor of a growing balance at the bank.

If he boasted a little his boasting was human, an opening of the male heart to the man who had been his small god and master.

“I ain’t swankin’ to you, sir. Just a little bit of yappin’. ‘Ave some cake, sir.”

He cut Sherring a huge slab of cherry cake.

“Yus, Blighty’s not a bad old ‘ole. We’ve got a piano. The missus wants Gladys to ‘ave lessons—but—there—the kid’s only a cos lettuce—so to speak—just at present. ‘Ow’s the cake, sir?”

“Splendid, Kettle.”

Sherring compelled himself to stow away the cake, and to drink a second cup of tea.

“Quite like old times, Kettle. You’re coming to the next dinner?”

“Rather, sir. I wouldn’t miss it for monkeys.”

2

Sherring’s landlady brought him a letter.

For the last six months he had occupied a back bedroom and a front sitting-room on the first floor of No. 3 Cardigan Terrace. The name of Cardigan Terrace associated itself in Sherring’s mind with a conventional woollen

garment that might cover a multitude of sins. It was aristocratic neither in its savour nor its sourness. In fact it was a street in which the houses—all narrow and mean and high and of a dreadful likeness, were so many jaundiced, disillusioned faces.

"Letter, sir. Be in to supper, sir?"

"Yes—Mrs. Moxon. Thank you."

In Mrs. Moxon's estimation Sherring was the perfect gent. She gave him breakfast and supper on week-days, but no meal after midday dinner on the Sabbath. She was a woman who was perpetually depressed, and who went about looking for trouble, and usually she found it. Her pale, watery eyes were like the eyes of a surprised and prematurely senile child.

Sherring opened his letter. He had come to know that Mrs. Moxon could not be treated with too much sympathy. She had an unpleasant habit of standing in the doorway with the door open while she poured forth some lament. She was a dismal and draughty person.

Sherring's letter was from Steel, and Sherring read it with a little, whimsical, kind smile. A cheque for £5 was enclosed.

> "SKIPPER,
>
> "Everything's O.K. I just went in off the deep end as you advised me to do, and we wept on each other's necks. Irene's really been a wonderful little sport. She's as keen on the family idea as I am.
>
> "What I wanted was—kicking. You didn't kick me, old man. You were just damned generous, and kind—and I suppose—after all—that's better than the boot. I shall never forget that evening. Come and look us up, there's a good chap. Come and spend a Sunday. We'll take you up to Hindhead in the old bus, and have a picnic. The bus is the wife's.
>
> "I enclose a bit of paper. I think I shall be able to pay you back everything in a few months. But there are some things one can't pay for, old man.
>
> "Yours,
>
> "ARCHIE."

Sherring helped himself to marmalade. How was it that Mrs. Moxon's marmalade dish was always sticky, and the spoons the colour of lead? He saw the sun shining on the smutty yellow face of the house across the way.

Someone in an opposite bedroom was experiencing trouble with the blind. It refused to roll itself up; an impatient hand tugged at it, and suddenly the whole contraption came down like a dropped sail and exposed to view the person of a plump lady very partially dressed.

Sherring laughed. He saw her tweak the curtains across the window, and exclude the sunlight. But Cardigan Terrace! Could life leap to laughter, music and love in Cardigan Terrace? He was to meet Mira in Regent's Park during the luncheon hour. He was going to dance with Mira that evening as her official partner at the Rutland Rooms. Exquisite movement! They seemed to mate and melt into each other like sunlight and shadow.

Sherring walked to Great Rutland Street with an innocent faith in the day's goodness. Steel's lowbrow and boyish letter had touched him. Not only had Archie taken a friend's advice, but he was preparing to repay a debt: both rare virtues in the social scheme. Poor kid, no doubt like thousands of other men he had found the quieter rhythm of civilian life insufferable. Shut up in a hutch, from nine till five, and then let out to nibble a little grass! Moreover, marriage with a conventional and refined young woman could expose man to all the minor social tyrannies. Mrs. Grundy in a Brass Hat! Poor Archie! But if a man accepted the social sacraments he had put his signature to a contract that had to be honoured.

Sherring found that Mr. Bliss had arrived at No. 52 Great Rutland Street before him. The folding glass doors were open, and their merchandise exposed to the public. Mr. Bliss appeared to be in one of his laconic and ruminant moods. He was in the glass box dealing with the mail.

"Morning, Mr. Sherring."

"Morning, sir."

"The gent who looked at the Daimler yesterday is coming up for a trial trip. You'll take him, please."

"What time, sir?"

"Eleven. Round Regent's Park will do."

Mr. Bliss disappeared into the back premises, and the elderly man who was employed to sweep out the show-room, and put a polish on the cars, arrived with a bucket of water and a floor-cloth. Sherring was standing in the sunlight in the open doorway, and the man with the bucket sidled up to him.

"If there's anything on, sir, you might put in a word for me with the boss."

"Anything on, Slater?"

“Yes, change coming, isn’t there, sir?”

“I haven’t heard anything about it.”

“Well, the guv’nor’s had two Ikey looking gents here two evenings after the place was shut up. Going through the ledgers in the office, and our stock.”

Sherring’s eyes seemed to narrow.

“I have heard of no change, Slater; but I’ll put in a word—if my word’s any use.”

The sunlight seemed to have lost some of its heat. Life might be pretty precarious and he very much a soldier of fortune, but this billet suited him for the moment. Also, if old Bliss had anything in his mind—why had he not warned him? He heard Slater’s wet floor-cloth sliding softly over the linoleum. Poor old Slater, life was pretty precarious for him, and with no rosy spots or high lights. Footsteps came out of the office. Sherring heard Mr. Bliss clearing his throat as though he had walked to Great Rutland Street through a November fog. That wet and semi-apologetic sound usually forewarned Sherring as to some minor commercial crisis. Probably Mr. Bliss used that sound at home when about to suggest that the bacon was not what bacon should be.

“O—Mr. Sherring.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Come into the office for a moment, will you. The girl’s not here yet.”

Sherring followed Mr. Bliss along the aisle between the two rows of cars. The glass door closed on them. Mr. Bliss, obviously embarrassed, perched himself on a stool, and taking the morning’s letters in his hands, shuffled them as though shuffling a pack of cards.

“Fact is—I’m selling the business.”

So, that was it! Sherring was conscious of a feeling of suspense like a band constricting his stomach.

“You had not warned me.”

Mr. Bliss recleared his throat.

“Well—you see,—I had nothing certain, but the purchasers said ‘yes’ last night.”

“I see. Who are they?”

“Name of McArthur, couple of brothers.”

“Scotch.”

Mr. Bliss appeared to welcome an opportunity for humour.

“What name did Moses take when he set up in the City? No, not McMoses. Eckstein—alias—McArthur.”

Sherring’s mouth emitted a thin, small laugh.

“I suppose that means I’m superfluous?”

Mr. Bliss reshuffled the letters.

“Well—I put it to them that you knew the ropes, and were willing to work on results.”

“Nothing doing?”

“Afraid not. You see—two fellahs like that—both on the job here—yes, very much on the job, I expect.”

“When do you hand over?”

“Directly the contract’s signed and I have my money. In a fortnight or so. I’ve got a little place in the country, yes, a bit of property. Local garage—room for expansion; give me something to do.”

Sherring’s feeling of suspense had slackened into something that had more resemblance to a flaccid sack. But he showed nothing of this to Mr. Bliss. If—as the Americans put it—he felt a little sick in his stomach, he chose to appear almost flippantly cheerful.

“So—that’s that. I’ll give myself a short holiday. By the way, what about old Slater? He’s not very young.”

Again Mr. Bliss cleared his throat, and performed inward shufflings.

“Nothing doing there—either. Got a fellow of their own.”

“A youngster?”

“Probably. After all, one cannot stop an old chap being put on the shelf.”

Sherring lit a cigarette and as he dropped the match into the waste-paper basket, the girl clerk arrived. Would she too be superfluous? He said—“No—I suppose not. It’s a pity the shelf can be so bare and dusty.”

Mr. Bliss growled. He was not God.

“Can’t help these things. Business, you know. If anyone’s to blame—it’s Nature. We oughtn’t to have kids, and we oughtn’t to grow old. Miss Brown,

you're late."

Miss Brown, agitated, placed her small and shabby attaché case on the desk.

"There was such a crowd on the tube. Just had the gate shut on me."

Sherring strolled out towards the sunlight, smoking his cigarette. Yes, life was becoming so much like the "Tube." A crowd pushing to find a place, standing-room, a strap to hang to. Gates slammed against you by someone who pulled a lever. And suddenly he was conscious of anger. What a filthy, silly scramble! He could understand some rebellious spirit seeing red and running amuck. "To hell with everything. Let's smash through, and start a fresh world."

Great Rutland Street and its traffic seemed to mock at him. Like some urchin it hooted and put its finger to its nose. It was a child of the metropolis.

"Yah, smash me and see what happens!"

Sherring put his head back and laughed, and two girls who were passing broke into sudden giggles.

3

Dr. Pitt had been to Harley Street with a patient, and the consultant having agreed with all that Dr. Pitt had had to say about the case, the patient, reassured and poorer by three guineas, had offered Dr. Pitt a lift in his car.

"I can drop you at the end of your road, doctor."

Dr. Pitt was utterly English in that he needed and insisted upon exercise. Night and morning he indulged in physical jerks, and when he could walk he walked. He chose to foot it home through the park. He would find himself back in St. John's Wood in time for a late lunch, and ready for it.

"Thanks very much—but I get exercise. I'm glad Dr. Bond was so reassuring. I'll see you to-morrow."

"Thanks, doctor. May I smoke a little?"

"Five cigarettes a day."

"Martinet!"

"What do you pay me for?"

In Regent's Park Pitt happened to notice a man and a girl on a seat. But a

moment ago Sherring had been in his thoughts, and here was Sherring in the flesh, a most unexpected and fortuitous Sherring. Pitt broke step, and was on the edge of diverging towards the seat when that which was man in him recoiled from an occasion which was so obviously and mordantly male. The girl was sitting sideways on the seat, her head slightly averted. Sherring, leaning forward, looking pale and pinched as with some paroxysm of passion, was emphasizing with little jerks of a fist the yea or nay of his maleness. The absorption of the other man was complete. He was so much in the midst of his crisis that Pitt, with one curious glance at the girl, walked quickly on.

Pitt stiffened his strong shoulders.

“Old Sherring!”

Strange, how prejudiced you were in favour of certain persons! Most lovable creature—Sherring. One of those men who—for some mysterious reason—make a mess of life, while remaining completely clean. And the girl? Rather a comely, dark, douce creature. Well—well! And what was their trouble?

The voice that was Sherring’s was saying—“In ten days or so—I shall be one of the workless. I’m not going to humbug you or myself, my dear. You had much better cut me out unless——”

She smoothed the back of the seat with two fingers. Her face had a soft starkness.

“I can’t—I don’t want to.”

“But, Mira—think.”

Her eyes were whimsical and poignant.

“Does one think? O, my dear—I don’t care. Can’t we of the new world get away from the old, stuffy conventions? Just love and laugh and live? O, why not?—Sin, shame, humbug. Am I ashamed because——?”

He laid a hand gently on her knee.

“There is nothing in me to shame you, dear. But—I’m unlucky, except in one thing. I remember there was a saying of my old pater’s, ‘Never have anything to do with unlucky people.’ ”

She frowned.

“How—beastly!”

“No, wise.”

“Then we’ve got to do without marriage.”

He glanced at his watch.

“In that game, my dear, it is always the woman who stands to lose. How do you know that I’m not just a casual cad?”

“Don’t look at your watch. Look at me.”

“I wish one could chuck the whole time machine into space. You have wonderful eyes—kid.”

“Look.”

“I’m looking.”

“Don’t you see; don’t you understand?”

Her gaze was steady. He answered her with a grave, consenting movement of the head.

“I understand. But don’t you know, my dear, that—this—is rather different—from the casual show? One doesn’t always drag one’s desire into a dark alley like some young rough, and cut its throat. I suppose there’s always one particular woman in the world for a man who rouses in him—passion—and with it—compassion. The idea of hurting you——”

She sat very still with her hands in her lap. Her face and eyes were innocent.

“I understand. I’ve never given myself to anybody else. But just because it’s different, because you are different—I want to give. Can’t you understand that? For years a girl like me has to be careful. If she’s fastidious—and I am, she has to look past men, walk fast, appear flippantly cold. She may know how little mercy there is—in most men. But when—someone—comes to her, she may look on carefulness—as cowardice. It’s all so different—so beautiful—my dear. It’s what we dream of, what we desire in our most wonderful moments when the hard little shell of self seems to melt. And because—something called money—is lacking, are we to lose all the beauty?”

He looked in her eyes. Her purity and her passion were there for him to see.

“Mira—I’m not worth it.”

“O, my dear!”

No one was passing, and he took one of her hands, bent his head, and put his lips to her fingers.

“Things like this do happen, even in this soiled and smutty old world. May I dance with you to-night?”

“I want you to.”

4

He called for her at eight o’clock. It was a calm, still night, but she brought with her into the dark street a suggestion of breathlessness. She held close to him.

“Let’s walk. No, I don’t want a taxi. It’s so near.”

She was wearing a black cloak, and she had for him the quality of shadowiness, mystery. Her pale profile approached his shoulder. Her dark eyes gleamed.

“I want to say something, Jack.”

“What is it?”

“I wish it could be all our evening, but it can’t. I’m a pro. to-night. Two or three of my pupils——”

He put his lips to her hair.

“Damn them! Well—give me six dances. If you want me to be kind to anyone—I feel like being kind to the whole of creation.”

“You’re a dear.”

“Old Mason coming?”

“Yes.”

“He and I can sit out together—and admire.”

She said—“I wish all my partners were like Mr. Mason. He’s a kind old thing, and doesn’t get silly.”

It was a gala night, and the “Rutland” had decorated itself with pink rambler roses. The public was still supposed to possess a passion for pink, though the sun of futurism was rising with jagged beams of orange, black and purple. Also, the “Rutland” still plushed itself and blushed Venetian red. Settees and chairs on a raised platform surrounded the ball-room. The walls and coffered ceiling were cream and gold. The orchestra in a recess like a large, gilt shell, had its feet among palms, ferns, and smilax.

The show had started. They found old Mason just within the doors, hands

in his pockets, white tie in order, gazing kindly if a little forlornly at the crowd.

He was glad to see them. He may have envied Sherring his youth, but he did not resent it. He liked Sherring. There were few men who did not. He looked appreciatively at Mira much as he might have looked at a rosebush in his garden at Marlow.

“Go on, you two children.”

Mira was motherly with him.

“Now, you mustn’t be shy, Mr. Mason.”

“I surrender to you, sir,” said Sherring.

With a droll crinkling up of his pink old face he sat down abruptly on a plush chair.

“Not a bit of it. I’d like to watch you.”

Sherring’s arms were out, and she slipped into them. He smiled at old Mason almost like a son at an understanding father. The orchestra was playing a fox-trot that had rhythm and lilt and melody. It was not chewed string, or suggestive of a disgruntled cow mooing monotonously and marking the time by pounding a fence with one back hoof. In those days the fox-trot was all chassé—a rolling glide, steps that were like the rise and fall of the sea to those who were supple. They floated off together, into and through the music. If they looked at anything they looked at each other.

“Holding you all right?”

“Yes. Don’t talk, dear.”

“Dream?”

“Yes.”

Wonderful movement, utter mutual understanding. Old Mason watched them. He did not want to watch anybody else. Both of them were in black, both of them strangely pale. There was passion in their dancing, though their poise was so quiet and easy. They were just the right height for each other, right in every way. Mr. Mason, rather like a wide-eyed and innocent old child, watched them and was wise. How beautiful to be young and ardent and good to behold. To be in love, to dance as lovers, to dance as those two danced. Nice fellow, Sherring. What did he do? Yes, a gentleman.

The music ceased. The room streamed to its chairs, and Mira and Sherring rejoined Mr. Mason. Seating accommodation was limited, and Sherring and old Mason found themselves standing and offering each other one chair.

“Yours, sir.”

“You have been on your feet.”

Sherring laughed. He was happy.

“I have. But the chair’s yours, sir—absolutely so.”

Mr. Mason sat down.

“It was a pleasure to watch you two. Miss Manetti—Captain Sherring’s as good as a pro. But then—of course——”

“She makes me dance, sir.”

“Well, you two make me feel shy.”

Mira patted his sleeve.

“The next. No—I’m not taking any excuses.”

A woman who was sitting next to Mira was looking at Sherring as he stood there talking to Mira and Mr. Mason. She had harsh brown eyes, a nose with deeply cut nostrils, a mouth that seemed to bite at life. In age about forty, smart, restless, vibrant, she watched Sherring; she had marked him down.

Mira felt herself touched.

“Good evening, Miss Manetti.”

“Oh, it’s you, Mrs. Parris.”

“Who is the pro?”

Mira laughed.

“Do you mean my partner? No, he’s not a pro.”

“He’s better than most pros.”

“I’ll introduce you.”

She touched Sherring’s sleeve.

“Jack—I want to introduce you. Captain Sherring, Mrs. Parris. O, there goes the band. Mr. Mason.”

Mr. Mason rose with a coy smile, gave a tug to his waistcoat, possessed himself very carefully of Mira as though she was choice china, and went off on the wrong foot. Mrs. Parris had risen. She was very tall, almost as tall as Sherring. She looked at him with her hot brown eyes.

“Shall we dance?”

“Delighted.”

She danced remarkably well, but too closely for his liking. She was a woman who managed to make her movements suggestively intimate. Her face seemed too close to his, with the red voracity of its mouth. She was highly scented. The savour and sex of her embarrassed him so much that he became self-conscious, a thing of wood.

“What’s the trouble?”

She treated him like a nice shy boy who might have to be taught intimate things.

“Trouble?”

“You’re scared. You’re all tightened up. You’re holding me as though I was a pot of jam.”

He made himself smile.

“Sorry. I get suddenly shy.”

The pressure of her arm surprised him.

“No need to feel shy with me. Yes, long steps. Sweep me along. I’ve got long legs.”

He felt that he was dancing with a kind of human brazier, supporting it, carrying it round. Little licking flames, a wanton wicked tongue. He wanted to be rid of the lady. She was altogether too suggestive. Was it her fault or his that his leg kept brushing the silk between her thighs? When the orchestra stopped playing he released her, and with brittle politeness led the way back to her chair.

“Thanks awfully. Afraid I’m not quite up to your standard.”

Her mouth was malicious.

“Don’t talk rot, my dear.”

“Perhaps later, you will let me——”

She gave him an upward and oblique glance.

“Yes, when you’ve warmed up.”

Old Mason and Mira were at his elbow, and he gave Mrs. Parris a little, self-conscious bow.

“Thanks—awfully.”

He found himself talking to Mira and old Mason, and old Mason was looking at him mischievously. He liked old Mason. Wise old lad. The orchestra started a waltz, and as though putting a bunch of violets to his nose after a breath of patchouli and civet, he drew Mira off.

“I say, kid—that woman——”

Mira flicked her eyelashes at him.

“Did you get on with her?”

“Get on with her? Why she’s a sort of suburban Semiramis, a she-pirate. I say, are some of the men you——?”

“Not quite so—naked—as that.”

“I should hope not—or I should be—kicking things downstairs.”

“Don’t talk, Jack, dance. It’s a dream—this waltz.”

“Darling.”

“I’ve got an idea. Do you know what she said?”

“Who’s talking now?”

“She may be an old vamp—but she can dance. She said you were better than any pro.”

“That was before she danced with me.”

“Listen. Why shouldn’t we run a show? Mira and Jack. You could teach. We could do exhibitions.”

“My dear!”

She looked into his face a little anxiously.

“Well—partners. It’s just my poor idea. If you——”

He held her just a little closer.

“Yes, it is—an idea. Beggars can’t——”

“Jack!”

Her eyes were poignant.

“It’s what I have to do.”

He said—very softly—“I want to kiss you.”

VIII

SHERRING became known at the Rutland Rooms as Mr. Montague. He was introduced by Miss Manetti as her partner, and the management did not trouble to ask how much ground or flesh the partnership deeds covered—if any. Miss Manetti was the most capable and the least troublesome of their instructresses, and having seen "Mira and Monte" give a demonstration, the management accepted Sherring. At that time the Rutland retained the services of three dancing gentlemen, but the genus was so mutable and moody that one of the three was usually on the mat, coming or going. Sherring was given to understand that he was expected to be present at the rooms on every afternoon from two till six-thirty. He would give lessons. He would share in the staff's search for new steps under the dancing director—Filiberto. It was understood that he should make himself pleasant to any patroness whatever her age or looks might be. He was to take his turn on the rota, and not slink suddenly into the gentlemen's dressing-room when something particularly ponderous and unprepossessing appeared. The game of passing the bolster had been too prevalent.

"Your lot, Jimmy."

"Rot! It's your turn, old man. Nothing doing."

"I say, look at her hocks!"

On Sundays the Rutland staged a set piece. There were demonstration dances either by Signor Filiberto and his partner Juanita, or by Mira and Monte. Sherring was painfully nervous on that first professional occasion. He knew that a couple of sneering young rivals were grinning at each other and at him, and hoping that he would make a fool of himself. He did not. You could not waltz with Mira to such music without losing the stiffness of your self-conscious soul.

Filiberto was a gentle little Italian with no jealousy, delicate and an artist. His partner, Juanita, suggested a ripe and purple grape. Filiberto, somewhat responsible for staff's manners and social accord as well as for its dancing, found the life none too easy. The young men, who were usually ex-officers, treated him with hauteur or with no hauteur at all. He was the "Organ-grinder." The young women were either upon their dignity, or fallen away from it completely in some jealous squabble.

Filiberto was glad of Sherring, for Sherring brought into that patchwork world a curious whimsical dignity of his own. Somehow he appeared to keep Filiberto in countenance, and the young fellah-my-lads from having too much of it.

As for the financial aspect the selling of “steps” was even less profitable than the selling of secondhand cars. The Brothers McArthur, alias Eckstein, were established at No. 153 Great Rutland Street, two swarthy young men in coloured shirts who lisped persuasively at customers over pink-scrolled lower lips. Sherring had had no dealings with the McArthurs. He had shaken Mr. Bliss by the hand and departed from Canaan before the Hebrew invasion.

Filiberto and Juanita had a little flat in Hart Street. There was a vacant flat above theirs, and Mira and Sherring might have taken it, but for the problem of furnishing it. The adventure relegated them to rooms.

Should Mira come to him, or he join Mira? Cardigan Terrace and Mrs. Moxon and her marmaladed mind were altogether too sticky for their romance. Adam Street was clean, and pleasantly George the Fourth, its doors and window sashes nicely painted. It had atmosphere, and Mira thought that she could manage. She would speak to her landlady and suggest a reshuffle. A small sitting-room and a double bedroom would suffice. Sherring remained with Mrs. Moxon for the moment.

But if Mrs. Moxon had a marmaladed mind, the mentality of Mira’s lady was more correctly glutinous.

“A gentleman?”

“Yes—my partner.”

“A double bedroom, you said?”

The lady looked appraisingly at Mira’s hand, and the soul of Mira blushed. Hateful embarrassment!

“Look here, Miss Manetti, you’ve never given me any trouble—and I believe in being honest, and let me tell you, my dear, that—you’ll only be making trouble.”

Mira flared inwardly, while remaining cold cream.

“Do you mean——??”

“Are you married?”

“Not yet. It’s a question of cash. I fail to see that it is any business of yours, Mrs. Bland.”

Mrs. Bland had the eyes of an uncompromising cow.

“It’s very much my business, Miss Manetti. You can’t bring a gentleman in here—unless——”

Unless! The word was as final as marriage. Mira packed her belongings, and arrived in a state of distress at Mrs. Flanders in Quorn Street.

“O, Connie, can you take me in?”

Mrs. Flanders, torn from the world of hats, listened to Mira’s lament, and her grievance against Mrs. Grundy.

“Of course, you. But why don’t you two get married?”

“O, my dear, he’s so dreadfully straight about things.”

“Straight?”

“He won’t tie me up. I mean—he says he’s not justified in binding me to anything—when he’s not in a position——”

Mrs. Flanders sat down solidly in a basket chair.

“Well—really! I’m neither a prig nor a prude, and I know the world is a different world. These temporary husbands!”

She glanced at the closed door as though her glance could pass through into that other room where her own poor derelict lay in bed.

“Does he know—yet?”

“What?”

“That Adam Street doesn’t admit——?”

“No; I’ve got to tell him. No, Connie, he really is straight. It’s not an excuse.”

“Sure?”

Mira closed her eyes for a moment.

“I suppose all women think they are sure. Or don’t they? Yet, somehow—I’m sure—utterly.”

Mrs. Flanders got up and kissed her.

“Shall I tell him for you?”

“Would you?”

“Yes; send him along to me this evening. Don’t let him know you are here

until I've seen him. Now, you bundle upstairs, my dear, into that little room where Elsie used to sleep."

"I won't give you any trouble, Connie. I know how much you have on your hands."

"Trouble doesn't always mean hell, my dear. Of course, if you have a shabby mind—the whole blessed earth seems shabby. But it isn't."

2

For Mrs. Connie Flanders was one of those happy people to whom the world is somehow full of beauty. She was strong and sanguine; she might have been too strong and sanguine but for that poor face on the pillow, her chronic invalid, a creature who could not walk, but could shave himself when given the necessary accessories. Mrs. Flanders had discovered other beauties. She was still in love with the man whose poor body she washed; her compassion was mated to his courage. How many people knew that Charlie Flanders was the soul of the hat-shop show?

It was he who shaped them, and trimmed them in that back bedroom. She would try on every hat in his presence, standing at the foot of the bed. He had an unerring eye for colour, style, shape.

"A bit more forward, Connie."

"How's that?"

"The right side of the brim up a shade. That's it."

Sherring, strolling into Quorn Street on that warm June evening, saw the first floor windows open and the curtains drawn back. The Flanders gramophone was playing ragtime, and suddenly this knock-about music ceased. Sherring, standing on the pavement under the window, heard Mrs. Flanders' voice.

"All right. One of Schubert's songs? Mira's man is coming round presently. I shall have to shut the door then, dear."

A moment later her head and shoulders appeared at one of the windows. She sang softly to the gramophone as she leaned out into the night. She did not discover Sherring, and he did not discover himself to her until the record had run itself out.

"Mrs. Flanders?"

“Hallo.”

“Mira’s man is down here. May he come up?”

She had another record in her hand, but she laid it aside. Her head and shoulders reappeared at the window.

“Romeo and Juliet, my lad! No, not quite. I’ll come down and let you in.”

She paused for a moment in Charlie Flanders’ doorway.

“He’s here. I shall have to shut you in for half an hour. Heart to heart talk.”

“Make him marry her, Connie.”

She nodded her jocund head at him.

“I’ll try,” and she closed the door.

Sherring, not unforewarned as to this feminine conspiracy, and also not resenting it, followed Mrs. Flanders into a room that was so like herself, rather highly coloured and sanguine and crowded with responsibilities. He was put into one of the large chairs and given a cigarette. He said—“You are going to scold me about something, Mrs. Flanders. I think I know. Well, you may.”

“Mira’s here.”

“I wondered.”

“She had to leave Adam Street. Are you so dreadfully innocent, my dear man—or just—casual?”

“You mean her landlady——?”

“Well, what did you expect? Even post-war London isn’t quite ‘News from Nowhere.’ What’s your point of view? Of course, you can tell me to go to ——”

He smiled up at her.

“No; as Mira’s friend you are quite right. It’s damned humiliating——”

“For the woman.”

“Yes—I suppose—I—— One can’t expect a London landlady to transport herself into the Golden Age. What are laughter and life and love to her? Yes. But my point of view; I’ll be honest with you. I have more than a feeling that I’m one of the world’s misfits.”

She sat on the arm of a chair, swinging a foot.

“Well, is it fair?”

“That’s just my trouble. It isn’t fair to tie a woman up in what we used to call a sacramental state, unless—one is sure. Don’t you see what I mean?”

“Quite. You say that a man who can’t afford to marry should not deny himself or the woman——?”

“Why should they? Are we born—to live—or to be the slaves of a social bug-a-boo? After all—what right has society to say that I must not love Mira?”

She looked at him very kindly.

“You mean—you want to insure Mira against—what shall we call it?—social shabbiness,—marriage with—a misfit?”

“Exactly. If that can be done.”

She gave a little compassionate laugh.

“My dear, it can’t. That’s one of the illusions. I don’t think life is meant to work that way. A summer day in the hay, a dream, beautiful surrender—and no future. When a woman surrenders—that—is her future.”

“Always?”

“No, not always. But—with Mira—yes. With me—very much yes.”

He said very gently: “But—you—you are a bit unique, Mrs. Flanders. I accept that.”

She rose, and walking to the window, stood looking down into the street.

“Listen. When Charlie and I married—we had a hundred and fifty a year. He was a solicitor’s clerk—and delicate. We took our risks, and my risk—came home to roost. I suppose lots of people think that this life of ours is a sordid show, a shabby struggle, that—inevitably—a woman must grow to hate a bedridden husband. But that’s just it, she doesn’t. No, not always. It’s so easy to be cynical, like shrugging your shoulders. It may seem much harder to be brave, to face up to things, and to beat them, but that’s how happiness comes, the happiness that is worth while.”

Sherring was silent for a moment.

“Thank you—Connie. But—my risk——”

“Mira’s risk, you mean.”

“Yes, but isn’t that my risk?”

“Have you asked her?”

“O, but she’s generous.”

“If she wants to be that—why balk her? You are trying to be a little too disinterested, my dear. Disinterested people can be pretty damnable to live with. A woman wants a man who wants—her—and things badly and says so. The curious thing about women is that we often get on better with a man who is—exacting. It keeps us alive, on the jump. Does any woman expect her child to be a little angelic nonentity who asks for nothing? Don’t be silly. Besides, hasn’t it struck you that Mira—in facing that other woman in Adam Street—for the sake of your punctilios—put herself in the gutter—so to speak? Why should she do that—for you—unless——?”

She had turned to him, and Sherring put out a hand.

“You two women—have me. Well, either I—I—disappear, or——”

She held his hand for a moment.

“Did you—disappear—in the war? I think not. Now, look here. Our top floor is unoccupied. I have a lot of old furniture knocking about. You two can have it. You can pay me a pound a week, if you can manage it. Mira’s clever, and so are you. Do you mean to tell me you can’t put up some sort of show of your own? Well—what about it?”

Sherring got up and kissed her.

“Well, have it your own way. One of my curses is—that I hate letting people down.”

“My dear, you won’t.”

“Is Mira upstairs?”

“Yes.”

“Send her down, Connie. Though why you should take all this trouble for us——”

“Don’t be silly. I’m going in to see what Charlie has made of a new hat. He’s my Paris artist, but that’s a secret. I’ll send Mira down. Now—don’t be too damned disinterested.”

3

Mr. Mason, coming to the Rutland Rooms for his bi-weekly lesson, found Miss Manetti a little unsure of her steps. Mr. Mason was the easiest of partners to follow, for he chasséd solidly and deliberately round the room with an air of concentrated attention to rhythm. Mr. Mason sprang no surprises upon his

partner, because he was dreadfully afraid of lapsing from the level of grace to which he had attained after much labour. Never before had he known Miss Manetti's feet to fumble. Also, she had the air of a woman who was dancing to some secret and mysterious measure of her own, some slim white yacht in a wayward breeze, and Mr. Mason was like an old, stout black brig squarely set, and thumping the seas.

"I'm awfully sorry."

Wasn't she feeling well? Would she like to sit the lesson out?

"We're not allowed to sit out. Well—I may as well tell you that I was married this morning."

Sherring and his partner, a middle-aged woman in the pangs of a first lesson were progressing hesitantly behind them, and Mr. Mason saw Mrs. Sherring's eyes looking at someone over his shoulder. The light in her eyes was not for him.

He said—"Married!—Splendid. To—your partner?"

"Yes."

"Congratulations. But what about the honeymoon?"

She laughed.

"We're honeymooning here. Like the war, you know, business as usual."

Mr. Mason missed a step. His feet seemed to stutter. Some other inspiration had inhibited his physical progress.

"That seems rather unfair. Let's break off and have some tea. Get Captain Sherring. I see he has finished with the lady."

The Rutland Rooms provided teas for its pupils, and as a rule the pupils paid for the teachers' teas. Mr. Mason chose a table in a corner at a distance from the pianist. Mira collected her husband. Mr. Mason stood up, and smiled at them both.

"Your wife has just told me the news. Congratulations."

Sherring looked at his wife.

Mr. Mason had rung a bell.

"Oh, I want tea for three. There's the waitress."

"I'll tell her, sir."

Mr. Mason sat down on a plush settee and felt for his cigarette-case. He

looked whimsically at Mira.

“Has it ever occurred to you to wonder why an old fellow should come here and take dancing lessons?”

“You’re not an old fellow.”

Mr. Mason offered her a cigarette.

“Yes, most certainly I am. But old fellows don’t always feel like old fellows. I’m young inside. I like to be with young things. Yes, in a way, I’m quite content to be just with them.”

Sherring came back, and sat down on a gilded, cane-bottomed chair.

“Very good of you to give us tea, sir.”

“It ought to be more than tea. Your wife has just been telling me—that it’s business as usual.”

“That’s my fault, sir.”

“I shouldn’t say that. Won’t you two come and spend the week end with me at Marlow?”

Husband and wife looked at each other.

“We’d love to. But there’s the Sunday show.”

“They can spare you one night. Who arranges these things? That nice little Italian. I’ll speak to him.”

“We’d love to come. It’s extraordinarily kind of you, sir.”

“Nonsense. I’ll send my car for you on Saturday, and run you back on Monday. Just the three of us. Nothing formal.”

4

Everybody in Marlow knew Mr. Mason’s house, and nearly everybody in Marlow knew Mr. Mason. The house was close to the weir—long, low and white, with green shutters, its windows looking across the river to the Bisham beech woods. Always, there was to be heard the moist roar of the weir, and with the wind in the elms and the poplars the chant was complete. Mr. Mason was very fond of the sound of falling water. It had a liveness, and Mr. Mason was sufficiently old to shrink from dead things.

He had said—“Nothing formal,” but Mr. Mason’s garden wall was of old red brick and about a quarter of a mile in length. It enclosed magnificent trees,

a Dutch garden, a Japanese garden, a grass and a hard tennis-court, fruit, vegetables, glass. Mr. Mason kept two cars, and a motor-boat, a butler, and of course—a chauffeur. Both the butler and the chauffeur were much more self-important and formidable persons than their employer.

Mr. Mason met the Sherrings on the lawn. As a matter of fact he had been asleep in a hammock under an awning.

“Captain and Mrs. Sherring, sir.”

The butler was very precise—Mr. Mason much less so. His hair was just a little untidy, and two waistcoat buttons unfastened, and Mira was reassured by these informalities.

“Well, here you are. Splendid. We’ll have tea out here, Tombs.”

What an admirable surname for so sober and superior a servant! Mira had a feeling that Mr. Mason wanted to kiss her. He did, and the kiss she gave him was not sepulchral. He crinkled up his pleasant pink face at Sherring.

“You see, she’s quite impartial! You’d like to have a wash. I’ll show you up myself. We’ll leave Tombs to the tea. Yes, that’s one of my jokes. I call the chap Mr. Mausoleum.”

The Sherrings had a suite overlooking the river—bedroom, dressing-room, bathroom complete. To Mira it was a new world, and Mira—like most women—was ardently ready to learn. Her husband was discovering that she had ambitions, the proper covetousness of the sensitive woman.

“O, Jack, do look at the bath!”

The bathroom was all white tile and marble. It had every sort of tap and gadget.

“Isn’t it lovely!”

He held her in the hollow of his arm.

“Everything in the garden is lovely. Like to be sprayed?”

Picking her up, he made as though to put her in the marble cistern just as she was in her bargain frock bought for the occasion. She clung to him, kissed him.

“Do mind my frock, you ruffian.”

“I’m not minding anything.”

“Not even the butler?”

“Not even the butler.”

At the bedroom window she discovered a sweet smell, honeysuckle, and the weir’s thunderous music. Her eyes were tender and mysterious. Marriage! And its complete consummation here! Woods, water, flowers, perfumes.

“Jack, we must have a cottage on the river some day.”

Sherring was brushing his hair, and he looked at his wife at the window.

“Let’s dream of it, anyhow.”

He was conscious of a moment’s whimsical sadness. Was it not a man’s business to translate a woman’s dreams into reality? The Golden Age, the Wind in the Willows? But where was the Golden Age without gold?

Tea under a lime tree that was full of bees. Afterwards he took them out in his motor-boat past the garden of the Bridge Hotel where every green table appeared to be occupied, and two girls were feeding swans. Mr. Mason drove his boat very slowly under Marlow Bridge, for the river was alive with punts and skiffs, and Mr. Mason’s self-imposed speed-limit was even more considerate than the official one. He had made much money in the war, and lost an only son, and what he could afford to do he did not do.

“Rather like a funeral, Mrs. Sherring, with our friend Mausoleum in charge! Can’t wash the rest of the world into the river.”

It was one of those gently burnished evenings when summer is still virginal and the hay fields have not been shorn, and Mr. Mason, looking with kind eyes at the people in punts with their gramophones and tea baskets, remarked that the whole world wanted to play. For thirty years he had worked sedulously, and now that he was alone in the world he, too, wanted to play. Almost, he was apologetic to these young people. If youth could understand an old fellow and be tolerant? His own daughters were intolerant young women.

But the work idea? He and Sherring had twenty minutes alone together in the garden before dinner, both of them in dinner jackets, two black and white figures under the lime tree. Tombs had prepared a tray of little drinks, and the men were waiting for Mira.

Said Mr. Mason—rather diffidently. “Not an easy time just now for the men who came back. Quite straightforward, of course, if your job was kept for you. Some weren’t.”

He looked shyly at Sherring. He liked Sherring very well, and obviously Sherring had not been one of the lucky ones.

“Had four years of it, didn’t you?”

“Yes, four years and a little more. August 1914.”

“M.C. and Bar?”

Sherring smiled whimsically at the kind old face.

“Mira has been talking. But that doesn’t carry one very far. My own fault, sir.”

“Your own fault?—Just how?”

“I’m the sort of fellow—who can’t settle, or rather—I couldn’t settle. Always trying new things; no use in a chair. Perhaps one gets more responsible as one grows older, especially when you’re married. I was with some aeroplane people just before the war—but I couldn’t wait for the air force. Rushed in and got submerged in the P.B.I.”

Mr. Mason looked puzzled.

“What was that?”

“P.B.I.?”

“Yes.”

“Poor Bloody Infantry.”

Mr. Mason’s blue eyes became retrospective.

“My boy was killed on the Somme. Fricourt.”

“Yes—I knew Fricourt.”

“Makes me all the more sympathetic to the lads who came back. Don’t think me impertinent, Sherring, but I have a certain amount of influence.”

Sherring smiled.

“I should never think you that, sir. But I’m not the sort of man who——”

“I should have said that you were just the sort of man. This dancing business. Excuse me, but——”

“It’s my wife’s show. I should like her to have a show. I’m a bad subordinate, sir. When I get shut up in a building—I want to break out of it. Temperament. Rather a rotten temperament to live on.”

Was it that Captain Sherring, like so many of the returned soldiers, could not stomach hard work? Moreover, Sherring’s very frankness seemed to suggest that a man can be most subtly reticent when he appears most candid.

But this dancing business, could Sherring content himself with it? Had he a past, a past that prevented him from accepting any patronage that might necessitate the production of credentials as to character? Mr. Mason suddenly felt himself on uncertain ground. Even kindness can create most awkward situations. Probably, many charming wasters had made excellent soldiers. Not that Sherring was a waster. Was it that he lacked just something? Was temperament the right word after all?

Moreover, would a charming cadger have interposed an explanatory candour between himself and an old gentleman who was capable of financial friendliness? Mr. Mason was a little puzzled. As a rich man he knew how little pride there is in the world, and how unexpectedly the most cultured of mouths will open.

Mrs. Sherring appeared at one of the french windows in a primrose coloured frock, and Mr. Mason jumped up. The grass was a green carpet for primrose feet.

“Come along, Mrs. Sherring, just a little something before dinner.”

He thought her an exquisite creature, which in truth she was, though he had been warned by and through his daughters that that which looked angelic was usually raffish, immoral, claw fingered, and shabby of soul. He did not quite believe it.

Mira had the face of a woman who was happy.

“How lovely it is here. It’s all so new to me.”

Her happiness was innocent. She bore within her a spirit that was essentially unshabby.

5

Sherring woke very early on the Sunday morning. He saw the sunlight playing on the blind, and heard the moist flurry of the weir. His wife was asleep, and he slipped out of bed, and going to the window gently raised the blind.

How beautiful it all was, how secret. The river seemed to slide past in a stealthy, silver skin. The beech woods up yonder were still very black under the edge of the dawn.

He heard his wife’s voice.

“Jack——”

“Hallo—I thought you were asleep.”

“What are you doing?”

“Just looking at things. Come and look. It’s so—very—lovely.”

She joined him at the window, and rested there with her soft young body pressing against his.

“Isn’t it mysterious?—Mr. Mason must be very rich.”

“Yes, pretty much so.”

“Jack, if we had a little capital—we could run a show of our own. I’ve talked it over with Connie. Everybody seems dancing mad.”

“And the idea?”

“Why, just a show of our own. We could work it together. I know one girl who was at the Rutland who is making a thousand a year with a school of dancing.”

“Capital of her own?”

“No, someone financed her. Don’t you think Mr. Mason might be willing ——?”

Sherring was looking at the lime tree under which he and Mr. Mason had talked.

“He’s such a decent old lad, Mira.”

“Yes, so kind——”

“That’s what makes it—rather impossible. One can’t come down to a place and be treated—and cadge.”

She glanced at him almost sharply.

“I didn’t mean that. You’re so dreadfully sensitive. But if he suggested ——?”

“Yes, if he suggested, and on your account. Would it hurt me? Perhaps; perhaps not. Come on back to bed, kid. You’re beginning to feel cold.”

6

Mr. Mason did make that very suggestion. It emerged somewhat diffidently while they were out on the river in his launch. He looked quizzically at Sherring.

“Your husband doesn’t like chairs, Mrs. Sherring. I’ve been thinking that you two ought to put up a show of your own.”

Mira looked poignant.

“If we could. But you see——”

“Exactly. Let’s discuss it as friends. Of course, if Sherring here—objects.”

Sherring was whimsical.

“I object to nothing—on her account. I won’t explain just why. You’re very good, sir.”

Mr. Mason’s suggestion took shape. If they could produce a practical plan he would finance it to the tune of five hundred pounds. The venture need not be very extravagant to begin with. An orchestra? O, no, an orchestra wasn’t necessary in the early stages. A good gramophone, a good room, and advertisements. Yes, advertisements. The Manetti School of Dancing. Excellent. It sounded chic and effective. Mr. Mason, turning the launch in mid-stream, looked at them both with paternal satisfaction.

“All right. Get out your plans. Look around. Count on me as your first—investment.”

Mira was flushed and excited.

“How—splendid of you. It’s—it’s incredible. O, you’ll be on the free list.”

Mr. Mason winked solemnly at Sherring, and then realized that there were secret sadnesses in Sherring. Poor lad! What was the difficulty? Just temperament—a queer—sensitive kink? He, Mr. Mason, could have insinuated Sherring into a job as easily as he could steer the launch into her boat-house. But Sherring had burked it. Gently, and with a kind of grave diffidence Sherring had edged him off. But he would accept kindness that under other circumstances would have compromised his wife. Well, after all, that did suggest that he—Sherring regarded the offer as a gentleman’s affair, the gesture of an old fellow who had much money and no son. But it was queer—a man like Sherring accepting a woman’s show as his.

Mr. Mason pointed the boat’s nose for Marlow Bridge.

“Well, we will take that—as settled. Nearly lunch time. We’ll drink the health of the Manetti School.”

Mira and Sherring spent the afternoon in Mr. Mason’s punt while their host slept peacefully in a hammock. Mira was intensely awake. Her husband might lie on his back and look at the green branches of the willows and the sky. She

sat up and paddled and talked, and at critical moments forgot to paddle, and drifted into double-scullers, and had to be rescued from the track of a river steamer. Her chance had come to her, and she belonged to a community which spent its leisure in dreaming of strange interventions of fortune.

“Isn’t it wonderful, Jack.”

He suffered her enthusiasm. What right had he to feel hurt, or secretly disgruntled by an old gentleman’s generosity? He gathered that to-morrow Mira and he were to explore likely situations. She was sure that already they could count on quite a number of pupils who would transfer their patronage from the Rutland Rooms to the Manetti School. Even a woman like Mrs. Parris would be an asset.

“You’ll have to be very nice to them, Jack.”

So, he too was to be an asset, a fascinator of middle-aged women and flappers. But what did it matter? Mira was happy and contemplating her show.

“Must I suffer the Parris woman?”

“Of course. She’s got a lot of influence.”

He saw himself as the Trojan Paris distributing apples to all the goddesses, while Mr. Mason played at Zeus.

Returning to the white house for tea they found that Mr. Mason’s world had been provided with a question mark. One of his daughters had arrived from Woking with a car and a husband. She was a very fair young woman, sharp-edged, smart, with an unripe voice, and cynical blue eyes. She drawled, she stooped, and her figure suggested a question mark. Her husband had lunched heavily and sat digestively apart. The Sherrings were introduced to her, and she sized them up with casual—oblique scrutinies.

“Delighted.”

She was not in the least delighted. She remained for an hour. She presided over the tea-table and her father, and ordered Tombs about, and talked through and over the Sherrings, and at them. She made the other woman feel that the value of her 19s. 11d. frock was exactly appreciated. She was wise as to the pre-war quality and age of Sherring’s grey flannel suit.

Who were these seedy strangers—anyway? Products of papa’s puerility? Dancing pros! Her eyes and her mouth were politely cynical. She smoked cigarette after cigarette as though to assuage some inward smart. She had one of those thin, red lower lips that do not lie snugly against the lower teeth.

“Pater—I want the launch next Sunday.”

Mr. Mason had become uneasily genial. He talked and smiled as though fate and his dentist had just presented him with very new dentures.

“Got a party?—Yes, you can have the launch.”

Miss Eileen—for that was her name, Eileen Lardner-Smith, energized her husband.

“How many have we, Hugh?”

“Eight, counting the Tomlinsons.”

“I suppose Tombs could put up lunch and tea for eight?”

Mr. Mason, knowing himself suspect—a facile old idiot—had to fling gifts broadcast. Joyful paternity!

“O, yes. I’ll get him to put in three bottles of Clicquot.”

At half-past five Mrs. Lardner-Smith remembered that she had a bridge-party.

“Socks up, Hugh. We must get a move on.”

She gave Mira a hard, dry hand and a bland smirk. It said—“I know just what you are, my lady. Nineteen and eleven, and after pickings—bargain basement.” She nodded at Sherring. “You came down by car—I suppose?” and Sherring gave her irony. “Yes—in just over the hour.” She trailed Hugh and Mr. Mason into the house, and subjected her father to some sweet questions.

Mira’s brown eyes were brittle.

“What a poisonous——”

Sherring smiled down at his rather shabby trousers.

“O, just a type. A yellow apple that never ripens.”

The Lardner-Smiths drove home with the wife at the wheel. Her father allowed her a thousand a year and plunder, and she controlled the wheel. She said things to her husband.

“Pair of seedy spongers.”

Hugh looked sulky.

“You must allow the old boy some friends.”

“Friends! You men are bloody fools. I suppose you thought the woman pretty.”

“As a matter of fact I did.”

Mr. Hugh Lardner-Smith was in a mood of “And be damned to you.”

On reaching Woking, Mrs. Lardner-Smith rang up her sister who lived at Esher.

“Hallo—Maisie. Yes—I’ve just been over to Marlow. What! Yes—I’m just telling you. Yes, couple of dancing pros. We shall have to watch things. The old man’s getting silly. Last year it was that weeping widow, widow—not willow. Much the same, later—tehee.—Have a talk with Alec about it. You have done?—Alec says—what? The pater might marry again? What rot!—Lonely? My dear, Alec’s a bit of a sentimentalist. Oh, all right, all right, don’t get peeved. You know what old men are when they get silly. Exploited by any sort of seedy sponger. We ought to do something about it.—What, you are going to have a baby? Good lord!—But what’s that got to do with it?—Well, look here, Hugh and I will blow over to-morrow evening. He can’t be left to—go potty. O, rats! See you to-morrow. Tell Alec to be legal—not a toshmonger. What’s the use of being married to a lawyer if—. All right. To-morrow. I’ve got a bridge crowd blowing in.”

IX

Dr. Pitt walked into Monmouth Square, and looked at the number of the first house on his right. No. 28, and he wanted No. 23. Monmouth Square was more than a hundred years old; it had its central garden, a label of grass, a gravel path, plane trees, iron railings, but Monmouth Square had ceased from being a seemly retreat round which the equipages of the elect circulated. Commerce and the professions had invaded Monmouth Square, though the gentlemen of the commercial world might be designated artists and experts. You could buy a Japanese ivory or a "Celestine" frock in the square, or have a tooth stopped, or insure yourself with Imperial Insurance Co. There were one or two Clubs in Monmouth Square which occupied a house or two houses from basement to roof, but the rest of the buildings were split into horizontal sections and let individually.

Dr. Pitt, being a bachelor—to a point, and the possessor of some spare cash, had—like so many professional men, become a collector. His passion was for jade, amber, ivory; and at No. 23 Monmouth Square Mr. Zakopulos—a Greek or Levantine waited to trade with the elect. Mr. Zakopulos lived at St. John's Wood, and Pitt was his doctor. Dr. Pitt had just seen Mrs. Zakopulos through a serious illness, and very skilfully and successfully so, and Mr. Zakopulos was grateful. He had asked for and paid Dr. Pitt's account within a week. He had suggested a little present. Dr. Pitt was interested in articles of vertu, was he not? Well, let Dr. Pitt come down and choose something.

There were three brass plates beside the door of No. 23. That of Zakopulos & Co. was the largest and most important, but just below it was a new and less massive plate, and Dr. Pitt's glance happened to light upon it. His habit of observing everything had become almost unconscious. He read.

"The Manetti School of Dancing."

and below, in the right hand corner, and less obtrusively—

"Captain & Mrs. Sherring."

He stared. The month was September, and from an open window of the first floor music floated, a gramophone playing a waltz tune. Dr. Pitt walked into the vestibule. Zakopulos & Co. occupied the ground floor, and Dr. Pitt had been told to enter by the door marked "Private."

Mr. Zakopulos met him, a kind of stout and genial Bluebeard in a frock

coat. He shook Dr. Pitt by the hand, sat him down in a club chair, opened a little Oriental cupboard and produced cigarettes, liqueur glasses, various bottles—bottles that only a man like Mr. Zakopulos could be expected to produce. Very French, most of them.

Pitt accepted a cigarette but refused all strange liquor. Mr. Zakopulos rang a bell, and an assistant appeared with a large lacquer tray packed with articles of vertu. The tray was placed on Mr. Z's desk.

"Make your choice, doctor."

Dr. Pitt was merciful to man and beast, and even to grateful patients. He selected a little ivory figure, and thanked the Greek; but Mr. Zakopulos was not satisfied.

"Not sufficient, doctor. You do not make the most of your opportunities!"

Pitt smiled his blunt, wide smile.

"When a man's generous, one doesn't——"

Mr. Zakopulos looked slyly amused. He had not found the world so scrupulous, nor was he so scrupulous with other merchants in the world's market!

"I will select."

He picked out a small carved piece in amber—Chinese—and passed it to Pitt.

"Very beautiful—is it not?"

Pitt's eyes lit up. The thing was exquisite. He supported it in the palm of his hand, and then with thumb and finger held it to the light.

"Delicious."

"It is yours, doctor."

"But, my dear sir——!"

"Please—please."

There was nothing more to be said, but at the back of Pitt's mind a question had been waiting. He savoured Mr. Zakopulos' excellent cigarette, and his Homeric generosity, and listened to the sounds of distant music, and a faint vibration of the floor above.

"You have a dance school overhead."

"Yes."

“Recent?”

“They have been there two months, doctor. Nice people. No—I am not worried. I am not what you English call fussy. Yes—they came to interview me before they took the first floor. Did I object? Was I likely to object? Why should I object? People must live.”

“Sound philosophy. I think I must know the gentleman. Married, is he?”

“Charmingly.”

“Very glad to hear it. And how are they doing?”

Mr. Zakopulos looked sly.

“Very well—I believe—though they opened in what you call the close season. I—myself—have had lessons. It is good for the figure and the digestion.”

Pitt laughed.

“Glad to hear it. A man is young as long as he is young on his feet. I think I’ll stroll upstairs and see if Captain Sherring is my Captain Sherring. Tall, dark, rather thin, quiet voice, pleasant smile.”

“That is so,” said Mr. Zakopulos; “what you call in England a gentleman.”

Pitt thanked the Greek again, and refused a second cigarette. Mr. Zakopulos assured him that the articles he had selected would be delivered by special messenger, or by Mr. Zakopulos himself. Pitt picked up his hat and gloves and climbed to the first floor. A notice on a door admonished him —“The Manetti School. Please ring and come in.” Pitt did both. He found himself in a kind of screened boudoir. It contained a desk, a table, three or four chairs. The floor was parquet. Beyond the screen were voices, music, movement.

He heard a woman’s voice say—“Please excuse me just a moment.”

Mrs. Sherring appeared through the screen. She looked inquiringly and appraisingly at Pitt, but smilingly so.

“Good afternoon. Do you wish to inquire about lessons?”

Pitt knew her for the girl whom he had seen upon the seat in Regent’s Park.

“Well—that’s possible. I ought to introduce myself. My name’s Pitt. I am a friend of Captain Sherring’s. I happened to see your plate.”

Mira was grave. A husband’s friends may demand discrimination, but Pitt’s pleasant, plain, sandy face was not that of a sponge.

“Jack and I are just giving a lesson.”

“I’ll wait.”

“We shan’t be five minutes.”

“I’ll sit down here.”

“Will you? There are some cigarettes. Yes, we smoke. And there’s the *Bystander*.”

Pitt liked her.

“Please don’t bother. Back to—your people, Mrs. Sherring. I’ll look at the pictures.”

She smiled and slipped away behind the screen.

Mr. and Mrs. Sherring were giving a lesson to a married couple, pleasant middle-aged people who had set out to rediscover youth. The man had not danced before, and would never make much of a dancer. In fact, to begin with, Mira had almost despaired of his good-natured and apologetic clumsiness. The wife was a cheery little round robin with a double chin and a high colour, who picked up new steps as quickly as a bird pecks seed. She thought Sherring rather wonderful, and on the way home her husband quizzed her about it. The lesson being over, these two good people appeared from behind the screens, and Sherring putting a head round the cretonne barrier, saw Pitt.

“Hallo, doc! Well—I’m——”

He pulled Pitt through the screen into the dancing room, and held him by the shoulder.

“What brought you here? Want lessons? You old——”

He was as pleased to see Pitt as Pitt was pleased to be seen.

“I had to call on someone below—and I saw your name on a plate.”

“Splendid. Yes, my wife and I are running this show. Full of surprises, the post-war world. Mira——”

The pupils had gone, and Mira came through to them. Sherring still held Pitt by the shoulder as though exhibiting him.

“My dear, this is the one and only doc, the man who used to give us little pills in Flanders. I should like to observe that if Dr. Pitt needs dancing lessons, he goes on the free list.”

Pitt smiled mischievously at Mrs. Sherring.

“Is your husband needing professional advice, Mrs. Sherring?”

“I hope not.”

“Because he’s on my free list, too. But, I say, old man, this is a good day for me.”

Sherring glanced at his wrist watch and then at his wife.

“Half an hour before the next lot arrive. Doc, we have tea here. You are going to stay.”

“If you adopt that attitude. May I, Mrs. Sherring?”

“Of course. Sit down and talk to Jack. I won’t be five minutes.”

She vanished into a little back-room that they used as a pantry, and which could be turned into a cloak-room and refreshment bar when they gave a small show. Pitt sat down on a settee upholstered in green brocade, and Sherring stood in front of him with his hands in his pockets.

“Well, how’s life, Doc?”

“In the language of the rank and file, champion.”

“Same here. As a matter of fact this show was my wife’s idea. I make a rather poor civilian, Doc. But we are doing jolly well—considering that we have only been on our own for two months. And she’s—happy.”

Was he apologizing to Pitt for being discovered in so unimpressive a part? Captain Sherring’s profession, that of assistant dancing instructor to his wife! His cheerfulness may have been the forced flower of a secret pride, but Dr. Pitt, who was not unreceptive in spite of his square and sandy head, discovered in Sherring a gaiety that dared to be happy. Besides, after all, there is a form of commercial snobbery that is as poisonous as its social relative. If a man manufactured cakes of soap and tooth-brushes and sold them by the million had he any cause to sit upon Olympus and look with patronage and pity upon the little men below who piped and danced and scraped fiddles? As Mr. Zakopulos had put it—Sherring was what they called in England a gentleman, and in the new world gentlemen were being put to strange professions.

Mira appeared with the tea-tray, and Pitt hurried to find a table for her. It occurred to him to ask himself—just how permanent were the satisfactions of sex? Sherring had married a very pretty wife, and so far as Pitt’s experience of women served, a lovable one, but wasn’t Sherring rather in the position of Mr. Mantalini?

“I hear Mr. Zakopulos is a pupil of yours.”

Sherring looked amused.

“One of Mira’s responsibilities! But I like Mr. Zakopulos. Life does educate one, Doc. We sometimes wish, don’t we, Mira, that we could paste a notice on our door—“Casual cads not admitted.”

Mrs. Sherring was attending to the teapot. The subject did not appear to disturb her serenity. With Sherring she felt secure.

“Mr. Zakopulos is a patient of mine. Pleasant person. Seen any of the old crowd lately, Sherring?”

“I spent a week end with Crabtree. Great man, old Crabbie.”

“How’s he doing?”

“Slaving away on the soil and loving it.”

“And young Steel? Steel tried to ring me up once, but I heard no more.”

Sherring’s eyes were kind.

“Archie’s a family man these days. Yes, quite settled down. There’s to be a little Archie.”

Pitt stayed with them until the bell rang, and a somewhat diffident young man and very self-assured young woman arrived for a lesson. The young man was receiving other forms of instruction. He was a devoted and dreadful dancer, and his goddess had insisted upon having him treated. Meanwhile, she amused herself with Sherring whom she described to her swain as “Utterly it.” Sherring was rather sorry for the young man. He had allowed himself to be fascinated by a fancy cake, and the ice on the cake was pretty thin.

Pitt walked away round Monmouth Square. His face wore an expression that might have been described as its diagnostic look.

He thought—“What the devil will old Sherring make of a life like that? Laughing and drifting! He’s much too good. But then—men—like some books—can be too good. The mere gentleman is not a commercial factor.”

2

The Sherrings continued to occupy the upper floor of Mrs. Flanders’ house in Chandos Street. It suited them, and so did the large and capable friendliness of Mrs. Flanders. They were allowed to share in the services of a strong young woman who had developed a devotion for Mrs. Flanders. It was not an easy house, but life is not always the happier for being easy. Sherring would run

downstairs in his shirtsleeves and carry things up, trays, jugs of water, boots and shoes. He had made the acquaintance of Charlie Flanders who lay in bed and created hats, and Sherring found the so-called derelict a most stimulating person. No creature could display to his little world a more smiling courage than poor Charles.

"Compensations, my dear chap!"

Compensations, when you were semi-paralysed from the waist downwards, and had to be turned over in bed and washed! Sherring would sit at the window and marvel at Charlie Flanders' delicate and skilful hands, and at the strength and endurance of his wife's compassion. Charlie Flanders would take a hat in the rough, and with scissors and deft fingers trim and fashion it into a creation that would catch the feminine eye.

"My wife's a marvel, Sherring."

Said Sherring—"And so are you, Charles, O—most certainly."

With his air of quiet, whimsical gaiety, Sherring found things to do in the house. He described himself as Mrs. Flanders's boots and butler. He went to the library to change Charlie's books for him, and Connie may have said to Mira—"Some men don't make much money, but they—are—easy to live with." Assuredly, Sherring was easy to live with during the early months of their marriage, and as for the financial side of it—life was distinctly promising. For so young a creation the Manetti School was flourishing. Old pupils came and introduced new pupils. The Sherrings were chic. Also, they were sensitive and understanding. Private lessons were actually private. Shy people had not to parade in public, while superior young cubs lounged about and mocked at them. The Manetti School was collecting the right clientele. Mr. Mason came each week, and sometimes took them out to dinner. Quite a number of people were eager to procure Captain and Mrs. Sherring to dine and dance. Sherring was a little diffident about these social affairs; Mira less so. She let it be known gracefully and politely—that fees were expected. You did not ask a doctor to dine with you and expect him to throw in a free consultation in return for the dinner.

For Mira was a romantic realist. She had had to scratch for money, and if the struggle had left the inner skin of an essentially sweet nature somewhat unscarred, she had developed an adventitious skin. She had ambitions, dreams. A car, a week-end cottage, capital, the chance to dress as other women dressed. She saw no reason why the Manetti School should not develop into a kind of institution. It would expand. It would gather reputation, and a staff of carefully selected instructresses. It would be both social and chic, connected with first-

class girls' schools; it might even prove useful to the débutante and the young woman of fashion. A school for gentlefolk, and the rich. At the end of her dream she may have seen herself as Miss Manetti a director of fashion, and her husband as a species of financial manager, a co-ordinator and co-partner, and a social asset. Jack was so popular with people. They thought him a charming person. He could exercise quiet authority. As a woman she was pleased with her husband.

But Mira missed no chances. She and Sherring evolved two or three exhibition dances of their own. They practised them after hours in the rooms in Monmouth Square. She had enterprise. She secured evening engagements at two or three night-clubs and dance-clubs, and these engagements included an understanding that "Mira and Monte" should also partner the patrons.

There was but little originality in this world.

"The old Apache show. Done to death by everybody. Think of something new, Jack."

Sherring did. He evolved the "Nymph and the Shepherd," "Mephistopheles and the Nun." In "Mephistopheles and the Nun," the gentleman remained red, but the lady, after the invitation to and the provocation of the dance, shed of a sudden her religious habit and changed from black piety to flame-coloured silk, an aery, ecstatic creature with butterfly wings. In the "Nymph and the Shepherd," Mira wore a creation of vine leaves and purple grapes, and Sherring flesh-coloured tights and sheep skins. These shows were individual and very successful, more so perhaps because they were staged when the audience had been primed and was in a mood to be pleased with anything. Gentlemen who were feeling mellow and well-oiled applauded Mira and wished themselves Sherring. The women thought Sherring wonderful. And Sherring was still in love with his wife.

3

They were giving "Mephistopheles and the Nun" at the Green Cat Club. The show was staged twice an evening, for those who dined, and again for those who came in to sup. Mira and Sherring had to perform quick changes, for between the shows they appeared as their normal selves and danced with any members who wished to do so. On this particular night they were going to change for the second show when Mr. Bastable and a lady came in to supper.

Sherring saw Bastable, and Bastable saw Sherring, and during the performance Sherring was very much aware of Mr. Bastable watching him

with an air of sallow and ironic interest. Bastable's lady was pink and plump and ecstatic, the kind of ripe young thing who develops passions for things and people. The presence of Bastable seriously interfered for a moment or two with Mephistopheles' sardonic splendour. Sherring went as rigid as a shy dramatist pushed on to make a speech to a critical first night audience.

His wife whispered to him.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm rather tight in my tights!"

He laughed, and in laughing recovered daring and fluidity. What if the City was making sardonic fun of him? Probably, Mr. Bernard Bastable would bring the thing up as a joke at the next Armistice dinner. Well, let him! Hitherto he had been merciful to Bastable. But there could be occasions——

The Sherrings changed back into evening dress and returned to their table in a corner. Sherring ordered a whisky, Mira an orangeade. They danced the next waltz together, and Sherring had never danced better. So far as his wife was concerned he kept Mr. Bastable up his sleeve.

They had returned to their table when the head waiter approached Sherring.

"A lady wants you to dance with her, sir."

"All right, Angelo. Indicate the lady."

"The one in pink, sir—over there—by the mirror."

Bastable's latest fancy! Sherring allowed himself a little grimace, and when the orchestra started a fox-trot, he crossed the room, bowed to the lady, and gave Bastable the smile of a polite stranger.

"May I have the pleasure?—Your permission, sir?"

Bastable nodded at him.

"Certainly. My partner is a little intrigued with your show."

"Then—our tastes coincide, sir, and are catholic."

Sherring danced with the lady. If he felt at all embarrassed by Bastable's supervision, or by the thought that Bastable had—in all probability—contrasted his present with his past to his partner, he showed no embarrassment. In fact he enjoyed the dance, and so did the lady.

"Doesn't your friend dance?"

"O, yes; but he's rather lazy."

He returned her to her table, bowed to them both, and returned to his own corner. A moment later Angelo followed him with a plate, and Angelo's thumb clipped between it and the plate a very new £1 note. Angelo placed the plate on Sherring's table.

"What's this, Angelo?"

"From the gentleman, sir."

Bastable's tip to the pro. who had performed for the pleasure of his lady!

"Some mistake—I think, Angelo. Return it to him with my compliments. No—leave the plate here, and send me Luigi."

Luigi was a little Neapolitan who was responsible for the six tables in Sherring's section of the room. Luigi had a wife and five children billeted somewhere in Soho, an anxious little man with a tired smile. He arrived, and Sherring pointed to the plate and its currency note.

"For you, Luigi."

The Italian gave Sherring a grateful look and bowed low.

"Thank you—very much, sir."

X

One of Sherring's dress studs had developed a misplaced sense of humour. Flicked off the chest by the end of a black tie that had been extracted from a drawer in too much haste it had disappeared under the piece of furniture, and Sherring had been constrained to go down on his knees and grope for it.

"Damn the thing!"

November 11th, Armistice Day, a day of petty provocations instead of a day of peace. He and Mira had had their first disagreement, a silly affair. At 10.55 they had been practising a new step together in Monmouth Square, and when the maroons had boomed the gramophone had been grinding out a fox-trot. Sherring had dashed at the machine, and silenced it, and stood straight and silent in a corner.

"What on earth's the matter?"

They had been arguing about that particular step. Mira had insisted on its being more of a glide. She had spoken with an air of authority, and she had not been able to cease from speaking.

He had shaken his head at her. Didn't she realize——?

"What—are—you playing at?"

"Two minutes' silence. Quiet."

"O, bother! Is it really necessary——?"

He had stood there rigidly, willing her to keep still, and certainly she had remained motionless; but not consentingly so. And afterwards he had scolded her.

"Some things still matter. Life isn't all ragtime."

She had been hurt. He need not have spoken to her so sharply. And then a particularly offensive person had appeared and demanded a lesson. Mira and her husband had been inclined to disagree about this person.

"If that fellow comes again I am going to show him the door."

Mira, somewhat on her dignity as Miss Manetti of the Manetti School, had chosen to give the offensive person a lesson.

Sherring found his stud. It had rolled and come to rest against the skirting-board. He was late. He inserted the stud into the front of a shirt, only to realize that this particular shirt had developed a lesion with respect to its buttonhole. He threw it on the bed, and extracted a second shirt. Yes, his shirts were a problem. So much dining-out and night-club work were expensive. Mira suffered in the same way with her shoes and stockings.

He remembered that he was to be responsible for the drinks at this dinner. How much money had he? He grabbed a wallet from the top of the chest and examined its contents. One pound ten. He would need at least four pounds.

He crossed the landing to the sitting-room. Mira had her feet up. The day had tired her. It had been a rather damnable day.

“Kid, got any money?”

She put down her magazine.

“What for?”

Now, need she have asked him that? He had put all the cash he could collect into the Monmouth Square show. He was in vest and trousers, and in a hurry.

“Have you any?—I’m due to stand the drinks to-night.”

“How much do you want?”

“Three quid.”

“Three pounds for——”

He was hurt.

“Yes. Another man paid last year. I promised.”

She rose, and passing him, went into the bedroom. She kept her spare cash in a bag hidden under scarves and gloves. She found the bag, opened it—produced two pound notes and some silver.

“All I’ve got. We owe the charwoman to-morrow.”

“All right—I’ll pay you back to-morrow. I have a small cheque to cash.”

She gave him the money, but with a seriousness that somehow suggested that it was hers—not theirs.

“Thanks, Kid.”

He placed the money on the chest, and resumed his dressing. It was the first humiliation she had made him feel.

“Don’t sit up. Expect I shall be a bit late.”

She returned to her chair in the sitting-room and her magazine. Ten minutes later he came in and kissed her.

“Goodnight. You’re tired. Turn in early.”

Her cheek was turned rather coldly to him. She felt herself reproached, and she was angry, yes—angry with herself. She was rigid, mute. He went out, closing the door gently, and when he was half way down the stairs he heard the door open, and the hurry of her feet.

“Jack.”

“Hallo.”

She rushed down the stairs.

“Sorry, dear—I’ve been——”

He caught and held her.

“Mira.—All serene.—Yes—I’m rather a silly ass about you. Good night, my dearest.”

“I’ll sit up.”

“No—no—tuck yourself up. You’re tired. I’ll come in like a lamb.”

In the same room at the Hallams Hotel, Loviebond was standing in front of the fire, reading a letter that had been addressed to him at the hotel. It was a somewhat incoherent and tumultuous letter from Steel explaining that he would not be able to attend the dinner. His wife was having a baby, or was about to have a baby, or had had a baby. It really did not matter, and Loviebond was concerned solely with Steel’s absence. Steel’s regrets and excited explanations were of no importance. Loviebond felt no regret. Steel was rather a cub, and the evening would be more decorous without him.

Loviebond was growing very decorous. Almost, he had developed the manners of a man prepared to make speeches and to receive deputations. He had a platform air. In a corner of a first-class carriage he read the *Financial News* each morning, and appearing from behind its pages would present to three other men the Loviebond views and opinions. He was not popular. His associates were beginning to avoid him on the 9.15. Sententious, oratorical prig!

“O—waiter.”

The waiter was the same, crumpled as to face and shirt. Really, a place like

Hallams should supervise its staff's shirts.

"Sir?"

"We shall be six to-night, not seven. Remove one of the covers."

The waiter did not like Mr. Loviebond, for Mr. Loviebond spoke to such people as though they belonged to an inferior breed, which—no doubt—was true, but sociological and biological truths are not beloved by a democracy.

Dr. Pitt was the first to arrive. Pitt was always punctual, perhaps because some of his patients were so variable. He made it his business to protest against any intermittent rhythm in habits or in hearts. He scolded his lady patients, and they liked it. After all, you came to confess your frailties to a strong man, not to a doll stuffed with sugar, and Dr. Pitt did listen to you. He might cut you short on occasions, but never with the air of a man who wanted to go and play golf. For the last month Dr. Pitt had taken to horn rimmed spectacles. They made him appear even more round and wise and solid.

"Hallo, doctor."

Loviebond stared at Pitt. He stared at Pitt's spectacles. He was developing an unpleasant habit of staring at anything that was both obvious and new. He remarked upon what was obvious as though he—Mr. Loviebond—had discovered something remarkable. If a man had cut his chin while shaving, Loviebond would observe the blemish. "You've cut yourself, So and So." Pretentious ass!

"Hallo, spectacles, doctor."

Pitt gave the stockbroker a diagnostic glance. The birth of a bore! How did it happen, and why? He joined Loviebond on the hearthrug.

"The spectacled pantaloon! Everybody coming?"

"No; Steel's cried off."

"I'm sorry. Any reason?"

"His wife's having a baby—or something. Probably, she won't let him come. Steel's the sort of noisy ass who ends by being bossed by his wife, doctor."

Pitt looked amused. He wanted to pull Loviebond's leg.

"I believe I have to congratulate you."

"Me?"

"I heard—your wife—presented you with twins."

Twins! How vulgar, how proletarian! Loviebond adjusted his waistcoat. Quite solemnly he corrected the canard.

“Nothing of the kind. How do these preposterous rumours get about?”

“Fluctuations in the House, Lovie. Markets heavy; men mischievous.”

But Loviebond could not see the point of a needle.

Crabtree stalked in, shirt bulging slightly, and much cuff making his sleeves look short. Pitt went forward to meet him, but Loviebond remained on the hearthrug. “Evening, Crabtree.” He was shocked by Crabtree’s shirt. Crabtree and the doctor were shaking hands, and looking at each other in the eyes like men who will always be glad to meet, when Kettle appeared, a slightly self-conscious and socially significant Kettle dinner-jacketed, black-tied. Kettle had become a Borough Councillor, and Mrs. K. was taking their new social position very seriously. She was of the opinion that Kettle should renounce his Saturday shrimps.

“Evenin’, gents.”

“Hallo—Kettle—this is——”

Kettle grinned.

“Bit of all right—Mr. Crabtree. Only got this rigout yesterday evening. Feels a bit tight in the back.”

He revolved, and Pitt, with sympathetic tact, ran a hand down Kettle’s spine.

“Excellent fit.”

“Not so bad for a reach-me-down, doctor.”

Loviebond was still looking shocked. Kettle in a dinner-jacket! Well—really! The world was becoming hopelessly and dangerously mixed.

Kettle turned to him.

“Of course—Mr. Loviebond always was our prize knut. Where do you get yours, sir. Friends?”

He uttered the name of a firm of outfitters who symbolized for Mr. Loviebond all that was cheap and impossible. Mr. Loviebond would have said that he would not have been seen dead in one of Friends’ shops.

“No, Kettle, not exactly.”

Dr. Pitt, the sage Pitt, wanted to giggle.

“Savile Row is the place, Kettle, for Mr. Loviebond.”

Crabtree offered Kettle a cigarette.

“You are more up-to-date than I am, Kettle. My show is pre-war.”

Once again, Loviebond scrutinized Crabtree’s shirt front and cuffs. Yes, poor old Crabbie looked absolutely pre-war. Regular old hayseed.

Sherring, an immaculate, cool, night-club Sherring, even more subtly it than Chislehurst! He was in the midst of them, one hand in one of Crabtree’s, the other on Pitt’s shoulder. He smiled at Kettle in all his glory. Kettle in a D.J.! Splendid! Loviebond was considering the cut of Sherring’s coat and the lines of his trousers. Yes, just a bit outré, the cabaret touch, for Loviebond had heard of Captain Sherring’s profession from Mr. Bernard Bastable at their city club.

“Captain Sherring, M.C.—Master of Ceremonies, my dear chap. Hires himself out to the ladies.”

Loviebond had expressed himself as feeling shocked. A gentleman like Sherring letting himself down to the level of the seedy and the parasitic! Drink and drugs, and little amateur “tarts,” and all that! It was remarkable how frequently the decorous Loviebond was receiving social shocks, for he could not be described as a sensitive fellow. His correct, cold egoism was perpetually raising its eyebrows. He was shocked by taxation, by political portents, by Labour unrest, by the crashing of currencies, by feminism, by his greengrocer owning a car. Assuredly, the world was going to the dogs. And here was Sherring——!

But Sherring was being told about Steel. As a matter of fact Sherring knew more about Archie’s affairs than any other man in the room, but he accepted what was passed to him as news. Meanwhile, they were waiting for Bastable. Was Bastable turning up?

Loviebond could answer that question.

“Most certainly. I saw him at the club.”

Pitt smiled dimly.

“A most unpunctual person, Bastable.—I think he has kept us waiting on every possible occasion.”

Loviebond corrected the doctor.

“Once—only. Besides—I can tell you that Bernard is a man of so many affairs——”

Sherring laughed, and the meticulous Loviebond looked at him a little reproachfully. Why did Sherring laugh? Surely, there was nothing funny in Bastable's very considerable reputation, to provoke humour?

"Of course—if the members who are present wish to begin, Bernard would be the last man to take exception——"

Sherring and Pitt exchanged smiles.

"I think we might begin."

"Lovie, the drinks are mine to-night."

"Thank you, Sherring. Ah, here is Bernard. Waiter! Where's that fellow got to? Oh, waiter, you can serve dinner."

Bastable was wearing a white carnation. Loviebond had moved aside and surrendered to Bastable his place on the hearthrug. Bastable did not shake hands. He gave everybody a little sallow smile. He noticed the absence of Steel, and the new splendour of Kettle.

"You run this show so early, Loviebond. As a rule I can't dine before 8.30. What has happened to the gentleman who hands out—specie?"

Loviebond laughed, and his laughter had become like himself, stilted and formal; but when a fellow like Bastable was witty, you laughed because laughter was good business.

"Steel is becoming a father, Bernard."

"Legitimately so—I hope? What a pregnant night for a baby!"

Loviebond produced more cachinnation. Really, Bernard was damned witty! But the other men did not appear to be appreciating Bastable upon Steel; Crabtree in particular looking glum and displeased.

"Absent members, Loviebond."

Sherring had been watching Bastable, as a man in the arena watches some beast that is dangerous.

"Well, about sitting down? Our friend from the city is—I know—a man of many affairs."

Bastable glanced sharply at Sherring. Sherring's eyes were half shut. Almost, he was the ironic, watchful swordsman ready to thrust. Hitherto, he had maintained towards Bastable a quiet tolerance, but that phase had passed.

They sat down to caviare, Pitt on Sherring's right, Crabtree on his left. Kettle and Bastable faced each other, and Kettle, with the astuteness of the

cockney, the city child, was alive to the temper of the occasion. He had seen Mr. Sherring look at Mr. Bastable. He knew his Sherring as a man of Kettle's elemental cleverness can come to know another. A brittle glimmering politeness, a quiet voice, something said that went zipp like a bullet. Captain Sherring was—after—Mr. Bastable. Good business! Kettle was a wiry partisan.

Caviare! Agglutinated, black beads! Kettle watched Mr. Bastable using his fork. Mr. Bastable was smiling obliquely at Sherring.

"You might suggest to the Green Cat people, Sherring, that a little more originality in their menus—would be welcome."

"Isn't that—the patron's privilege, Bastable?"

"Haven't you a share in the show?"

"No; I help to provide—social caviare—for people who pay."

The table was puzzled. It listened. Were Sherring and Bastable exchanging compliments, or those little poisoned speeches that are wrapped in silver paper? Pitt observed Sherring's ironic face. What was the matter?

Bastable accepted sherry.

"Just half a glass, waiter. So—Mephistopheles is part of the stunt. Symbolism—what?"

"Quite possibly. Caviare, and herrings, roes on toast, and cayenne for people who think that sort of thing chic and sinful. Have you ever seen a green cat, Bastable?"

"No. But—I suppose—if one dug up a dead cat, it might be somewhat of that colour."

"Septic?"

"Exactly."

"So—I presume—you would appreciate dead cat curried? You see—we try to cater for the tastes of our patrons."

That was one to Sherring. Bastable grinned faintly, like a man who had been hit and did not mean to betray it. The waiters were serving soup, and Pitt, passing his spoon to and fro through the liquid, attempted a diversion.

"You two seem to have some jest of your own. Being something of an expert on diet——"

Sherring sat with spoon poised two inches above his plate.

“May I explain? Bastable is preparing to tell the table that I make my living by giving dancing lessons. I may as well forestall him. Incidentally, I dress up in fancy clothes and exhibit myself at night clubs. Isn’t that so, Bastable?”

The eyes of the table were on Bastable. Kettle’s were sharply burred with points of light. His lower lip stuck out.

Bastable appeared busy with his soup. His silence was deliberate.

“Someone asked you a question, Mr. Bastable?”

This was from Kettle, whose spoon was very much in the air, and Bastable’s eyes fixed themselves on Kettle’s tie. It was a ready-to-wear tie, obviously so, and it provided a provocation.

“Did Mrs. Kettle tie that for you, Kettle?”

Kettle’s lower lip stuck out still more aggressively. If Mr. Steel was absent, he—Kettle—might produce a skewer.

“No, she did not; bought it art of a box. That reminds me, Mr. Bastable, of a certain oc-casion, Jerry was givin’ us jip, and one of my orficers couldn’t find ‘is box-respirator, no, nowhere. Stuck in the mess dugout ‘e was. Yes—and I found ‘is box-respirator for ‘im, and tied his tie for ‘im.”

There was silence, Bastable the colour of cream cheese, seemed to hesitate, to hang upon the edge of a precipice.

“You have a good memory, Kettle.”

“I ‘ave—that; but I ain’t one to rake up a dead rat—with friends—unless ____”

It was Sherring who led the conversation elsewhere. Loviebond was looking shocked. Pitt had removed his glasses and was cleaning them as though to enjoy some future glance at a particular countenance. Crabtree was head in air, rather like a lean stag with antlers raised. Kettle, noisily and triumphantly finishing his soup, watched his *vis-à-vis* like a terrier waiting for its enemy to venture again into a particular back-yard.

2

Bastable did not venture. Almost, he became genial. He listened to what these other men had to say, and when Dr. Pitt told a humorous but risky story, he laughed at it.

“That’s a good one, doctor. May I steal it?”

“No copyright.”

If he had been grossly offended by the primitive candour of Kettle he hid the offence away and was blandly cheerful. He did not belong to a world that gave hard knocks in public. The social struggle was for him an affair of paper, of telegrams and telephone messages, ambuscades, planned and carried out in an office. He preferred silk to steel. He could be deliberate, cynical, reticent. But if any rough fellow jostled him he did not forget it. He would not jostle back, but set a cord to catch the other fellow’s feet.

Already it was said in the city—“Young Bastable’s a nasty man to quarrel with. He waits and gets back at you.”

Moreover, one’s opportunities for retaliation are limited. Competition has travelled beyond the dark corner and a foot of steel. Gentlemen do not now send their footmen to bludgeon impertinent pamphleteers. But Bastable knew his world and how the hostility of other men may be smothered. You drove through a sulky crowd in your Rolls. You ignored the crowd. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the silly swine had not the courage to throw bricks. You could hurt men most acutely by becoming rich and more successful than they were. Yourself—invulnerable—you treated them with indifference. They would come to you for largesse, flatter you, plead for your patronage, request you to support this and that.

He drank wine with these other men; he joined in their toasts. He drank Sherring’s health, and Kettle’s health. He showed himself facetiously forgiving towards Kettle.

“No more box-respirators, Kettle.”

The late mess-orderly grinned at him. What was Mr. Bastable’s game? Polite, and polished and slimy! Regular white slug of a fellow.

It was not a completely successful evening. A little, chilly wind blew through its conviviality. The jokes and the conversation were raised under glass. Loviebond presided at his end of the table with the air of an anxious chairman on edge lest the meeting should again get out of hand. He talked sympathetic shop to Bastable. He was very attentive to Bastable. Insensibly, a gap that was both physical and emotional separated the city from the soil, medicine and failure. The rift became obvious when the cigars were lit. Sherring, Pitt, Crabtree, with Kettle as a humorous attachment, gravitated towards the fire. Bastable and Loviebond remained at the other end of the table. They had the private affairs of a company to discuss.

“ ‘Scuse me, gentlemen, but can’t we send Mr. Steel a telegram?”

“Excellent idea, Kettle.”

“Fancy Mr. Steel a father! Marvellous. ‘E was a lad, too, for the girls.”

Pitt looked amused.

“As a doctor, Kettle, I’ve seen strong men tamed. Prowling up and down the passage, waiting for the news.”

“Don’t I know it, sir. Feeling as though you’d got a bag of whelks inside you—with the shells on.”

Bastable was crushing out the stump of his cigar. He spoke softly.

“What about going to my flat? We shan’t be missed. They’ll go on talking till midnight about Old This and Old That.”

Loviebond looked bothered.

“I have to settle the bill.”

“My dear chap—I’ll leave a couple of fivers downstairs. My text is—never be held up by trifles.”

“Sherring’s paying for the drinks.”

Bastable said—almost inaudibly—“Or rather, his wife is. Sleeping partner—or dancing partner, doesn’t matter much which.”

3

Una met her brother with the pony trap at Midworth station. She had driven in from Darrels through a tenuous white mist, with the stars very bright overhead, and the blurred light of the carriage lamps revealing the ravaged hedges. Winter was on the road; this would be her third winter at Darrels, and she wondered how she could bear it. Rising in the raw darkness and pottering about by candlelight; cleaning the kitchen grate, and relaying and lighting the fire; grey dawns, grey days, mud everywhere, until your mind became muddied. Then, at four o’clock more darkness, six hours of semi-gloom until you went to bed.

She met her brother cheerfully.

“Had a good time, Dave?”

“O, yes.”

She knew at once that the evening had disappointed him, and she wondered why. Could an evening in London ever be disappointing?

“Shall I drive?”

“Yes.”

She gave him his half of the rug, and flapped the reins on the back of a sleepy pony.

“Everybody there?”

“No, Steel couldn’t turn up. Some domestic business. By the way, old Sherring’s married.”

She was persuading the pony out of the station yard, and a lamp lit her face. It was curiously stern and set. Her brother was buttoning the collar of his heavy coat.

She said—“I had an idea that something of the kind was in the air. I’m glad.”

It was a lie, but lone women may have to go through life telling lies. Her brother was silent for nearly a minute. He seemed to be digesting other matters in addition to his dinner.

“I’m worried about old Sherring.”

“Why?”

“O, he seems to be living a rather hole and corner sort of life. What do you think he is?”

She said that she had no idea.

“A kind of dancing master. He married a girl who gave dancing lessons. They run a sort of school, and go out to night shows—and give exhibitions.”

“How perfectly thrilling!”

His chin jerked round to her.

“Thrilling! A man like Sherring—! Why, it’s perfectly—fantastic.”

She wanted to laugh.

“Perhaps. You see, Dave—it’s such a new and fantastic world. It hasn’t your—phlegm.”

He was silent for some seconds.

“Well—I should call it a rotten sort of life. No stability.”

Stability! She said no more to him on the subject. She was conscious of the stars, and the patches of pale leaves in the hedges and the mazes of the mist.

Dancing in London! Mysterious streets, passionate humanity, strange macabre night-shows, music, a poignant, adventurous restlessness! She could have run laughing into such a life—yes—with Sherring.

The pony stumbled, and she gave the reins a tug.

“Idiot!”

4

Sherring walked home under the same stars. Pitt had ordered a taxi, and had offered to give Sherring a lift.

“Where do you want to go?”

“Don’t bother, old man. It won’t take me ten minutes. I like walking.”

Was it that he had wanted to be alone, or that he had been shy of confessing to Pitt that he lived in Quorn Street, and over a shop? Snobbery? No, his reluctance to show up Quorn Street had reserved to itself other subtleties. He had expected a clash with Bastable, and in the clash he had given the brass of Bastable a happy blow. But it was not he who had silenced Bastable. Kettle had done that, Kettle with his out-jutting lower lip and his Covent Garden candour.

A seedy failure! That was how men like Bastable and Loviebond would class him. His friends might be more kind—“Poor old Sherring.” He had caught Crabtree looking at him as a man may look at a beloved and stricken dog. Pity? O, damn the pity! And yet he had paid for their drinks with borrowed money, Mira’s money.

He came to Portman Square. He walked round it twice as though its spacious solidity made room for his restlessness. He was not ripe to return to Quorn Street, and in confronting the significance of Quorn Street, he thought of Charlie Flanders lying in bed and creating hats. What was the difference between Sherring and Charlie Flanders? Both of them were attachments to a feminine world. They lived upon a woman’s show, but he—Sherring—was more to be pitied, in that he had the use of his legs. Poor Charlie could not help himself. He could not walk downstairs and become self-assertively male.

Money? Certainly he and Mira were making the Monmouth Square show profitable. Yes, unexpectedly profitable, and he—like a disinterested ass—had insisted that its banking account should be in Mira’s name. It was not even a joint account. He could not touch that money. But did he want to touch it? Was not his wife the dominant partner, and he an ornamental and useful adjunct?

The Manetti School! There would be no Manetti school without Mira.

Was their romance over? Had he kissed and possessed, and in and through her surrender reached reality? Moreover, she might surrender to him physically, but in other matters she was showing signs of a quite reasonable independence. It was her show. She might not be conscious of being a little head in air, of an eager and vivid insistence that flew away and perched above him. Had he accused her—even most gently—of becoming “bossy,” she would have been hurt and surprised. She—bossy? How unfair! She was just tremendously keen on the show, for the show might produce all sorts of material things for her—and her husband. A woman can crave for her success—even as man does.

But it was Mira’s show.

He went forward towards Quorn Street. He found himself hoping that he would find Mira in bed and asleep. Strange, but to-night he did not want to meet his love face to face. He could not look it in the eyes and laugh. Almost, it had become a secret shame to him.

Mephistopheles? What a poor Mephisto was he! Flicking Bastable’s pound note to a waiter, and living inside the shoes of a dancing mistress! The spring, Regent’s Park, a soft white chin, a poignant mouth. Sex—subtilized? O, damn!

He reached Quorn Street, let himself in, and crept quietly up the stairs. How the confounded boards creaked! He entered the sitting-room, switched on the light, and saw the sofa by the window. It was not a very accommodating sofa, but it would serve. He took off his jacket, collar, tie and boots, collected two or three cushions, turned off the light and lay down on the sofa.

XI

MOREOVER, there were other men, the sensualists to whom a woman in Mira's position was fair game. That she was married might be considered both an added provocation and a safeguard, in that a married woman who lived by her face and feet could not afford to become pregnant. Miss Manetti, were she persuadable, would be wise as to all the precautions.

Certainly, she had a husband, a fellow who was rather too prevalent. The Sherrings were performers, hired people. They might be classed with the obscure crowd that is associated with the stage, the film studio, or the variety theatre. They dressed up and exhibited themselves for cash, or for favours in kind. Marriage was a mere costume which a woman in Mira's position might be expected to put off with her night dress, while an accommodating husband accepted an appointment elsewhere.

But Sherring was not an accommodating husband, and most certainly his wife had no leanings toward other forms of professionalism. She might be a little too vivaciously eager to welcome patronage, and to exert charm in encouraging it. Inevitably her profession had brought her in contact with the casual, vicarious sensualist. She may have had more experience of the type than Sherring. These occasional and casual gentlemen, having savoured Monmouth Square, and been kept very much at arm's length by a husband who was so obviously the man in possession, had behaved themselves or gone elsewhere.

But Mr. George Stanger was different. A thick set, well greased man about town with a curious pallor, saxe blue eyes and a lame leg, he limped insolently through life. He was witty, and witty with a most unpleasant tongue. He was scented, and successfully self-assured. In spite of his lame leg, he danced and danced remarkably well. He came to the Manetti School for tango lessons. He was sort of sleek, supple swashbuckler who contrived to make such a dance sexually insolent.

Sherring had met many men, but never a creature quite like Stanger. There were elements of decency in most men, but Stanger was impertinently indecent. He was unshameable.

Sherring had said that only once in the war had he quarrelled with another officer, but Stanger made him flush at the ears.

“Mira, if that fellow comes here again, I’m going to throw him out.”

She was all for appeasement. O, yes, Stanger was an arrogant ass, but she was not afraid of Mr. Stanger. He had tried the old trick of pushing a five-pound note under her ledger in payment for the first lesson.

“Take it out—in pretties.”

Mira had asked him coolly whether he proposed to pay for a series of lessons in advance. No?

“Your arithmetic must be rather shaky.”

She had flicked the note back at him.

“You will receive your account at the end.”

His pallid smirk had suggested that he had no illusions as to the sincerity of woman.

“Thank you, dear lady. I comprehend.”

It happened that Sherring went down to Narbiton to see the Steel baby and Archie’s wife, and returning rather late to collect Mira from Monmouth Square, he found the door of the studio locked. He heard voices, Mira’s voice, and somehow he knew that Mira was both angry and frightened.

“Give me that key—at once.”

“Don’t be a fool. You haven’t any sense of humour.”

“The key, please.”

Sherring knocked. His face wore a bleak and brittle little smile.

“Hallo—can I come in?”

There was a moment’s silence, before he heard Mira at the door.

“Jack—this cad has the key.”

“Mr. Stanger—I think?”

“Yes, he had the cheek to——”

“Tell him to unlock the door, or I’ll kick it in.”

The key was surrendered. Sherring, standing in the little vestibule, saw Mr. Man About Town looking both sheepish and defiant. His face had a kind of greasy, confident shimmer, but his eyes were furtive.

“Evening, Mr. Sherring—your wife and I have been having a little joke.

She dared me to——”

Mira was by her desk, rigid, pale.

“This cad—Jack——”

Sherring hung up his hat and coat on one of the pegs in the vestibule. He took three deliberate steps until he was close to Stanger. He looked into Stanger’s pale rake’s eyes. He did not utter a word, but his fist whipped out, and Stanger went backwards.

He was up, ugly and full of fight.

“If you want a row about your—woman.”

But in ten seconds Sherring had him mauled and marked and out in the passage. There was a second savage scuffle there. Stanger was knocked down. His mouth emitted foul words.

“Why—you bloody fool, your woman——”

Sherring was more than mad. He got Stanger up and by the ears, and held him against the wall.

“You swine, be quiet.”

He twisted him to the top of the stairs, gave a push, and a kick, and Stanger dived. He went down that first flight like a man taking a header. He lay there for some seconds, watched by Sherring. He gathered himself up.

“My hat and coat—please.”

Almost, Sherring laughed. Brazen swine! He went for Stanger’s hat and coat, and flung them down.

“Get out.”

And Stanger got out, his pallor somewhat bloodied. It was a most unseemly occasion. He took a taxi to his flat, and the Manetti School saw him no more.

Sherring found his wife in tears, tempestuous tears. As Mrs. Sherring and founder of the Manetti School she had begun to think of herself as a social figure, a woman of affairs whose dignity was to be respected, and Mr. George Stanger had smashed this delicate china. He had treated her like some cheap little wench whose virtuous protests were part of the conventional provocation, and whose subsequent struggles on the sofa would be more according to nature, and a return for value received. But it was Sherring who sat on the sofa with his weeping wife on his knees. He did not say—“I told you so” with

regard to George Stanger.

“You had better let me inspect your men in the future, kid. It’s not always a nice world.”

She knew that as well as he did, but in Monmouth Square she had supposed that men might respect both her morals and her show.

“It isn’t as if I hadn’t snubbed the beast, Jack. I had just finished with Miss Maitland when he came in and said he wanted us both to dine with him. He stayed on and chatted——”

“I don’t think he is feeling very chatty just at present, Mira. And luckily he didn’t mark me.”

She sat up and examined her husband’s face.

“Sure?”

“Quite.”

“O, my dear, your lip’s bleeding a little.”

“Perhaps I bit it! But, look here, kid, in the future you will hand over all male applicants to me. I’m pretty wise as to men. The complete blackguard is not a common product; but, in the future, I’m taking no risks.”

She put two fingers on his cut lip.

“Jack—it’s made me feel cheap, horribly cheap. It hasn’t made me—cheap—to you, has it?”

“Not likely.”

“Let me do something for your poor lip.”

She went for her bag and produced cotton wool and powder.

“Turn to the light, dear. Yes, it’s only just split slightly. But, Jack, I think I’d like to take on a girl or two. We are getting quite a rush of work, and I should have someone with me—if you were not here.”

He smiled at her.

“Good idea. Have you anyone in mind?”

“Yes—I know quite a nice girl who was at the Rutland. She’s very keen to come.”

“You’ll still require a partner?”

“You? Oh, of course. Why, you’re extraordinarily good with——”

“The middle-aged and the——”

“Don’t be silly. There are so few men in our profession who will take trouble. And you don’t frighten people. Don’t lick your lip.”

His expression was whimsical.

“Yes; I’m quite a nice tame rabbit.”

2

Their “profession!”

She had some right to be proud of it; but in Sherring, Monmouth Square was provoking more than an incipient restlessness. Was he to conceal it? And if it could not be concealed from his secret self, could it remain hidden from his wife? This quite futile assumption that he was being convincingly male when chasing round and over a parquet floor to the music of a gramophone. A gentlemanly parasite, a night club clown, a diner-out at other men’s expense! Even the complacent caddishness of George Stanger had revealed to Sherring just how much importance the ordinary casual man attached to the person of Miss Manetti’s husband.

“The Love Game!” Somewhere on a placard—advertising a play or a film he had seen those words. Love, laughter and life! O, yes, in some fabulous golden age, but in a commercial world the phantasy became pulp. Poor white trash. Probably Mr. Stanger had regarded him as little better than a gentlemanly bully, a fellow who lived on a woman. Life might tempt you with a roving commission, send you gold grubbing in Alaska, or beachcombing in the Pacific, but that was not a matrimonial affair. A wife might attend to your buttons and your socks, but the world of men expected you to purchase those items. And what did men like Pitt and Crabtree think of him in their secret souls? Poor old Sherring, a gentlemanly waster, of no use in the competitive scheme. It had been just the same at school. He had ragged and fooled and slacked; he had been exceedingly popular, save with one or two of the more urgent masters.

At the end of two successive terms he had filled the bottom place in a math. class, and an acid and pallidy strenuous master had asked him a question.

“Sherring, aren’t you ashamed of yourself?”

He had smiled sweetly.

“No, sir, I’m a hopeless ass at maths.”

Was not life proving to him that he was a hopeless ass at most things? The war had been different. In the war he had been able to display some of the conventional attributes of the gentleman, courage, poise, that curious gift for exercising a quiet authority. He had escaped from the strange business of making money. The war had been like an immensely serious game in which he had played for his side. At school he had been good at games. He had talked about “playing cricket.” He had believed—even while struggling with insurgent sex—in the importance of honour.

Poor little Mira! She was a warm-blooded, vivid creature, and her hot blood had involved him in this surrender. Mrs. Flanders had given him the advice of a kind, self-sacrificing fool. His marriage had been a disgraceful surrender to conventional sentiment. Had he gone home for the night with some casual girl—the adventure would have been incidental and far more honest.

3

It was the wife who suggested that her partner needed a new lounge suit. In spite of ironings and pressings under the bed, Sherring’s trousers were not what they should be, and appearances had to be considered. It was not policy to let the world say of you—“Those poor Sherrings, they must be having a struggle.” In the smart, sensational world success is more persuasive than pity.

“Jack, you must have a new suit.”

Incidentally, at the moment, he could command no adequate supply of money. He was depending upon Archie Steel’s monthly refund, and when a cheque did arrive it became mere petty cash.

“Can’t afford it.”

“Don’t be silly. Of course we can afford it. Clothes are part of the show. Go and see your tailor.”

He made some excuse, and then it did occur to Mira that all cheques were paid into her account. Like many women who are responsible for finance for the first time in their lives she was a little careful, and lacking in sense of proportion.

“You have some money, haven’t you?”

“Not much.”

“Well, draw on our account.”

Was she so very innocent? Couldn’t she appreciate the irony of the position? He explained.

“It’s not a joint account. I wanted the show’s money to be in your name. I can’t write cheques.”

She looked poignant.

“Oh—I’ll write you a cheque—then. You want some new dress shirts, too. Will twenty pounds do?”

“Plenty.”

“Do I write the cheque out to you?”

“Yes, pay John Foster Sherring—and sign it—Mira Sherring.”

She sat down at her bureau and took her cheque book from a drawer, and he stood behind her chair and watched her write that cheque. Didn’t a woman understand——? But, damn it, it was his own fault. What right had he to feel bitter? Mr. Mantalini had had no qualms. But while her pen moved over the paper he descended into a sudden pit of secret shame.

She tore out the cheque and passed it to him with a smile of naïve tenderness.

“Go and rig up, old thing.”

If he had been a boy, her son, the thing would have been different. He took the cheque, but his face betrayed to her something of his humiliation.

“What’s the matter, Jack?”

He made himself smile at her.

“O, nothing.”

“It’s your money as well as mine.”

She was so ingenuous about it that he realized how little she understood that the economics of their marriage were beginning to poison his pride. But how could he tell her? She might love him and fail to understand. Was love always physical and soul-blind?

Suddenly he laughed.

“Just a moment, Mira—when your show is well on its own legs—I shall begin to think of legs of my own.”

She was wide-eyed.

“What do you mean? Not another job?”

“Well—yes.”

“But I want you here. So many of the women prefer a man to teach them. You’re my partner. There are all sorts of possibilities.”

He was putting the cheque away in his wallet.

“O, well, we’ll see! If I can add to the bank balance, why not? I might get something that would leave me part of the day—and the evenings.”

He noticed that she was looking at him intently as though she suspected him of being bored.

“Feeling fed up, Jack?”

“Not a bit. Just wondering whether I could not produce something more. Don’t you worry.”

That is the last thing that a man should suggest to a woman, and when the suggestion was left in her lap Mira began to reflect upon it. Also, it is an open question whether a woman should discuss her husband and their private affairs with another woman, for if she needs reassuring she may be sure that there is something amiss with her affairs, and if she asks for advice she should remember that advice is often unpleasant and rarely accepted.

“O, my dear—I’m worried about Jack.”

Mrs. Flanders might have declared that she was not responsible for other husbands. But what was the disharmony in the Sherring marriage? Sherring wasn’t ill, was he?

“O, no, it’s not that. He’s funny.”

How vaguely descriptive was that word! When a woman used it about a man or a situation it implied that she was suspicious and perplexed.

“What do you mean by funny?”

“He talks about getting a job. Connie, don’t men become bored very quickly?”

“Some; but what’s the matter with Jack wanting a show of his own.”

Mira looked shocked.

“You mean, that Monmouth Square is—my—show?”

“Well, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s a partnership; it’s just as much his show as mine. We halve the lessons. He seemed so keen to begin with.”

“Ever wondered why?”

“Why? But it’s a good show. We are doing ever so much better than we expected. We took nearly thirty-five pounds last week at the rooms alone, not counting the night shows. And old Mr. Mason has been a perfect dear. He won’t let us pay him back. And then—there’s another thing. Sundays Jack has been down to Narbiton. He’s godfather to a friend’s kid. He says he adores babies.”

Mrs. Flanders was stitching away at something. If her life had suffered from certain sterilities—it had not been her fault. She understood the sacrament of sacrifice.

“My dear, don’t think me a beast, but Jack has done all he can to help your show to be a success. After all, a man who went through the war. Besides, you’ve got a rather unusual husband.”

Mira looked poignant.

“You mean—he’s jealous of my show?”

Mrs. Flanders gave her a glance of kind tolerance. She was growing wise as to the limitations of this pretty, vivid thing.

“No, no; you’re keen on your show and its success, aren’t you? Well, doesn’t it occur to you that your husband may feel—that he wants a job of his own, a man’s job?”

Mira’s pretty mouth betrayed sulkiness.

“He has always lost his jobs. I rather thought I had found him a job that ——”

“My dear!”

“Well—what have I said wrong now? If our show grows he can be a sort of director or manager for me.”

“For you? Exactly. It’s not much use giving people advice. Don’t tie your man up. He may know what he wants, and he may not want it merely for himself.”

“You are trying to tell me that he is ashamed of being——”

Mrs. Flanders became almost severe.

“Now—don’t be—temperamental. If you want me to tell you what I think—I’ll tell you. A man like Jack can’t fill his life by dancing around with a lot of women. A man ought to tussle with men. If you are wise—you’ll leave him free to find a billet.”

“But he never keeps them; he says so himself.”

Mrs. Flanders gave it up.

“Well, let him lose them. It may be—his hobby!”

4

If marriage was proving for Sherring an exploration of the profound loneliness which may envelop a man even in the presence of his wife, he concealed his feelings. If passion is followed by pity, Sherring’s compassion was not self-pity. He was growing wise as to this vivid, eager creature who was so ready to grasp at the glitter and the colour of material things. Could he blame her? If their mating had been a mingling of beautiful sensuous sex, the surrender had been mutual, and the aftermath was for his reaping. His wife’s vision was so immediate and vital. She could not translate to-day into to-morrow or yesterday. If she was happy, there was no reason why the world should be unhappy. She was tempted to resent other people’s searchings of their souls.

But, as Sherring came to realize his mate’s limitations he knew moments of fear. Like a baby she reacted to glitter and colour, newness, mere objects. Her touch explored surfaces, and Sherring was a surface, the man whose looks had piqued her, the playfellow, the bedfellow, the dancing partner. It was not in her nature to divine or to go deep. Moreover, her world had been one in which sensational creatures sought satisfaction and could she be blamed if her standard was that of a little girl who had gazed a little curiously into shop windows? A certain fastidiousness, a quality of physical delicacy, had saved her from making of herself shabby merchandise. She wanted things “nice.” She wanted to climb her beanstalk into some prosperous other world in which all sorts of desirable things grew on trees. Her very fastidiousness had given a sharp edge to the lips of her ambition. Sherring’s gaiety as a lover had delighted her. It was perhaps very natural that she should have assumed that he would scramble up the beanstalk with her, and laughingly share any fruit that was to be found. It has been argued that modern woman prefers the man who makes no moan about morals, who is cheerfully sexual, who has no false pride about money—who—in fact and in gross language—may be what can be described as a woman’s kept man. The old relationships have been removed. If

man has kept woman for centuries, why should not woman keep man? A tame buck-rabbit in a hutch.

She, simple mind, did not understand the more sensitive prides. Her pride had been a girdle of chastity worn to propitiate a nice fortune. She had refused to make a fool of herself, and then had fallen over the edge of things with Sherring.

He had married her.

They were making money.

What conceivable grievance had he against life?

Did the women pupils bore him?

Well, apparently, he had found commercial routine even more boring.

They could have no end of fun together, Mira and Monte, play-girl and play-boy.

He had ceased to laugh as he had laughed a year ago.

She wanted to say to him—“Laugh, Jack, for God’s sake laugh! Life’s fine and lovely.”

5

As Mira had told Mrs. Flanders, Sherring did go to Narbiton to see Archie and Mrs. Archie and their baby. He went down to have tea with them, choosing a Sunday, for on Sundays Mira liked to stay in bed till twelve o’clock, and to spend the afternoon by the fire reading a novel. It was her rest day when she played cat on a cushion, but on the Sunday night she and her husband had an engagement to dance at The Green Cat or some other club.

Master Eric Valentine Steel also lay on a cushion, and made noises, and kicked, and crinkled up his funny little face. He was an exceedingly healthy and good-tempered child. Sherring, whom Mrs. Steel had tried to treat with suburban impressment, and had failed, asked for nothing but infantile informality.

“Do let’s have the baby in, Mrs. Steel.”

Archie was sent to fetch him. Archie was almost absurdly good with the baby. Already they were like a couple of quidnuncs.

“Hallo, young fellah!”

Sherring liked Mrs. Steel, especially when she had decided to drop her mannerisms and be somewhat herself. She was a quick-tempered and quick-witted little woman. Obviously, she might not be too easy to live with, but the coming of Eric Valentine had filled out her thinness, both mentally and physically. She and her husband were becoming friends.

Sherring, with his first finger clasped by one of Eric Valentine's puddy little fists, found a strange satisfaction in watching this small piece of flesh. Life began by being so supremely natural and unsophisticated. It asked you for everything and nothing. It clutched your finger and bubbled. It could raise infernal squalls and yet be so restful.

"Does he shout at night?"

No, Eric Valentine slept like an angel. Only occasionally did one of the parents have to get up and dandle the infant, and that parent was Archie.

"He's really marvellous with baby."

Sherring quizzed Archie.

"I remember you carrying a bag of bombs, babe."

Archie was staring at his son.

"Bombs! Does seem funny, doesn't it? That young fellah is a bit of a bomb, sometimes."

Sherring noticed that Archie was kind to his wife. He had ceased to be the mere young sexmonger, the full-eyed egoist. He would get up and fetch the buttered toast from the fender and offer it to Irene, nor was this a mere Sunday parade for Sherring's edification. Eric Valentine was persuading his father to settle down. Archie was feeling responsible.

Sherring would reflect while talking to the Steels and watching their baby. Queer thing life! Human putty like this—which would mould itself into—what? The plastic stuff out of which man was building beauty or ugliness. Or was it God? Why did one small creature become a gentle, sensitive, fastidious man, and another a mere brute, some foul-mouthed lumberman or fish-porter? Was the sensitive product more significant than the brute? To the brute the dreamer of dreams might appear to be a futile, finicking, feeble person, no use in a rough house, a thing that was not worth a belch. It knew nothing of uppercuts and straight lefts to the jaw. Had civilization made for too much refinement? What were the exact values of a picture gallery in Bond Street and a pub in the Waterloo Road?

The war may have been brutal, but it failed to turn certain men into brutes.

Peace could be even more brutal. It belched its boredom at you. Its stomach had a hopelessness. It looked at you with a sudden, sullen fury.

But why worry? Life was a jig-saw puzzle. Eric Valentine lay and kicked. He was inevitable because he was wanted.

After all, wouldn't the world be a pleasanter place if all the unwanted people were painlessly snuffed out, blown out like candles? Eliminate half London or New York?

He found himself tickling Eric Valentine's tummy.

"Thank God, young fellah—you don't ask questions like that."

Steel walked to the station with him. He treated Sherring as his father confessor. It did a chap good to talk to a man like Sherring.

"Gee wizz, Skipper, but I was nearly over the edge. Silly ass! Irene's been an awful little sport to me. I've toned down."

"It's just a question of finding out, Archie, the things that are worth while."

"But that can be a pretty large order. I don't know what was the matter with me last year. I was simply mad on girls. If I saw a pair of legs in the street. Ever been that way, Skipper?"

"Yes; I got over it. Some chaps do; some don't. It's the idea of—newness—that gets one—strangeness. After all, they are all much alike in the dark. Being nothing but a rip is a rather rotten prospect."

Archie held on to Sherring's arm.

"That kid has made a difference to me. And Irene becoming a friend. She understood things more than I thought. Didn't know how much I was hurting her, old man. After all, most of us are soft-hearted asses; we don't like hurting people."

"God's truth, Archie. That's why the world goes on."

6

Soft-hearted asses. How very English was that phrase, and Sherring, strolling up to Islington on another Sunday morning, found the Kettle shutters up, and Kettle preparing to take out part of the family. Mrs. Kettle was concerned with the Sunday dinner, and Kettle was going for a walk with the two small Kettles, Percival and Gladys. He wore a bowler hat, a white collar and black tie, and a dark blue overcoat, and the two children were dressed as

Mrs. Kettle expected her children to be dressed.

Kettle was the practical eugenist.

“Must give their little tummies a chance, sir. When we sit darn to Sunday dinner—we sit—darn to it.”

Meanwhile they walked up the Canonbury Road, where the children stopped to look at the New River. Kettle held his daughter by the hand. His conversation was a mixture of facetiousness and complete candour. With perfect naturalness he discussed with Percy the possible presence of tiddlers in the New River in springtime, and why the New River could not be a home for whales. In the first place it wasn’t large enough, and in the second place not salt enough, and thirdly—whales were whales. They went on in the direction of Highbury Fields, and the two children, discovering in Sherring a new spectator to be impressed, began to exhibit themselves. Percy would dash on ahead, slip into somebody’s garden, close the iron gate, and go through a series of facial contortions when his sister arrived. The girl, mercurial according to her sex, patted walls, skipped on to doorsteps and off them, retorted upon her brother’s grimaces, or walked backwards looking up into Sherring’s face, the incipient little flirt.

Kettle exerted authority.

“Nar then—you two—stop showin’ orf.”

They denied the accusation.

“We’re not showing off.”

“Oh, ain’t you. Well—stop it. Ain’t your mother taught you ‘ow to behave?”

His criticism of his children was cheerful and free, nor did they cheek him. Kettle was very much father, and what he said still went. Gladys could have corrected his pronunciation, and informed him that he should say—“How” not “ ‘ow,” but father transcended the aspirates. In the vernacular he was, as a father, very much it.

In the Fields their progress was quite decorous. Gladys elected to hold Sherring’s hand. The boy aped his father, trying to keep step with him, his fists stuffed into the pockets of his small overcoat.

Kettle talked. He was in an expansive mood. He aired a practical man’s philosophy.

He said—“Socialists! Yah! What’s the thing that keeps the world from

fallin’ to bits? Why, property. Bricks and mortar. All this talk about luck! When a chap’s got a bit o’ property, ‘e’s like an ‘ouse, ‘e’s got foundations. Why don’t the ruddy Bolshies get busy and make somethink for themselves instead of blowin’ ‘ot air? I’m old-fashioned—I am. Bricks and mortar and a little business and a wife and kids. That’s the stuff. Stands to reason that if you’ve got nothin’, and no guts to get anythin’, you talk tripe about the chap as ‘as somethin’. If I ‘adn’t bucked into things—where’d I be? Blowin’ froth with the soap-box merchants. Share and share alike? Rats! If some of them blighters ‘ad my little business—would they cough me up ‘alf the profits? Not ruddy likely. Property. That’s what keeps the world from fallin’ to pieces.”

Sherring smiled and agreed. He had no property, but he did appreciate the finality of foundations.

He heard Gladys piping at him.

“Have you got a motor car?”

No, he hadn’t.

“Father’s got a motor car.”

Kettle chuckled.

“Now—you be—h’exact. It’s a Tin Lizzie, my dear, a bloomin’ old van. This gentleman don’t ride in vans.”

“What do gentlemen ride in?”

“Rolls Royces, young lidy.”

Gladys reflected.

“If I’m a lady you’ll have to buy a Rolls Royce, daddy.”

“Rats,” said her father.

XII

DURING the early part of the winter Sherring persisted in trying to procure some form of employment. Too gentlemanly to approach Mr. Mason, he wrote letters and sought interviews and answered advertisements. He put himself in the hands of an association for assisting ex-officers; he had to appear before a small committee, and when its members inquired into his financial position he had to confess that he was in business with his wife.

"What do you do, Captain Sherring?"

"Teach dancing, sir."

"Are you in debt?"

"No. It is—rather—a question of self-respect. I am perfectly willing to take on anything dangerous."

Sherring was given to understand that London was full of more pressing and tragic cases than his, men who were suffering in stomach as well as in soul. The members of the committee were gentle to Sherring, but they reminded him that he had work of a sort, board and lodging, and he apologized for having approached them as the supplicant of a nice pride.

"I feel that I ought not to have come to you, gentlemen. I'm sorry."

He rose to go.

"If your position should change, Captain Sherring, of course—apply to us again."

"Thank you, sir."

But the world was much more curt and candid than these gentlemen who sat to consider the needs of the middle class unemployed. It asked Sherring a blunt question.

"What can you do?"

On several occasions after he had attempted to answer that question, he realized that almost he might be classed among the unemployable. He was an anachronism. He would find himself vacating a chair and apologizing for having wasted somebody's time.

He asked himself that same question—"What can you do, you devil?" And

when he set out to catalogue his capacities he became conscious of his commercial uselessness.

He could say—“I know a little about cars, but I couldn’t take down an engine and reassemble it. I know a little about business, but not enough to make me an efficient clerk. I used to play quite a good game of cricket. I can box quite nicely. I can speak a little French. Someone might employ me as a secretary, but I can’t type or write shorthand. I’m too old for the police. If I had been able to remain in the army peace soldiering would have bored me. I don’t know enough about the land to be a land agent; in fact I cannot claim any serious commercial value. I’m just an ex-public school boy, a gentlemanly fellow who loathed routine, a drifter. I might be described as mildly ornamental, like a palm in a pot that can be hired to help decorate a ball-room.”

In conclusion he could add—“I can dance.”

London had nothing gentlemanly to offer Sherring. It did not want him as a clerk or as a salesman. It could have told Sherring that he was casual labour, and that if he found his level it might be that of a luggage porter or a car-washer in a garage. It might have suggested to him that with a little influence and some luck he might obtain a golf secretaryship; or be engaged as a gentleman chauffeur. Or had he considered a post as valet? Could he press clothes? Years ago he had been offered a niche in the social scheme as the son of a successful country solicitor, and he had scorned it, to become one of those wandering spirits who must move from place to place. Possessed of a private income he might have been a successful shooter of big game, or a motoring pioneer, or a species of gentlemanly Wandering Jew.

But he could dance. He could order a dinner, and impress waiters. In many respects he was a social asset. Women liked him. He made them dance better than they could. He might be an inoffensive parasite, but he was not a cad.

The world of commerce said to him—“Well, your wife’s right, after all. She does fill a niche, and you had better slip in beside her as her shadow. Yes, you can dance, and that’s about all you can do. If your hands and your head are useless, well—concentrate on your feet.”

2

Yet, Sherring’s increasing dislike of himself as a gigolo was to emerge into the very forefront of his consciousness. The little London tragedy of Mira and Monte was threaded upon the silk of a man’s will to dance. As Mira Manetti’s

partner he had been silk, a lover lost in movement, a gay rhythmical body unvexed by any inhibitions. As the husband of Mrs. Sherring, her shadow and assistant, the thing was different. Within the fluid flesh the spirit began to creak. He had ceased to dance to music. He performed for money on a sort of stage. He was a kind of clown, a social sponger, an attachment to his wife.

Quite suddenly he became self-conscious, acutely and shamefully so. He felt the stare of the world upon him, and if it was not unfriendly, it might be contemptuously tolerant. On those public, night club occasions he began to burn. The redness of poor Mephisto was like a fierce and universal blush. The easy glide, the indifferent casual poise, the almost impudent gesture began to desert him. His body became like a mechanism in which the wheels were being interfered with by the fingers of a sensitive and questioning intelligence.

One night at The Green Cat Club he caught a couple of men laughing at him. Seated at a table with two women they observed him from under ironic eyebrows. He was not dancing too well. Something in him resisted. And after that laughter he began to dance like a man made of wood.

Mira's face was close to his. He was aware of a perplexed and slightly impatient frown. Her eyes looked narrow.

"What—is—the matter with you to-night?"

His face winced into a smile.

"I'm a bit off colour."

"Do let go. You're like cast iron."

He could have said to her—"My God—I'm feeling a damned ass."

Relax he could not. His conscious self kept castigating his physical self, and with each blow it uttered the accusation—"You damned ass—you thrice damned ass."

3

Mrs. Sherring had been playing with an idea, and early in December it took shape. The Manetti School of Dancing had prospered beyond their expectations, and Mira was feeling that something was due to her public. In fact it was the moment for a gesture. The Manetti School should present a New Year show to its patrons.

Moreover, it would be an excellent puff.

“I’ve been round to one or two hotels, Jack. Most of them are having a New Year show of their own, but the Brandon could let us have their room and serve light refreshments.”

“The Brandon?”

She explained that the Brandon regarded as an hotel was not exactly a posh place, but it was in a good neighbourhood, Knightsbridge, and the ball-room and cloak-rooms were excellent. Also, she was in touch with an orchestra, and orchestras might be expected to be scarce on New Year’s Eve. The decision had to be made promptly.

He had not the heart to crab her scheme.

“What’s it going to cost? Any idea?”

“About thirty-five pounds.”

“The price of about ninety lessons. Still, as you say, kid, it will be a gesture. Well, go ahead.”

But that was only part of the picture. She was very keen that they should evolve a new dance, something arrestive and original, and advertise it on their cards. “Special Exhibition by Mira and Monte.” Her imagination was leaping into pagan picturesqueness. Why not something classic and Russian like the Nymph and the Faun? She had seen a picture of the great god Pan and a lady in light drapery performing together against a background of ruined temples and black cypresses. Ruined temples and the trees could not be set up in the Brandon ball-room, but she and Sherring could stage a dance.

Sherring raised objections.

Inwardly, his new self-consciousness was asserting that it would be damned if it would prance to order like a man-he-goat. Make a hairy fool of himself in public! No, thank you.

“Much too difficult, kid.”

“Why?”

“I haven’t the technique. You might do it—but I should let you down.”

“But—why not try?”

For once he was firm with her. He would not perform as Pan, and having objected to the exhibition, he was constrained to humour her by consenting to play shepherd to her shepherdess, in a garland of vine leaves, a sheepskin, and a Cretan kilt. But hoofs, no! He could not forget the ribald, ironic faces of those men at the Green Cat Club.

Mira booked the Brandon room and engaged her orchestra, and sat down to draw out a list of the various people who were to be invited. Mr. Mason—of course, but not Mr. Mason's daughters. Sherring suggested that they should indulge in a *beau geste* and give Mr. Mason dinner before the show. No, not at the Brandon. The Brandon might be capable of producing a decent dance floor and lemonade, but its dinner would in all probability consist of tomato soup, tasteless fish with dabs of yellow sauce, roast mutton with greens and boiled potatoes, and perhaps a very watery ice. No, let Mira ask Connie Flanders to make up the party, and they would dine where the cook was not English.

Mira extracted a list of names. She had yet another suggestion to make.

"We might send out cards to your friends. That nice Dr. Pitt, and some of the officers you know."

Sherring demurred. He could not tell her that he was ashamed of his share in the show, and that he would not exhibit himself before Pitt and Crabtree and Loviebond. He had been a man to these men, not a poor, performing pro, a creature who had to rouge his face for the occasion. As a shepherd, an Arcadian, he had to appear as a glowing youth, and Mira would persist in using a powder puff to expunge the too virile blackness of a mature chin.

"They wouldn't be interested. Besides—they all live out of town."

"Dr. Pitt doesn't. St. John's Wood might be useful."

"He's much too busy. I don't want to worry a man like Pitt."

She was not deceived. He was making excuses. He did not want his friends to come to the Brandon. She was hurt; piqued. Was he shy of exhibiting his wife and his marriage to these other men who were his friends? She had written down the name of Dr. Pitt, and with a look that was both poignant and peevish she put her pen through the name.

"O, very well."

4

Sherring's wife knew nothing of haruspicy or star patterns, but the last day of the year was unfortunate in its omens.

December 31st proved to be a dastardly day. It enveloped itself in fog, a raw white blanket. The dance orchestra had arranged to attend at Monmouth Square at eleven o'clock to rehearse the Sherring exhibition dance. Mira had chosen Mendelssohn's Spring Song as an accompaniment, a fantasia of

dancing daffodils, and leaping lambs, but only two members of the orchestra turned up, the pianist and the drummer, and the Spring Song proved wintry.

Mira was angry.

“If you are going to let us down like this——”

She was called to the telephone. The leader of the orchestra wished to say that he was most frightfully sorry, but he was nursing a cold and himself for the night’s necessity. O, yes, he would be there. There should be plenty in the Spring Song. “Don’t get fussed, Miss Manetti. Everything will be O.K.”

Mira and her husband tried out the dance to the piano and drum, and though all the movements were familiar to them, Sherring fumbled several steps. His wife suddenly broke off the rehearsal. She was angry and upset. The fool of a drummer persisted in producing facetious rat-tats where the music surged skywards. Irresponsible joy, leaping lambs, streaming sunlight, west wind—rat-tat!

Mira’s lips bit her words.

“Perfectly useless—perfectly fatuous! You can pack up. We’ll wait for the real show. I hope to God you’ll be able to put some pep into the thing to-night.”

The drummer tapped his drum. He was a facetious fellow.

“Don’t you worry, Miss Manetti. A couple of bottles of fiz and we’ll bubble like brooks.”

They departed, and Mira walked up and down hand in hand with her vexation.

“They expect champagne, do they.”

Sherring was gentle with her. He knew that he had not shone in the rehearsal.

“Worth it—probably, Mira. We’ll all have champagne. Makes one fluid.”

“I have a good mind to ‘phone Horrocks—and tell him he and his band can go to——”

He went and put an arm round her.

“I know. Damned exasperating—but things will be all right to-night. A good dinner—and some wine.”

The telephone bell rang, and Mira ran to the receiver. She was in one of those moods when a woman cannot stand still. She fidgeted on her feet, and

wriggled her shoulders.

“Hallo—who’s that? I can’t hear you. Yes—this is Mrs. Sherring. What?—O—I’m so sorry. In bed. How very trying.”

She turned protestingly to her husband.

“It’s Mr. Mason now. He’s got ‘flu.”

“Poor old lad. Is he speaking?”

“No, the butler.”

“Say how sorry we are, dear.”

Mira resumed her conversation with Mr. Mason’s butler.

“Please—say how sorry we are. Tell him to take care of himself. What—he’s sending some flowers to the Brandon? How kind of him. Please thank him.”

She hung up the receiver. There was no kindness in her eyes at that moment.

“O, damn, everything’s going wrong. It’s perfectly poisonous.”

Sherring tried to reassure her.

“Just like the dear old war, kid—but we—won—the war.”

The ball-room at the Brandon was very much in a December mood when the Sherrings went round after lunch to see that everything was in order. The ball-room had a separate entrance from the street, with cloak-rooms on either side of a narrow vestibule. The fog had penetrated to the ball-room, and on this December afternoon the decorations of the big bare room which were in French grey, matched the fog in the street. The place was cold and dreary. On a table in a corner Mr. Mason’s flowers looked like a mass of coloured wax wrapped in grey wool.

Sherring saw Mira give a little shiver of protest.

“Jack, it’s like a station waiting-room.”

“No heat on—yet, perhaps.”

The room had radiators, and he went and felt one of them.

“Just coming on, I think. We’ll see about that.”

He was aware of Mira standing in the middle of the room, a little figure in black, vaguely forlorn and dismayed. He did not see her as a figure of tragedy,

nor suspect that the seeds of tragedy lay in this dreary room. Obscure, trivial happenings that would sprout in one short hour. He was conscious of sudden compassion. He crossed to the door and turned on the lights.

“That’s better. It isn’t fair to catch a room like this—undressed. Wait till it’s full of pretty frocks.”

A grand piano stood in a recess, and Sherring raised the lid of the keyboard and sat down. He could vamp a few easy tunes, and he crashed out a fox-trot, the season’s favourite.

“How’s that? Tails up! Try the floor, kid.”

She put her hands on her hips.

“Give me a tango, Jack. Can you manage it?”

“Rather.”

He attempted a tango, and she began to dance, but there was no rhythm in his improvisation, and after a few steps she gave it up.

“No use getting stale.”

Gently closing the piano, he stood up.

“Let’s look at old Mason’s flowers. By Jove, he must have sent half his conservatory. Flowers bring luck.”

They were to dine at seven-thirty. Sherring was insisting upon that dinner, though the principal guest had failed them. He knew that Mira was nervous, and probably he was much more on edge than she was. Champagne was necessary. He dreaded an attack of paralytic self-consciousness. At six Mira went up to dress. He was leaving her the bedroom and the ordeal of a new frock; he could change in the sitting-room. That new frock of Mira’s was an exquisite thing, an amber chiffon, and if a woman can be put into paradise by a frock, all should be for the best on God’s earth. Connie Flanders was equally busy below. She was coming to the Brandon for a couple of hours to cheer the show with her cheerful countenance.

About 6.30 Sherring heard his wife’s door open. She went hurriedly downstairs. There was agitation in the swift descent.

“Connie, I’ve ripped a gather.”

“O, my dear!”

“Perfectly damnable! I hardly know how I did it.”

“Let’s look.”

The damage was not too disastrous, and Mrs. Flanders was able to find some thread to match the colour of the frock. She knelt and sewed, while Mira restrained a moody restlessness.

“Everything has gone wrong to-day, Connie.”

“Nothing like getting things over.”

“I’m most frightfully nervous. I have a feeling that the show is going to be an utter frost.”

Mrs. Flanders protested.

“Don’t be silly, my dear. There you are. It’s absolutely unnoticeable. You look lovely.”

“I don’t feel lovely.”

Mrs. Flanders was moved to scold her, but afterwards when the unmerciful thing had happened she remembered that mood of Mira’s, and wondered at it.

XIII

THEY dined; they shared a bottle of champagne, and Mrs. Flanders realized that both the Sherrings were nervous. She knew that Sherring could be gay, but this gaiety of his was different. Spontaneous it might be, or partly the product of the wine, but in it she divined a note of pathos. Sherring was passionately anxious that neither he nor the night should disappoint his wife. He was much too anxious.

In the taxi he sat facing the two women. Connie Flanders was holding one of Mira's hands, and Mira's fingers were hot and febrile. She was restless, irritable.

"Let's have a window down, Jack. It's awfully stuffy."

He lowered one of the windows two inches.

"Pretty raw to-night."

His remark reminded her of the rawness of the Brandon ball-room.

"I hope to heaven—they've warmed that room up."

He smiled and patted her knee.

"Don't worry. I crashed round there just before six. Everything was O.K."

Half an hour later Mrs. Flanders was beginning to think that all their fears had been fallacious. She had mothered Mira in the dressing-room and sent her out with a kiss and three kind words. "You look lovely." The big room was warm and bright, and its greyness had taken on a sheen of silver. The floor gleamed. The jazz-band made cheerful noises as it tuned up.

Sherring had an idea.

"Come along—just one cocktail tune before we start. I want to try the floor."

The band responded—and Sherring swept across the room to his wife.

"Dance, kid—dance."

For a moment she hesitated, and then with a sudden glimmer of the eyes, gave herself to him. It was a happy moment, a moment in which both of them felt supple and relaxed.

“I can move to-night, kid. By Jove, if I was dead I could get up and dance with you. It’s going to be a success, our show.”

The first arrivals surprised the Sherrings dancing. It was a pleasant picture, obviously an improvisation, playful, unstudied. Mira, laughing, broke away, and skated across the floor to welcome her first guests. She had become animated—her vivid self.

“Splendid of you to come. Jack and I were just being children.”

The room began to fill, and Mira and her husband stood by the door, and received the crowd. Obviously Sherring was proud of his wife; he waited slightly behind her as though the social occasion was hers. There was no jealousy in him. For the moment he was happily unself-conscious.

People stood about in groups, or sat on the gilt chairs ranged against the walls. Sherring would diverge occasionally to introduce solitary souls. Mrs. Flanders, happily by herself in a recess where Mr. Mason’s flowers had been massed, watched Sherring and his wife. She felt relieved. The show promised to be alive and easy. Even the inaugural stiffness of such affairs was lacking, that English chill which descends upon a crowd of strangers. Sherring was busy weaving a web of friendliness. Mira looked vivid and happy.

Then—an untoward circumstance! Mrs. Parris arrived towering in orange and black, her face a white confection, and with her a tall man who looked distinguished and felt it. He had one of those very small heads like the head of a bald eagle, a hook nose, a round and prominent chin that glistened. His eyes were those pale blue eyes which see everything, but without kindness. Sherring had met those eyes under the gold braid of a staff-hat.

Mrs. Parris drawled.

“I’ve brought Colonel Dudenny.”

Colonel Dudenny shook hands with Mira, and nodded at Sherring, and the soul of Sherring flushed and fell flat.

“Good evening, Colonel.”

He was aware of the soldier regarding him with calm curiosity. Colonel Dudenny had appeared in a battalion’s lines or billets with just that same icy air, a casual and supercilious expert stalking hither and thither in silence—to utter perhaps a few words of thin-lipped sarcasm.

“Your men’s boots are dirty, Captain Sherring.”

He spoke to Sherring now.

“New profession for you, Captain Sherring.”

“Yes, sir; one has to improvise.”

“So I gather. Turning field-boots into dancing pumps.”

Sarcastic swine! Sherring’s mood changed from mulled wine to ice. A little shiver of self-consciousness ran through him. Of all the damnable coincidences! That Mrs. Parris, that lustful, painted corpse should have produced this one particular man!

Colonel Dudenny seemed to be enjoying some frozen jest. He kept such sottishness as laughter in cold storage.

“I hear you are to give us an exhibition.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sherring escaped to welcome other people, but the poor dancer was dead in him, a puppet stuffed with sawdust. Exhibition. Exactly. He was to exhibit himself to Colonel Dudenny in a sheepskin and vine leaves, and with his knees and legs stained brown. How damnable! Yet, what did the man matter? An old he-goat with supercilious and surprised eyes, sarcastically amused by the strange antics of a one time temporary gentleman. Let the fellow go to hell and cool his glittering grin in ice, if he could find any!

Sherring had been silk. He was wire and then wood. The presence of that other man was like some paralysing, hostile power. Jettatura, the evil eye, Mars with a monocle observing queer, shabby people.

Sherring was shaking somebody’s hand, and thinking—“That fellow is here to watch me make a damned fool of myself.”

And that was the beginning of the night’s obscure tragedy.

2

The Sherrings had gone to dress for the exhibition dance, and when Sherring saw himself in the dressing-room mirror he felt that he could not show himself in that ball-room. Clown, ass, mountebank!

Someone knocked at the door. It was Connie Flanders.

“Jack.”

“Hallo!”

“Mira’s waiting.”

He opened the door and walked past her, and when Mrs. Flanders saw his face she was shocked. He looked like a man going to meet the scorn of a ribald crowd instead of to entertain a number of good-natured people who were quite ready to applaud him.

Mira had been waiting by the glass doors of the ball-room, and she was not pleased.

“What—have—you been doing?”

“Sorry, kid.”

He was conscious of feeling sudden pity for this pretty, impatient creature who was his wife. Poor little Mira! She was angry with him for being late, and her anger added to his emotional confusion, the yea and nay of a complex disharmony. Compassion challenged him to dance with her as her dream-shepherd, and not to damn the display by performing like a wooden doll. What were they but a couple of mountebanks?

She gave him a protesting look. His face scared her.

“What’s the matter with you? Nerves?”

It was one unhappy touch. He was trying to relax and her flash of temper stiffened him.

“All right, kid. I’m ready.”

“For pity’s sake—smile and look pleased.”

She flung through the glass door and he followed. They had arranged with the orchestra that their entry should be greeted with a vibrant cord, a roll of the drum, and then a clash of cymbals. A pause, while they bowed to the room and the room’s salutation. The Spring Song was to open with a subtle, piquant softness. Mira would run into the centre of the room, and her shepherd give chase.

Sherring saw Colonel Dudenny directly opposite him, attached to the wall like some sardonic caryatid in evening dress. That which should have been a rippling run became a self-conscious stride. Sherring’s legs felt and looked like the limbs of a pair of compasses.

Mira waited, poised. He saw her eyes. There was a kind of shallow glare in them. She smiled, but her mouth was like a little wincing wound.

He was a mere piece of taut twine covered with hoar frost.

They danced, and Sherring like a man counting his steps. Always he seemed to be a shade of a second behind his wife. She was prompting him, this

body of his which was a wooden contraption pulled by strings. Mira's smile became set. He was making a damned fool of himself, and clogging the flow of her easy movements.

Faces—staring faces—Spring Song, Colonel Dudenny's figure plastered against the wall.

Mira, with that set smile, breathing her humiliation at him.

"Let's cut it short."

What did she mean? Her face expressed smiling shame. He was making a complete mess of the show. The dance should have risen to a crescendo in which Sherring caught his wife and swung her aloft. He had not bungled the movement in practice, but he bungled it now. She had to help him with a little surrendering leap, and somehow he missed the movement, clutched her, but half a second too late. He was conscious of her slipping from him, of a faint, rending sound.

She crashed.

Silence; staring, shocked faces. Even the orchestra became mute, and then fell pell-mell into more music.

Only then did Sherring lose his self-consciousness in pity for his wife, anger against himself.

He had Mira in his arms. He carried her to the glass doors. Someone opened them. The doors closed. They were alone in the vestibule.

"Kid—I'm——"

She struggled out of his arms. She struck him across the face with a little, stinging hand.

"O, you fool!"

He stood there, watching her rush from him and disappear into her dressing-room. Good God, what a damnable mess he had made of her show! Someone went past him and paused. It was Mrs. Flanders.

"Do something. Go back and explain."

"Explain?"

"Tell them Mira wasn't well. Tell them—anything."

"But it was my fault."

"O, never mind—man—whose fault it was. Go in and smile. Say

something. It’s up to you.”

He turned back; he repassed the glass doors. There was a kind of expectant, warm hush.

“Ladies and gentlemen—I’m supremely sorry—but my wife ought not to have danced to-night. She was not feeling—well.”

He was aware of the faces murmuring at him sympathetically. He made a sign to the band, and the musicians struck up a fox-trot.

Sherring smiled with that lie in his heart.

“Please dance; please enjoy yourselves.”

They danced.

3

He went into his dressing-room and flung off his clown’s clothes.

“O, you bloody fool!”

He resumed the black and white of convention. As he tied his tie he addressed his face in the mirror. “Smile. Go back into that damned room and try to pull the show together.” The orchestra was playing the opening bars of a waltz when he walked through the glass doors. He stood there for a moment, head up, smiling. He saw Mrs. Parris and the Dudenny man opposite him, and walking straight across the room to the couple, he bowed coolly to the lady.

“May I have this one?”

He was aware of Dudenny’s ironic face.

“No more crashes, Captain Sherring.”

Sherring smiled at the other man’s eyes.

“Hardly, sir. I may have let my wife down badly—but—that’s—history.”

They danced, and Sherring danced remarkably well, though his thoughts were in Mira’s dressing room. He was watching for his wife. Would she come back?

Mrs. Parris drawled at him.

“What was the matter with you two?”

“There was nothing the matter with Mira.”

She squinted at him.

“But didn’t you put the blame on your wife?”

“Dear lady—wasn’t it obvious to everybody—that—I—was the mutt? My wife wasn’t herself—because I had stage fright.”

“Poor lad.”

“Poor jack-ass!”

“You’re all right now.”

“Quite. With you—could it be otherwise?”

She grimaced at him. She was pleased.

“Gallant fellow.”

Mrs. Parris might think what she pleased and tell the whole room what she thought, but her inferences were not what Sherring had expected. Mrs. Parris was always kind to the man, and her supposition represented Mrs. Sherring as a young cat who had clawed a highly strung husband into a state of panic. She put it that way to Colonel Dudenny after her waltz with Sherring. She said—“Anyone could see that the poor lad was scared stiff. Madam had been putting him through his paces. One should not treat a lad of Sherring’s type like a circus horse.”

Colonel Dudenny was not particularly interested in Sherring.

“Pretty sorry exhibition for an ex-officer. I suppose he lives on the woman.”

“O, possibly. But is that of any significance in these days? He might have married money. That’s quite correct—socially, isn’t it, Harry?”

Mrs. Sherring had not rejoined her guests, and her husband going in search of her, stood hesitant outside the dressing-room door. He knocked. A voice, the voice of Connie Flanders, answered his knock.

“Yes, who is it?”

“Jack. Can I come in?”

“Mira’s changing.”

“All right. Tell her the show’s going quite well. Ask her to come and forgive me—by dancing.”

There was a murmur of voices, one of them persuasive, the other petulant, but no one came to the door, and Sherring walked quietly away. So, his wife

was still feeling bitter towards him. Poor little Mira. He went back to the ball-room and danced.

People made kind inquiries.

“Captain Sherring, I do hope your wife is better?”

“Yes. She’s just resting.”

“I thought she looked rather flushed.”

“O, she is coming back presently.”

For more than an hour he worked hard to make the show a success. He danced with the dullest of the School pupils. He saw that the band was cheered with champagne. He led people to the buffet in an adjoining room where very light refreshments were served; iced coffee and lemonade, sandwiches, and fancy cakes. He heard Colonel Dudenny asking for a whisky, and there was no whisky. But surely Mrs. Parris was sufficiently stimulating for an elderly gentleman, or did the Colonel only get fresh on alcohol? He went up and apologized to Colonel Dudenny. He interviewed a waiter and arranged for the production of a bottle of whisky, for which he—Sherring—paid.

Colonel Dudenny welcomed the whisky.

“Just a spot.”

Dudenny’s spot reached a third of the way up the glass.

“Don’t drown it. I hope your wife has recovered, Sherring?”

“Please don’t worry, sir. She’ll be with us soon.”

It was nearly midnight before Mrs. Sherring reappeared among her guests. She had a high colour and bright eyes. She was somewhat shrill in her vivacity. She laughed. She laughed at herself and her husband; she made a joke of their crash.

“My fall—Mrs. So & So! But, with a married woman—if she falls with her husband, does it matter?”

She was a little too noisy and raffish in her reaction, but one thing she would not do, dance with her husband. He had looked at her almost with the eyes of a remorseful dog.

“Try me again, kid?”

She had laughed and given a flick of the head.

“My dear, do your duty. There’s Miss Symes sitting out.”

Obediently he had rescued Miss Symes, and discovered his wife was dancing with Dudenny.

He had a feeling that Mira's slim body retained deeps of anger and humiliation. She had not forgiven him. The storm was muffled. It waited for him behind a flushed face and a too vivid smile. Sherring's wife was one of those women who must have her emotional explosion—and after all—most women are like Mira.

4

Sherring was waiting for his wife in the vestibule. Everybody had gone; the lights were out in the ball-room, and a night-porter was hovering to lock the doors. Mira loitered. She had nothing to do but change her shoes and put on her cloak, and join him with the small suit-case that held her shepherdess' frock.

Sherring had arranged for a taxi. It was waiting for them, and he had put his own suit-case inside it.

He knocked at his wife's door.

"The taxi's here."

She did not answer him, and feeling anxious and a little impatient, he opened the door. She was sitting in front of a gas-fire, smoking a cigarette, her cloak over her shoulders, the suit-case ready on another chair.

"What do you want? Can't I be alone for a minute?"

Her passionate sulkiness was prepared to express itself to the very limits of unreason. To every yea of his she would answer with a nay.

"The taxi's ready."

"I don't want a taxi."

He tried gentleness.

"Come along, dear, you're tired. After all, the show didn't go so badly."

She gave a toss of the head.

"Badly? It was a filthy frost."

"O, not quite that. I'm sorry I let you down. Come along, kid."

She rose, and collected her suit-case.

“I’m going to walk.”

He let her pass him, for he did not take this whim seriously. Probably, he would be wise to hold his tongue, and suffer her to recover her poise in silence. Her perverseness would exhaust itself if he refused to provide it with opposition. He followed her out, but on reaching the street she ignored the taxi and walked off without waiting for him.

He stood for a moment undecided. Could he chase her along the street, argue with her while the taxi-driver listened? The thing was too foolish. He felt in a trouser pocket for some silver.

“The lady wants to walk. I’ll pay the fare.”

The taxi-man was ancient, blue-nosed and sardonic. He had no illusions about women and their ways. He blew at Sherring from under the white bush of a moustache.

“That’s all right, sir.”

“How much do you want? Will five bob do?”

“Make it seven and six, sir. I’ve been waiting here for ‘alf an hour.”

Sherring made it seven and sixpence, recovered his suitcase, and went in pursuit of his wayward wife. What a waste of money, and what a fatuous anticlimax! The night was raw, so raw that he turned up his coat collar. He overtook her. He proposed to carry her suitcase as well as his own.

“Hand it over, kid.”

“I can manage, thanks.”

She was all profile to him, and as they passed under a street lamp he saw that her cloak was hanging open, exposing throat and chest to the cold New Year. Well—really! Could unreason be more rash?

“Cover yourself up, dear.”

“I’m all right, thanks.”

“You’re not all right. You can’t come out of a hot room and walk about like that.”

“I’m too hot.”

He became impatient.

“You’re too—something else. Now, no nonsense.”

He caught her by the arm, and dropping his suit-case, swung her round.

They faced each other. He began to fasten up her cloak, but she struggled with him and broke away.

“Let me alone. I know what I want.”

“That’s your trouble—you don’t—at this moment. If you want to row me—go ahead. Say what you jolly well please, but cover yourself up.”

She walked on, and he picked up his suit-case and followed her. As he drew up beside her he reached out and turned up the collar of her cloak.

“Don’t be silly. It’s not worth all this bitterness. Can’t you forget that it was I who made an ass of myself?”

She folded back the collar of her cloak.

“I’m not being silly. I’m feeling too hot. What was the matter with you to-night?”

“Call it an attack of nerves.”

“If you had cared sufficiently for my show——”

He answered her gently.

“My dear! Doesn’t it occur to you that if I hadn’t cared a damn—I might have been less nervous?”

She would not shake off her sullen mood.

“I’ve never been let down in a room before. I dare say it pleased Mrs. Parris—and some of the women.”

“As a matter of fact—I don’t think it did anything of the kind. I told Mrs. Parris it was all my fault. Now, cover yourself up; it’s beastly cold. That’s all I ask you to do.”

But she was obdurate. She walked all the way to Quorn Street confronting her mortification and that raw night air. If her professional pride had been martyred her body should share in the distress. She was a little hysterical, abnormal, moved to exaggerate her suffering in every possible way. In a yet more primitive state she would have lacerated her bosom and torn out her hair.

Sherring remained mute. His only thought was to get her home as quickly as possible and put her to bed. She was just an emotional child who had burst into tears at a party.

He unlocked the side door of No. 5.

“Give me your suit-case.”

She surrendered it to him. She gave a little shudder.

“I’m so cold.”

He was beyond exclaiming at her strange perverseness, and at this sudden revulsion. Just like a woman! He was worried about her.

“Run upstairs and light the gas stove.”

She obeyed him. He followed her up the dark stairs to the light on the top landing, and as he passed Mrs. Flanders’ door, it opened.

“Jack——”

He paused. He was glad of Mrs. Flanders.

“That you, Connie. I say—could I get something hot. Mira’s frightfully cold.”

His anxious voice moved her.

“I’ll run downstairs and heat something up. Milk.”

“You’re an angel. I’ll come down for it. I want to get the kid to bed.”

“And a hot-water bottle.”

“You’re twice an angel.”

5

Mira was undressing before the stove. She had a pinched look, and with an anxious glance at her Sherring found his whisky flask and went downstairs to Connie Flanders. She was in the kitchen standing by the gas stove and watching over a small saucepan of milk. She had the kettle on. Sherring did not notice that her lace cap was awry, and her dressing-jacket shabby.

“How did she get cold? Didn’t you drive?”

Sherring gave her a helpless little smile.

“She was badly upset. Everything wrong, poor kid. Wouldn’t do anything I wanted her to do.”

Mrs. Flanders dipped a finger into the milk.

“O, like that. Let her alone, Jack. To-morrow——”

He said—“I won’t fuss her, my dear. I wish she hadn’t taken the thing so seriously. All my fault.”

Mrs. Flanders smiled at him, and decided that the milk was sufficiently hot. She poured it into a glass, and Sherring added some whisky.

“She’ll forgive you to-morrow, Jack. Is it too hot to hold?”

“No. All I hope is that she hasn’t got badly chilled.”

“Run up with that. I’ll bring you the hot-water bottle.”

“Thrice an angel.”

Sherring found his wife in her night-dress kneeling in front of the gas stove. She looked up at him as he entered, and he saw that her bitter mood had passed. The faint smile she gave him was tremulous and tentative.

“Sorry, Jack.”

“Here, drink this down. Feeling warmer?”

“A little.”

He took her dressing-jacket from a hook on the door, and put it over her shoulders.

“Connie’s getting you a hot bottle.”

She gave a little shudder, and laid her cheek against his arm.

“Silly of me, Jacko. Right in off the deep end. I’m better now.”

He knelt beside her while she drank her hot posset, and her dark eyes looked at him shy and slantingly. They were velvet.

“I hope I shan’t have to pay for being silly.”

“Stay in bed to-morrow. I’ll run the show.”

Mrs. Flanders came to the door with the hot bottle, and Sherring rose to take it from her.

“Thanks—so much—Connie.”

“Good night, you two.”

“Good night—Con dear.”

Sherring slipped the bottle between the sheets. He turned back the clothes, and picking his wife up, he carried her to the bed. She clung to him for a moment.

“O—Jack—I’ve been a little beast to you.”

“That’s all right, kid. Snuggle down and get warm.”

XIV

SHERRING walked to Monmouth Square.

This first day of the new year was offering to the London streets a little transient sunlight. On the steps of No. 3 Sherring turned to look at the plane trees, those hardy aliens who refuse to be stifled by the London smoke. Did these trees sometimes crave for the dusty glare and the heat of the south, or for those starry nights when Mediterranean folk gather round little tables? But in the south man pollarded these accommodating trees and trained them to grow according to his pleasure in canopies and arcades and live green loggias. The brass plate of Mr. Zakopulos confronted Sherring. Mr. Zakopulos was another importation, and growing much as he pleased in this city of the north. Did Mr. Zakopulos ever crave for Athens or Sparta, or for strange islands set in a purple sea, memories of the old Minoan kings, honey and wine and slim girls like young cypresses? Ariadne in Naxos? Sappho? Helen of the Golden Hair? Or was Mr. Zakopulos satisfied with other gold, and its glitter?

Sherring climbed the stairs, let himself in and collected from the floor two or three letters that had been pushed through the letter-flap. The day's work did not promise many exactions, two lessons in the morning, and three in the afternoon, and since the pupils were all of the opposite sex Sherring was capable of dealing with them. It had not occurred to him that any conventions might be involved, or that the ladies would object to receiving lessons from a lone male. As a matter of fact they did not object.

Sherring seated himself at his wife's bureau and opened the letters. One was a bill; another contained a cheque made out to Mira; a third proclaimed the virtues of somebody's face cream. Sherring slipped the cheque into his wallet, and was preparing to receipt the account when a visitor knocked at the door.

"Come in."

The visitor was Mr. Zakopulos carrying in his hand a decorative box of chocolate creams.

"Good morning, Captain Sherring. A little tribute to madame."

Sherring rose and smiled at the Greek.

"Very good of you, sir. As a matter of fact my wife is not here this morning. She is having two or three days in bed."

Mr. Zakopulos, with the chocolate box extended towards Sherring, made polite and sympathetic inquiries.

“Nothing serious—I hope?”

“Just a chill and a slight temperature. It’s very good of you. She’ll love these.”

Mr. Zakopulos accepted a cigarette, and being a family man he was rather fond of domestic philosophy and of airing it.

“In England one should never neglect a chill. London is what you call so—septic. Hygieia was a lady who lived in the sunshine. Moreover, it is economical to call in the doctor at once.”

“I quite agree, sir.”

“I have a very excellent doctor.”

“Of course. I remember. He’s a mutual friend, Dr. Penrose Pitt. I knew him in the war.”

“So English, so calm. My wife, Captain Sherring, is a leetle—nervous. Yes. Dr. Pitt is—a wet blanket, no—that’s not quite the phrase— a cool hand.”

Sherring smiled and nodded at Mr. Zakopulos.

“I know. Inspires confidence.—I hope we shan’t need Dr. Pitt. These chocolates will help to cheer her up. She will be able to thank you in a day or two.”

Mr. Zakopulos departed, and Sherring, while waiting for the first pupil, tried two new records on the gramophone. He was not seriously worried about Mira, but the music was not in tune with his mood. It sounded noisy and blatant, and too suggestive of the previous night’s show, and his debâcle as a dancer. Poor little Mira! She was feeling subdued this morning. She had a bad headache and a flushed face. She had asked to have the blind drawn. Sherring turned off the gramophone, and stood at one of the windows overlooking the Square. He saw a black cat climbing the iron railings. Black cats were lucky.

He gave his two lessons to the ladies, after explaining to them that his wife was not well. Would they prefer to postpone the appointments? O, not at all. He hung about till one o’clock, and then went out to lunch at a Lyons, for by lunching out he would save work at Quorn Street. He returned to Monmouth Square. He read a few pages of a novel, gave two more lessons, and was waiting for the third, when the telephone rang.

He picked up the receiver.

“Hallo.”

“Is that you, Jack? Connie speaking.”

“Yes.”

“Come along as soon as you can, will you. Mira has rather a high temperature. I think she ought to see a doctor.”

“I’ve got just one more lesson. Due now. I’ll be with you in an hour.—I say, Connie—you don’t think it’s anything serious?”

“My dear, I don’t know. Come as soon as you can.”

“Of course.”

Sherring hung up the receiver. He was beginning to feel worried about his wife.

2

“I can’t breathe—Jack.—It hurts me to breathe.”

He was standing by her bed. Her dark head sunk in a little pit of shadow showed him two eyes that expressed vague fear and physical distress. Too much light had worried her, and Connie Flanders had turned off the light and left a candle burning on the table beside the bed.

“Where is the pain—kid?”

“Here in my chest.—It hurts when I breathe.”

That catch in her breathing seemed to snatch at something in his consciousness and arrest it. It was like a door held open through which fear and its confusion entered in.

“Can you lift me up, Jack?”

He saw that she needed another pillow. There were a couple of cushions in the sitting-room, and he fetched them and, bending over her, slipped an arm under her shoulders. Her body was hot and moist, and the flare and the odour of her fever were realities that both shocked him and moved him to pity. He did not shrink from the little sour and sweating pathos of her body.

“Your night-dress is all wet—dear. It ought to be changed. How’s that?”

She was breathless.

“O—better. I can’t be bothered.”

She winced, and her pain hurt him. He held one of her hands.

“I’m ringing up the doctor. Pitt—you remember him.—Great man.—I’ll be back in a minute.”

Dr. Penrose Pitt was at home. Called to the telephone at No. 5 Chandos Terrace he did not at first recognize the voice as Sherring’s. It was just a man’s voice, anxious and hurried, and appealing for help.

“Who’s speaking?”

“Sherring, doc, No. 5 Quorn Street. It’s my wife. She got chilled. Pain in the chest and a temperature. Could you manage to come?”

“I’ll come at once. Five—Quorn Street?”

“It’s awfully good of you. I’m worried about the kid.”

“Right, old man. I’ll be with you in half an hour.”

Sherring had used the shop telephone. He spoke to Connie Flanders in her little world of hats. She had locked up for the night, and was putting away chapeaux that had passed through the process of being tried on by a more than trying customer.

“Pitt’s coming at once.”

Mrs. Flanders applied her plump person to a big, black drawer, and it closed unprotestingly.

“I’m glad.”

She was aware of Sherring’s poor, worried face.

“I don’t like that pain in her side. All my fault. If I hadn’t made such an ass of myself last night she wouldn’t have caught cold.”

“My dear—you couldn’t help—that.”

“I ought to have insisted, Connie, got her into the taxi. I’m afraid—if it’s serious—we are going to be rather a nuisance to you.”

She laid one of her firm pink hands on his shoulder.

“Are we friends—or not? My dear—you are too sensitive about some things.”

“You’re a good woman, Connie.”

“God forbid!”

He climbed the stairs to the top floor and opened the door gently. Mira’s

face was turned towards the door. Her large, bright eyes were expectant.

“Pitt will be here—any minute.”

He spoke cheerfully, because he was beginning to feel dreadfully afraid. He might assure himself that such fear was utterly unreasonable, that he had wind-up, that even if the affair was serious his wife was young and strong. He sat down beside the bed. Consumed with anxiety he wanted to fidget, and he made himself sit still.

“How’s the pain?”

He realized the foolishness of the question, for her restrained breathing and her wincing face showed him that the movement of breathing hurt her. Each lift of the ribs meant a stab.

“Don’t talk, dear.”

“I—can’t—much.”

“I wish I could do something. Pitt would soon put you at ease. Would you like some scent on your forehead?”

“Yes.”

He got up and looked for a scent bottle. It was good to be able to do some little thing. But her scent bottle when he found it—was empty.

“I’ll see if Connie has some.”

Mrs. Flanders produced a bottle of eau-de-Cologne from the bathroom cupboard. She held it up to the light. About half an inch of liquid remained in the bottle.

“I’ll get some more to-morrow.”

He hurried upstairs, found a handkerchief, and moistening it with the scent, dabbed his wife’s forehead.

“That’s—nice. Put a little on my night-dress, Jack.”

He was sprinkling a few drops on the moist warm fabric when he heard voices and footsteps on the stairs. Old Pitt! Thank God! He saw Mrs. Flanders in the doorway, and behind her that solid, reassuring, sandy head, and those sagacious spectacles. He could have kissed Penrose Pitt’s bald round forehead.

“Hallo, doc, so glad you’ve come.”

He stood hesitant, holding the scent bottle.

“You’d rather—I cleared out—perhaps?”

Pitt, with one intent look at Mira, nodded his head.

“Yes. Now, Mrs. Sherring, let’s see what your trouble is.”

Sherring crossed the landing to the sitting-room. It was in darkness, and he turned on all the lights and put a match to the gas stove. Yes, light and warmth were good on such occasions. He sat down in front of the stove. Yesterday he would have felt shy of asking Penrose Pitt to climb the stairs to this rather ramshackle billet of theirs in Quorn Street, but when your heart was in Queer Street such simple snobberies lapsed. And how—exactly—had his snobbery manifested itself? In being rather sensitive as to the sort of environment in which he had been compelled to place his wife? What the devil did it matter? How these petty propositions fell to earth when the tree of life was shaken. Yes, the big things were supremely simple. One was more afraid for the other person than for oneself. Poor little Mira! That beastly pain! But old Pitt would give her something to soothe that pain.

His consciousness was dominated by two convictions, a supreme confidence in Pitt, and a sense of the reality of Mira in the flesh, as a warm-blooded, vital creature who in these months of her marriage had become part of his person. He did not affect surprise at the discovery that his wife had become deeply dear to him in that any pain of hers moved him to profound compassion. He was not consciously afraid of losing her. She was so much alive to him that the shadow of death had not yet fallen across the crisis.

Poor little Mira! He had spoilt her show, and now she was in pain.

He heard the bedroom door open and close. Mrs. Flanders was hurrying down the stairs. Sherring got up quickly and went out to the doctor.

“Come in here, old man.”

He looked anxiously at Pitt’s face, and its gravity troubled him.

“Is it serious?”

Pitt’s eyes were very kind behind their glasses.

“Pleurisy—and I’m afraid more than that. You’ll have to have a nurse in, Sherring, perhaps two. I’ll phone for one at once.”

Sherring stood staring at Pitt’s round forehead.

“What do you think it is, doc?”

“An early pneumonia, old man. But she’s young. Let’s go and phone up the agency.”

Sherring followed him down the stairs to the shop where Connie Flanders

had switched on the lights. He stood and listened to Pitt calling up the Nursing Agency, and arranging for the immediate attendance of a nurse, but Pitt's voice seemed very small and far away.

3

The internal economy of No. 5 Quorn Street was transformed by the crisis, and if poor Sherring was grateful for one excellent thing he had cause to bless Connie Flanders' good temper. Not that she herself was conscious of virtue. Life had made of her an Amazon armed against circumstance, and when battle was joined she attacked. She explored cupboards, opened drawers, toiled up and downstairs with sheets and blankets and pieces of furniture, or was busy in the kitchen.

Sherring spent the night on the sitting-room sofa. A nurse had arrived, and her uniformed figure and her air of authority prevailed on the top floor. Sherring had been warned that the sitting-room would be needed as a bedroom for the nurses, and that the superfluous thing in trousers would be extruded. He crept down to the bathroom in the early hours, and washed and shaved and dressed. Venturing upstairs again he was met on the landing by the night nurse, a rather formidable young woman.

"How is—my wife, nurse?"

"Rather restless."

"Could I—could I see her for a moment?"

"I'm afraid not. I have just slipped out—because she seemed like sleeping."

Repulsed—and feeling reproved, he retreated down the stairs. He began to realize that strange personalities and forces had come between him and Mira. He felt sundered from her at the very moment he wanted to help, and when—poor man—he needed help himself. He was the mere male, tolerated and treated with kind firmness. He could not do anything. Actually, he was in the way.

He went and sat in the Flanders' sitting-room until he heard Connie bustling downstairs. Seeing the light in the room, for the hour was six o'clock, she turned aside to explore.

"O, it's you, Jack."

There was no need for him to tell her that he had been unable to sleep. He

looked it.

“Must get busy. Charlie’s early tea, and breakfast.—We’ve got to put up a bed in your sitting-room.”

He stood. He looked at her with thin eagerness.

“Let me do—something.”

He wanted to help, and she humoured him. He could be quite useful about the house.

“Come along.—You can lay this table.—I’m going to run a mess for you and the nurses.”

He followed her down the dark stairs into the half basement kitchen whose window looked out on an area and back yard. He waited in the passage until she had switched on the light.

“What about a bed, Connie?”

“Have to hire one—perhaps two. I’ll dash across to Noble’s directly the shutters are up. They hire out beds.”

She was filling a kettle, and he stood confronting other problems. His ready cash was a negligible quantity, and Mira’s bank-balance could only be reached through Mira’s cheque book. He would be responsible for the hire of the beds, and drugs, and the nurses’ fees and their food.

He said—“I shall have to get a bedroom out, Connie.”

“Yes; no trouble about that.”

She had lit the stove and was collecting china, and he stood there mutely watching her. He was trying to collect his resources. She caught a glimpse of his worried, preoccupied face.

“Short of cash, Jack?”

He looked startled. How quick she was!

“Not really—but the money is in Mira’s name.”

“You mean—you can’t touch it?”

“Well—yes. You see—I felt it was her show——”

“That’s all right, Jack. Draw on me. We can settle up afterwards.”

What a strangely sensitive and disinterested creature he was! And so very helpless at the moment. He needed prompting.

“Carry that trayload upstairs, my dear. You’ll find a cloth in that drawer. The table drawer.”

He disappeared with the tray and the cloth, and on the first landing he met the nurse.

“Anyone bringing me my morning tea?”

Her morning tea?—Well—of course—she had been up all night, and she needed it.

“Mrs. Flanders is downstairs. I’ll see about it, nurse.”

He was eager to propitiate her. She was such an important person. She entered the sitting-room and sat down on a chair, and yawned, while he laid the table. She did not attempt to help him, and her professional apartness made him feel nervous. He hurried downstairs again to Mrs. Flanders.

“Connie, the night nurse is asking for her morning tea.”

There were occasions when Mrs. Flanders was vigorously but good-humouredly candid.

“Oh, is she—the bitch! All right, she can have Charlie’s tray. I’ll manage another.—Here’s the tray. I suppose two pieces of bread and butter will fill her mouth.”

Sherring looked wistful.

“I’m awfully sorry, Connie.—We ought to get help in.”

She smiled at him.

“My dear—I’m not cross with you. Take my lady up her tea. The people I can’t stand are the superior wenches who teeter about on the edge of a knife-blade.”

Sherring carried up the morning tray to the nurse. He found her smoking one of Connie’s cigarettes and reading an old magazine.

“Thanks.”

She looked at him casually, a little contemptuously. For a man of some appearance he was rather unconvincingly meek and unexciting. She liked men who were breezy and buxom. O, yes, husbands could be quite flirtatious.

“By the way, when will my room be ready?”

He explained to her that a bed was being imported, and that the sitting-room was to be adapted to her needs, but he did not appear to realize that she

went off duty at eight when the day nurse would arrive and relieve her. She had been up all night, and she expected her room to be ready.

“Sorry, nurse, we’ll fix things up as soon as possible. I suppose you couldn’t manage on the sofa for one day?”

Sofa indeed! Was he being facetious?

“I—don’t—sleep on sofas.”

Sherring became of the opinion that Mrs. Flanders epithet applied.

But for an hour and a half he was extremely busy. He took Mr. Flanders his early tea, and Charlie Flanders reproached him. “You shouldn’t have bothered, old chap. Tell Connie not to fuss about me.” He helped in the kitchen, and remembering that the top floor sitting-room was not in a state of grace suitable to that formidable nurse he tidied it up and prepared it for the erection of a bed. His own wardrobe was a considerable problem. He needed socks and a clean shirt, and his clothes were in his wife’s room. Also, if he was to transfer himself to an outside bedroom he would have to pack a suitcase. Should he appeal to Miss Gorgon, who was waiting for her official breakfast before retiring to rest?

He went downstairs, and on the landing he met a chubby little creature in uniform, high of colour and brown of eye.

“Good morning. Are you the day nurse?”

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid we are rather upside down at the moment.”

“O, that’s all right.”

The day nurse was a different proposition. O, yes, she had had her breakfast, and she was going on duty at once, and Sherring offered to show her his wife’s room.

“O, by the way, nurse.—I’m not allowed in there—and all my clothes ____”

She understood. She understood more about him than his outer garments. She was wise as to his poor, worried face.

“I’ll bring them out to you.”

“Thanks, most awfully, nurse. I’m glad you’ve come. I know you’ll be good to her.”

She slipped into the bedroom, closing the door after her, and a moment

later she reappeared.

“Your wife’s awake. She has had some sleep. She wants to speak to you for a moment.”

“May I?”

“Just one minute.”

“I won’t be longer, nurse. I promise.”

The blind was still down and the room dim, and Sherring bent over the bed. He was aware of his wife’s rapid, distressed breathing. It moved him to fear and compassion.

“My darling, how’s the pain?”

“O—much easier——”

“Splendid.”

She touched one of his hands.

“Jack—you’ll see to things, won’t you. I don’t want—the show—to slide.”

He put his lips to her forehead.

“Don’t you worry. I’ll run Monmouth Square. All you have to do is to get well.”

She gave a little sigh—“I’m—so hot, Jack, so—so tired.”

4

Sherring carried on. For Monmouth Square was most strangely Mira, and the familiar tunes and the polished floor seemed to reassure him. Even the gramophone was a friend, a cheerful and breezy person asserting that its mistress would soon be herself again and dancing to its music. Sherring’s lady pupils were sympathetic and kind.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like to postpone the lesson?”

He managed to smile.

“It is better to have something to do, you know.”

He did not lack for things to do. It was like one of those crowded occasions during the war when you forgot to feel tired, and your body refused to relax. He was sleeping, or supposed to be sleeping, in a back bedroom at No. 6 Quorn Street, but he did not go to bed till midnight, and he was up at six. He

helped Connie Flanders, for the good Connie was even more exercised than he was with the shop to attend to and orders to be completed. Sherring would carry up shapes and boxes of sundries to Charlie Flanders' room, and Charlie shared in the crisis.—"Bring me up as much as you can, old man." The day-nurse was a complete and chubby angel, no mere meticulous professional; but a pair of hands and a head and an ineffaceable smile. At the end of the first day she and Connie were on kissing terms.

For they were sorry for Sherring, sorrier than he knew.

"What's your feeling about it—Mab?"

Nurse Mabel screwed up her pleasant little mouth.

"Pretty serious. Don't like it much. Pulse not too good. But we simply—must—pull her through. I wish Pearson wasn't here. She's such an ice-pack."

Dr. Penrose Pitt was coming three times a day, and Sherring would rush back from Monmouth Square during the luncheon hour to hear the news. On the fourth day he caught Pitt at the side door just as the doctor was leaving, and Pitt was looking solemn. He drew Sherring into the passage.

"I should like someone else to see your wife, old man."

Sherring winced.

"She's not worse?"

"She's very ill.—I'd like Manser to see her. He's a very sound man."

"Of course——"

Pitt said something about oxygen, and again the soul of Sherring winced. Was it as bad as that? Surely not? And suddenly he found himself fumbling with the problem of the consultant's fee.

"What ought I to give Dr. Manser."

Pitt blinked.

"O—three guineas. Or, you can leave it to me."

"I can manage old man.—I shall owe you——"

"Not one farthing."

"But my dear old man——"

"Not one farthing. If you mention it again—I'll chuck up the case."

As a matter of fact Sherring had a little money in hand. Three or four

pupils had settled their accounts in cash, and as yet he had not been driven to borrowing from Mrs. Flanders. This ready cash was a godsend. It was quite sufficient to feel that your tummy was tied into a knot without having to worry about immediate ways and means.

“I shall never forget your kindness, doc.”

“O—that’s all right;” but Pitt was wishing that fate would promise to be more kind to his friend. He was not pleased with the case. It was what the doctors used to call a massive infection, and Mira’s heart was not responding too well. Pitt was worried, and he was not a man who worried unnecessarily.

Sherring ate some bread and cheese in the kitchen and hurried back to Monmouth Square. The jazz tunes jarred on him that afternoon, and his tuition was like a stuttering tongue.

“I’m afraid I’m rather worried. My wife’s not so well.”

His last pupil was very sorry for him. Poor dear! He kept kicking her feet, and she forgave him. He seemed quite unaware of his inco-ordinate clumsiness. She went through with the lesson because she felt that he would be even more worried if she made some excuse and broke it off.

“I do hope the news will be better to-morrow.”

“O, yes—I’m sure it will.”

He could not yet believe in the possibility of disaster.

5

On the fifth evening, returning to Quorn Street, and hurrying upstairs he caught the little nurse in tears. The doctors had been twice. They had been administering oxygen and watching its effect.

Sherring heard himself asking that bête question.

“What’s the matter, nurse?”

She was annoyed with herself.

“Mrs. Connie wants to see you. She’s in the kitchen.”

As Sherring descended the rather dark stairs he was conscious of a sinking feeling as though life was falling through the warm darkness of his stomach. He knew why the little nurse was in tears; he knew why she had sent him to Connie Flanders. He knew that Connie Flanders would say to him. “My dear, it’s ghastly—but—you ought to be told. Dr. Pitt asked me to tell you.” He saw

the kitchen door before him as a dark panel edged with light. He hesitated. He was suddenly and terribly afraid of that door.

“Jack, is that you?”

He put a hand against the door and pushed it open. He saw Connie Flanders standing at the kitchen table; her sleeves were turned up and she was stirring something in a basin. Her hair was untidy, her face suffused and swollen, rather like the face of a woman with a cold.

“Nurse sent me down here.”

She went on stirring the stuff in that basin. She could not bring herself to look at him.

“My dear, it’s horrible—but the doctor asked me——”

Almost the very words he had imagined her uttering! He leaned against the edge of the door.

He said—“Yes—I know, Connie. You want to tell me—that—she is not going to get well.”

Mrs. Flanders produced a moist sound that was neither a sneeze nor a gulp, nor was it articulate. She stirred hard at the stuff in the basin.

“Jack—I’m——”

His eyes were fixed on the wooden spoon as though its movements fascinated him.

“It’s—so—strange——”

The door bell rang, and they looked at each other with startled, distraught eyes.

“The doctor.”

“I’ll go——”

He rushed up the stairs into the passage as though to let in Penrose Pitt and a last hope of human succour. He opened the door.

“Old man—they’ve just told me—— Is it true?”

He felt Pitt’s hand on his shoulder gently pushing him back into the passage.

“I’m afraid so. We’ve done everything.”

“Isn’t there—anything?”

“Nothing. Her heart’s given out.”

Sherring’s head went down on the other man’s shoulder, and Pitt caressed it with curious, awkward tenderness.

“Poor old Sherring, poor old man. I’m so sorry.”

6

He sat beside his wife’s bed and listened to the little panting sound that was her breathing. She did not seem conscious of his presence, and in her poor, ravaged face her widely open eyes were like dark and vacant windows. No beauty was left to her save the beauty of her eyes, and it was a tragic, bitter beauty. He sat in silence, stricken, wondering at this darkness that was death, the bemused, drugged, smothering end of a creature who was dear to him. A week ago she had been so alive—— Yes, life had been like that in the war. Sometimes his wife’s eyes remained fixed upon him in a deep and shadowy stare. Thank God, she did not know that she was dying. There was no conscious anguish for her in this pitiful submergence.

The room seemed insufferably hot, and he rose to open the window slightly, and let in more air. He came back to his chair by the bed, and as he seated himself he saw his wife’s right hand make a little groping movement. Her eyes were looking at him differently. She knew him. For a moment her consciousness was clear.

He bent forward and held her groping hand.

“My dearest.”

Her dry, cracked lips moved. She was whispering something. He put his face close to hers.

“Jack—I’m—I’m not dying—am I?”

Her poignant eyes besought him. He managed to smile, and to utter that loving lie.

“Of course, not, darling. You’ll soon be dancing again. Just rest and go to sleep. I’m here.”

She seemed to give a little sigh of relief. She closed her eyes. Her hand remained in his.

And presently Sherring realized that his wife had ceased to breathe. He was holding the hand of a woman who was dead.

7

Shortly after midnight the night nurse put her flat, pragmatical face into the room, stared, and then closed the door. She went downstairs to Mrs. Flanders who was sitting by the fire and pretending to trim a hat.

“It’s all over.”

Mrs. Flanders face was flushed and heavy.

“She’s gone?”

The nurse nodded.

“I looked in. He’s by her bed. I think one ought to do something.”

Connie Flanders rose like a woman who was very tired. She went slowly and heavily up the stairs, and after standing for a moment outside the Sherring door, she spoke.

“Jack.”

There was no answer, and she opened the door. She saw Sherring sitting by the bed, leaning forward, his forehead resting on two clasped hands, a live and a dead one.

His stillness alarmed her. She moved across the room and touched him gently on the shoulder.

“My dear——”

He straightened. He looked round and up at her. He was still holding his wife’s hand.

“I killed her, Connie.—It was all my fault.—I ought to have died in the war.”

XV

THE taxi pulled up outside No. 5 Quorn Street, and Sherring opened the door for Connie Flanders. It was raining. It had been raining during the ceremony at the cemetery, and if Sherring's top hat had suffered, the spoiling of its gloss was a matter of no importance, for it was not a new hat, and Sherring might never need it again. He paid the taxi man, and as he turned to cross the pavement he noticed the drawn blinds of No. 5. A little shiver went through him. He was vaguely afraid of this tragic house.

Mrs. Connie had opened the side door and stooped to pick up a letter that was lying on the mat. It was addressed to Sherring, and she handed it to him.

"Yours—Jack."

He glanced at the envelope. The writing was familiar and he recognized Archie Steel's untidy scrawl. Mrs. Flanders' black figure was moving down the dark passage to the kitchen stairs.

"I'll get tea, Jack."

Tea? How the little formulæ of life persisted. He went slowly up the stairs into the Flanders' sitting-room. He took off his overcoat, and standing by the window with Steel's letter in his hand, he thought of that night when he and Mira had danced on the pavement below. Laughter and love! And suddenly he knew that he wanted to escape from this place of pain, to go away and lose himself somewhere.

He opened Steel's letter. It contained a cheque for twenty-five pounds. He read:

> "DEAR OLD MAN, "I told the wife about your loan, and she agreed with me that we should like to pay off the balance. Here is the piece of paper—but there is one thing I can never return, your generosity and kindness——"

The letter rambled on. It told Sherring all the latest news about the infant Steel. It asked Sherring when he was coming down to see them. It left in Sherring's consciousness a sense of confused good-will and of vague chatter. He looked again at Archie's cheque. This was reality, a God-sent windfall at this bitter hour, a pocketful of ready cash at a moment when he had nothing.

Mrs. Connie came in with the tray. Her face still looked suffused and swollen.

“I’ll just rush in and see Charlie.”

He turned from the window.

“O—Connie, I shall want to know what I owe you.”

“That’s all right, my dear.”

“It isn’t all right. I want to clear things up. I feel I can’t go up those stairs again.”

She understood him.

“I’ll do all that for you.—Why don’t you go away for a week, Jack.”

“Perhaps I shall when I have cleared things up.”

Mira had left no will, but her pass-book showed a considerable balance at the bank. The furniture and fittings at Monmouth Square were in her name, but both bank balance and furniture were the results of Mr. Mason’s generosity. On the very next day Sherring put his dead wife’s affairs into the hands of a firm of solicitors. There were very few outstanding bills. Sherring had paid the consultant and the nurses, and the chemist, and he would be able to pay Mrs. Flanders. As for Penrose Pitt he was refusing to treat the affair as a commercial transaction.

“I suppose there will be some delay?”

The lawyer explained matters to Sherring. An intestate wife’s property reverted to the husband.

“But I don’t benefit.”

The lawyer had seen Mrs. Sherring’s pass-book, and he demurred.

“There are some hundreds lying at the bank.”

“That was a present to my wife by an old friend. He provided her with some capital.”

“Any documents to show?”

“No.—The position is this—when the matter has been cleared up—I shall pass on the residue to Mr. Mason to help clear that debt.”

“But you said it was a present, Captain Sherring. Aren’t you being just a little—quixotic?”

“I don’t think so. The money was provided for a certain purpose, and that purpose is at an end.”

Meanwhile, the rooms in Monmouth Square had to be disposed of, the Manetti School closed. Sherring made no attempt to treat it as a going concern and sell a very hypothetical good-will. The Manetti School was a memory, and to him so tragic and painful that his urge was to close the covers of his wife’s short romance. He wanted to escape, not from these memories, but from all the little realities that were saturated with too much emotion. He flinched from them. He sat in his dead wife’s chair at her bureau, and with her ledger before him he proceeded to write to all the “Manetti” patrons and inform them that the School was at an end. There were a few outstanding accounts to be sent out. He asked that the cheques might be drawn in favour of the solicitors who were handling his wife’s estate.

He was seated at the bureau one morning when someone knocked. Strangers kept calling as prospective pupils, and with an air of quiet seriousness Sherring had sent them away. That gramophone had ground out its last fox-trot.

“Come in.”

Mr. Mason appeared to him, a rubicund and recovered Mr. Mason, and as Sherring’s eyes met those of the older man, he remembered that no letter had been sent to Mr. Mason. He rose, confronting that kind and cheerful countenance, and feeling that old Mason was the god of a distant Golden Age.

“What, all alone. How’s the wife?”

Sherring steadied himself. He was aware of Mr. Mason’s blue eyes looking at his black tie.

“My wife was buried three days ago.”

Mr. Mason’s shocked face seemed to float in a circle of silence. He sat down suddenly on one of the chairs.

“What do you mean?—Dead?”

Sherring nodded.

“It all happened so very suddenly. She caught a chill and developed pneumonia.—I didn’t worry you, sir—because we had heard you were ill.”

He sat down in his wife’s chair.

“I’m just clearing things up, and closing the show. One has to do something. Of course—without her—the thing’s a sort of dreadful farce.”

Mr. Mason stared inarticulately at Sherring's shoes.

"This has been rather a shock to me. At my age—of course—death——"

"It's been a ghastly business, sir.—She—was so alive. She was making a success of things.—But—that's that.—I'm glad you've come. I was going to write to you. You see—Mira left no will—but when the estate has been cleared up—I will send you a cheque. It won't be for the whole amount, I'm afraid—but I may be able to manage that later."

Mr. Mason stared at him.

"A cheque?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

Sherring closed the flap of his wife's bureau.

"The capital you advanced her. Now that the show has ceased to exist ——"

"But, my dear boy, it was a present—to you both."

"I know.—It was a most generous thing.—But I want you to let me——"

"I don't take back presents."

Sherring looked at him a little anxiously.

"Please don't feel hurt, sir.—I don't want to hurt anybody, you—last of all people—but—if I accepted a present for her show—now that's she's——"

"Pride—my lad?"

"No, not exactly pride, a kind of feeling for the fitness of things. You did an unusual thing for us—and I want to do——"

Mr. Mason smiled rather wistfully. He was a lonely old man, and he was realizing that though you may finance youth you cannot redeem the years that are pledged to fate.

"Rather an unusual attitude, Sherring."

"Mine, sir?"

"Yes."

"Surely not?—You gave my wife her chance, and quite a lot of happiness. Do you expect me to——?"

Mr. Mason looked distressed.

“My dear boy—you’re not feeling—well—how shall I express it—sore—that an old fellow like me—butted in and——?”

“Jealous?—Good God, no!”

He re-opened his wife’s desk, and looked at its contents. Her memo pad still showed the appointments she had jotted down.

“No; that sort of thing never occurred to me.—Only a fortnight or so—ago—she was sitting here. Strange, isn’t it? She has left me a wonderful memory—bitter and sweet.—And, in a way, you are part of it, sir.—One doesn’t buy that sort of thing. What I’m trying to say is—that I’d rather that money did not come into the friendship—between us.—If you will let me send you that cheque——”

Mr. Mason nodded at him.

“I—understand.—Well, you can send it me.”

“Thank you, sir.—This isn’t mere business.”

Again Mr. Mason nodded. He was quite sure that he would tear up that cheque.

2

Mr. Zakopulos became helpful. The Greek climbed the stairs to see Sherring, and offered to take over the first floor and the furniture and fittings. Yes, his business was expanding and he needed more room to display his articles of vertu. If Sherring would give him a quotation for the fittings and the furniture—he—Mr. Zakopulos would meet him as a friend.

“I can show you the bills we paid, sir.—Of course—the stuff is secondhand now.—I suppose—if I asked you two thirds of the cost price——”

Mr. Zakopulos was not always a flesh-monger. Certainly, Sherring was a very poor business man, but in a rather ugly world Sherring might be regarded both as a curio and an article of vertu. Mr. Zakopulos liked Sherring; he admired him, and the poor fellow was in trouble.

“I will take everything at a ten per cent. reduction.”

“That’s very generous of you.”

“But everything is new, or nearly new.”

Sherring’s glance happened on the gramophone.

“You won’t need that, sir. Moreover—it’s not for sale. I’m giving it to a friend—of my wife’s.”

Mr. Zakopulos nodded his black head.

“One does not sell—some things. I understand that. I am—very sorree—Captain Sherring—very sorree. I, too, have been afraid sometimes—terribly afraid——”

He shrugged.

“Send me the bills—and I will write you a cheque.”

Sherring’s eyes were still resting on the gramophone.

“Make it out to the lawyers, will you, Mr. Zakopulos. I will let you have their names.”

Meanwhile he remained at No. 5 Quorn Street, but precariously so, and like some creature restless with pain. He retained his bedroom next door, but he allowed Mrs. Connie to feed him, and ostensibly he was still the tenant of her top floor. She noticed however that he never went up the last flight of stairs. The bedroom was just as it had been left since Mira’s death. Also, he was reticent about the furniture. He was out a great deal, and she supposed that he was in search of work.

She felt very motherly towards him. She had a feeling that he had lost all confidence in himself and in life. He was a fatalist.

“What are you going to do—Jack?”

He was mysteriously vague.

“Try a new country—perhaps.—I rather fancy Canada.”

“Seriously?”

“O, quite seriously. I shall have to hang about here until things are cleared up.”

From all that she had heard of Canada Mrs. Flanders would not have described it as a country fit for gentle fatalists. Meanwhile, there was the problem of poor Mira’s clothes and little possessions. It was a delicate and a sensitive subject, but all those pathetic objects could not be left in drawers and cupboards. Obviously, Sherring flinched from making any decision about them. It was as though he was waiting for someone to make the decision for him.

“Jack—there is one thing I want to talk to you about.”

He knew at once what it was.

“I’d like you to keep some of her things, Connie. I’m sending you her gramophone.”

“But her poor dresses and shoes—and things, my dear?”

“I don’t want them sold. I would rather they were given away to someone. I suppose I couldn’t burn them?”

“I know a girl who would be very glad of the clothes. A nice girl—not one whom you’d mind about. She has a pretty tough struggle.”

He looked relieved.

“Let her have them, anything you don’t want. You know, Connie, I rather believe in cremation, and I would have all a woman’s personal belongings burnt with her.”

“You want to forget?”

“No; but some things make one remember too terribly.”

She dealt with poor Mira’s possessions one day when he was out. After selecting a few intimate things such as Mira’s handbag and her toilet set, she packed an old trunk and hid it below the kitchen stairs to be called for by the carriers. When Sherring returned she told him what she had done, but she noticed that he did not go upstairs. He thanked her. He sat staring at the fire rather like a man in a station waiting-room whose train is not quite due.

“O—Connie—I forgot to tell you—I’m going down to Marlow for the week end.”

“To stay with old Mr. Mason?”

“Yes.”

She did not ask him any further questions, but she was troubled. He appeared to have no heart for anything. He was altogether too gentle and quiet.

“You’ll come back here, Jack. I can manage for you quite well till you have settled on something.”

“You’ve been very good to me, Connie, you and Charlie.”

“O, there’s not much virtue in that, my dear. We haven’t found it very hard.”

He smiled at the fire, and even his smile was preoccupied and vague.

“People have been so terribly kind.”

3

On the Saturday morning she was busy in the shop when he came in to say good-bye to her. He had a taxi waiting outside.

“Good-bye, Connie.”

He wanted to kiss her kind, fat face, but she was in the act of assisting two ladies to select hats, and the occasion had to be somewhat formal.

“See you on Monday?”

“O, yes.”

She watched him get into the taxi, and saw his face for a moment at the near window and the flutter of a hand. She did not know that he had all his worldly possessions packed into two suit-cases, and that this was his vanishing act in the tragi-comedy of a man’s descent into Hades. Meanwhile, one of the prospective purchasers was feeling neglected. Why did not the woman attend to business instead of making eyes at a man? The choosing of a hat when the hat is young and you are fiftyish is apt to be a depressing and exacting ceremony, and the particular hat and her own appearance were persuading the lady to feel peevish.

“This thing makes me look ridiculous.”

Mrs. Flanders did not contradict her.

“I think more brim would suit madam better. Something in black.”

Why was it that all shop mirrors made a person look a complete fright? The lady allowed Connie to impose another hat upon her head, but she liked it even less than she had liked its predecessor. On that January morning she was in a mood to dislike everything, hats, her own face, Mrs. Connie’s mirror, Mrs. Connie herself. She looked yellow; she had a spot on her chin, and she had been unable to find a hat that would charm away these blemishes. She peeked at herself in the glass.

“No—I don’t like it.—I don’t think it’s my morning for hats.—I’ll come in again next week.”

Mrs. Connie was consoling and sympathetic. Business required you to be bland and tactful.

“Yes, it is—depressing this morning. Madam is quite right. There is the

proper mood—for things—isn't there?"

The lady gave a last grim glance in the mirror. How you could love your own face, and hate it for showing signs of wear!

"These grey mornings don't suit me."

"Madam should wait for a sunny morning."

The lady rose from the stool. Wait for a sunny morning indeed in a smutty hole like London! She was feeling the English winter, and her husband had suffered losses on the Stock Exchange. No Monte Carlo this season! And she was fiftyish and looking it.

"I'll try another day."

"We shall always be pleased to see you, madam."

Mrs. Flanders showed her out and turned to the other lady, who, having found a hat that pleased her, was pleased with Mrs. Connie and Mrs. Connie's mirror, and with life in general.

"I think this is—just—my style."

Mrs. Flanders beamed upon her.

"Madam looks charming in it."

It was so much pleasanter to serve people who were pleased with themselves—even though the justification might be a little inadequate.

On the Monday a charwoman came in to clear out the two upper rooms, and to disperse the dust of a dead romance. Mrs. Flanders expected Sherring to turn up for the evening meal, and when he did not appear she waited for ten minutes and then sat down without him. Probably Mr. Mason had persuaded him to stay on at Marlow. Going in to take away her husband's supper tray she showed herself just a little piqued by Sherring's silence.

"Jack hasn't come back. I think he might have 'phoned me."

Had Charlie Flanders known his wife less well he might have been jealous of Sherring.

"I expect he's staying on."

"He might have let me know."

On the Tuesday there was no Sherring, and when she had shut up the shop it occurred to Connie Flanders that Sherring might have sent word to the people next door. In spite of their proximity it was easier to ring them up than

to go to their door and wait on the pavement. They were not good at answering the bell.

“That you, Mrs. Thomas? Has Captain Sherring come back?”

“But he’s not coming back. He gave up his bedroom and took his luggage away.”

This was serious. Mrs. Connie disconnected herself with No. 4 Quorn Street and transferred her inquiry to Marlow. A man’s voice answered.

“Who’s that?”

“Is that Mr. Mason’s at Marlow?”

“His butler speaking. Who are you?”

“Is Captain Sherring still with you?”

“Captain Sherring?”

“Yes. He went down for the week end.”

“We haven’t had the gentleman here.”

“He hasn’t been to Marlow?”

“No.”

Mrs. Connie forgot to thank Marlow. She hurried upstairs to her husband’s room.

“Jack has never been to Marlow. He has given up his room next door.—He’s vanished.”

They were discussing Sherring’s disappearance and its significance when Connie heard the telephone bell ringing.

“That must be Jack.”

She ran downstairs into the shop.

“Hallo—that you, Jack?”

“No, Dr. Pitt speaking. Is that Mrs. Flanders?”

“Yes.”

“Is Captain Sherring in?”

“No; he has gone away. We expected him back on Monday and he hasn’t turned up. We’re rather worried.”

She explained the situation to Penrose Pitt. Yes, poor Sherring has been

very depressed since his wife's death. But why all this mystery? If Sherring had contemplated suicide why had he pretended that he was going to Marlow? Should she ring up the Marlow police? Pitt's voice was reassuring. He said that he did not for a moment believe that Sherring was a man who would throw himself into the river. He had served with Sherring in the war, and Sherring was not one who chucked in his hand. Then, why should Sherring run away from his friends? Well, had not Mrs. Flanders heard that when an animal was in pain or sick, it crept away and hid itself? Sherring might be feeling like that.

"Ring me up to-morrow and let me know if you have heard anything."

"I will, doctor.—Then you think we ought not to fuss?"

"I think that is the very thing that Sherring would resent."

"I agree.—I'll let you know, doctor."

"Thanks. Good night, Mrs. Flanders."

Pitt hung up the receiver and returned to a solitary and interrupted dinner. Women were good creatures, but they did not always understand a man's moods, his sudden rages, his restless melancholies, his revolt against too much kindness. "O, hell, let me alone." Very possibly, Sherring had been suffering from the publicity of his pain, and like a man with a raging tooth, had gone upstairs and slammed the door, to walk up and down in his own secret den.

"Poor old Sherring!"

Escape! To lose oneself in the crowd! To avoid all the kind people who stare you in the face and ask questions. Besides, if a man was a failure, and sensitive about it, he might be all the more restive in the presence of pity.

"Poor old Sherring."

Yes, if a man wished to submerge himself for a period of time—well—let him remain below the surface until some new and buoyant urge brought him back into the light.

PART II

XVI

PENROSE PITT had been visiting a patient in Canonbury Square, a lady, who, having removed herself from St. John's Wood, had insisted upon Dr. Pitt continuing to attend her. Miss Preedy was one of those sweet egoists who make themselves tiresome to busy men. Having no occupation, she occupied herself with good works, largely at other peoples' expense. She wrote innumerable letters of extreme prolixity in which she advertised the necessities of some charity or of some unfortunate individual who could not seek work because he lacked boots. She sent out tickets for concerts and bazaars, on the understanding that a cheque was despatched in return. She could gabble oriental mysticism at you, and was always the devotee of the latest Hindu Christ.

Pitt had been firm with Miss Preedy. He had told her that the limitations of the flesh prevented him from scattering his activities in every postal district. Miss Preedy had squirmed and ogled him.

"But, doctor, you have time to attend—me."

He hadn't, and he had told her so. There were plenty of medical men in the neighbourhood who could suffer Miss Preedy for a period. The lady's sweet froth had been blown aside to disclose an acid liquid beneath, and Pitt, dismissed as a disgraceful materialist, walked contentedly down the Canonbury Road. He had half an hour to spare, and he was in search of Mr. Kettle and Mr. Kettle's shop.

He found them both in the Essex Road, and pragmatically active, Kettle very much the proprietor supervising three assistants. Kettle took Dr. Pitt into the glass case he called his office. Kettle too was less lean than of old, and his boots were highly polished.

Had Kettle seen or heard anything of a particular person?

Kettle, perched on a stool, became animated behind the smoke of a cigarette.

"Canada?—No, he ain't in Canada, doctor. I saw him two months ago."

"Saw him?—Where?—What was he doing?"

"Ah, there you've got me.—It was like this.—I was ridin' up the City Road

on the top of a bus, and suddenly I saw Captain Sherring walkin' along the pavement. Bitter cold day and 'e 'ad no overcoat on, and was carryin' a little case. I leaned over and sharted—' 'allo, sir—I'm comin' down,' yes, just like that. 'E gave me a look and went right abart, and when I got down the bus steps I saw 'im disappearin' up a side street."

"You didn't go after him, Kettle?"

"No, sir.—I didn't. I 'ad a feelin'—that 'e wasn't feelin'—well—you know what. It gave me a shock, it did. A gent like 'im must 'ave been feelin' pretty bad to cut a chap like me."

Penrose Pitt nodded.

"Damned bad.—It's rather a rotten business, Kettle."

"I should say so, sir. A man like 'im."

"Yes, it's a rotten business. He had the knock rather badly when his wife died."

"Some chaps get nothin' but knocks, sir.—I don't feel like any more dinners—with 'im wounded and missin'."

"Those are just the very words, Kettle. Same here.—Well, how's the family?"

"Champion, sir."

"Business too, that's obvious."

"I've nothin' to grouse abart.—I wish I 'ad'nt seen 'im—somehow. It made me sweat, doc; it did—straight."

2

During this particular winter Sherring inhabited a top floor bedroom in a Bloomsbury back street. He had been engaged by The Iceberg Refrigerator Company on a commission basis to tour outer London and interview householders, and proclaim the virtues of their machines, but Sherring was not a very eloquent tout, and the selling of refrigerators in December, January and February would have been described by Mr. Kettle as a "Mug's Game." Certainly, Sherring was a gentlemanly person, and could send in a card with "Captain Sherring" printed on it. The ladies whom he interviewed liked him very well. He was far less refrigerating than the machine he tried to sell them, but even the Baby Berg cost forty-five pounds, and such a sum could not be

squandered because an ex-officer looked rather pathetic, and had nice manners.

Moreover, the “Iceberg Co.” was not wholly ingenuous in its methods. The “Baby Berg” was listed at £45.0.0; the sum included delivery, and the placing of the machine in position by the firm’s representatives. Then came the snag. The machine had to be connected up to the domestic power circuit, and though this might mean no more than attaching it to a switch that was already in place, the firm sent in a bill for four guineas. That was their scheduled charge.

Purchasers protested. The firm wrote polite letters, and begged to be allowed to remain “Your obedient servants.” If the protests continued and the charge was not paid—“Our Mr. Sherring” was instructed to call and explain the situation. Sherring had been warned in the first place against revealing the fact that installation would be charged for. He happened to know that the Company made a very considerable profit out of this piece of bluff, and that when the bluff was called he was expected to put it over the recalcitrant householder. He was supposed to enlarge upon the delicacy of the adjustments. The motor had to be tested by one of the firm’s expert electricians.

“But, damn it, man” one angry citizen had said, “when I buy a motor-car I buy a motor-car that goes. I don’t expect to be charged for a fellow to come down from the works to see that the engine will function.”

“Quite so, sir, but——”

“You tell your people to go to hell. They can sue me.”

In such cases the Company did not sue, but it recorded a black mark against Sherring. He was so indifferent a liar that during that winter his record as a salesman became very black indeed. He did not like the job, and in the Spring the Iceberg Refrigerator Co. dispensed with his services.

Once more he disappeared. He pawned a few of his possessions and paid his Bloomsbury landlady. He departed from her with very few possessions, and they were mostly upon his person.—London had begun to frighten him. Almost, he was afraid of himself. He cherished one five-pound note sewn up in the lining of his jacket. Yet, had he known it, he had some three hundred and seventy pounds lying to his credit at a Mayfair Bank. Mr. Mason had torn up that cheque.

3

Chislehurst was picknicking upon Netley Heath. Mr. Loviebond fancied himself upon most matters, and if a fellow with a high-powered car could not

shed the mob, well—what was the use of money—anyway?

“We’ll have the basket here, Smith.”

A patch of rabbit nibbled grass surrounded by bracken and shaded by a beech tree offered a velvet carpet and pleasant shade upon this hot July Sunday. The Loviebonds had brought friends with them, and the Loviebonds’ friends could be placed under two categories, those who were useful and those who accepted patronage. It was a day of patronage. Irma had said to her husband—“Max, let’s take the Blabers. They don’t get much jam.” Irma Loviebond was very fair, very slim, and very smart. She had the reputation of being the best dressed woman in Chislehurst; she was everything that was chic; her golf handicap was twelve; she could play an indifferent bridge hand far better than her husband. She knew what to see in town and what not to see, where the right people dined and danced, what was worn, what was said.

“O, my dear, how perfectly marvellous!”

Maisie Blaber was full of such exclamatory adulation, a feverish little woman with hard brown eyes. Blaber was a conventional person, and not very successfully so. He shot his cuffs and smiled a great deal, and his face had a pink and succulent silliness. He would take a spot of this or a spot of that. His wife treated him like the domestic idiot, for he was not a man who provided purple patches.

The Loviebond chauffeur deposited a very large luncheon-basket on the grass, and Blaber, who had been loaded up with rugs and cushions, stood smiling at nothing in particular. He was that sort of ass. Action had to be suggested to him.

“Harold—do—spread the rugs.”

Harold spread them slowly and carefully like a man who knew that his wife would alter anything that he did. There were flies present, and the flies appeared to select Mr. Blaber as their inevitable and instant victim. He was a savoury mortal and rather fat. He perspired easily.

The Loviebonds were busy with the luncheon-basket. A cloth was extracted, and Irma and Mrs. Blaber spread it while Loviebond mixed cocktails. Mr. Blaber stood by and smiled. The spreading of the white cloth necessitated a readjustment of the rugs and cushions.

“Harold—the things are no use there.”

Mr. Blaber gathered up a rug, and stood holding it, his head surrounded by an increasing and enthusiastic halo of flies. How could a fellow spread a rug

when two women were fussing round a basket?

He said—“Hadn’t you better get unpacked first?”

His wife said—“Don’t stand there. Lend a hand.”

He helped and he perspired, but when any article was passed to him he would hold it with an air of indecision.

“Where do I put this?”

“On the tablecloth, of course.—My dear, how perfectly marvellous. Ice!”

Things and people gradually rearranged themselves. Loviebond, after vigorous exercise with the cocktail shaker, distributed glasses.

“Bar open.”

Mrs. Blaber chattered.

“How perfectly priceless.”

Mr. Blaber would take a spot. So would the flies, and Irma, the most observant of those present, noticed poor Harold’s choir of insects.

“I’ve got a bottle of citronella in my bag.”

She produced it and passed it to Blaber.

“Harold always does collect flies.”

Mr. Blaber anointed himself. He had to allow his wife her grievance.

“Well—perhaps I’m the bait.”

“Yes, you’re the worm, Harold.”

Really, he wasn’t as bad as all that.

Irma Loviebond proceeded to help them all to salmon mayonnaise. “Perfectly marvellous, my dear. I wish I had your cook.” Mr. Blaber ate salmon mayonnaise, but in spite of the citronella the flies buzzed attendance. His wife reminded Loviebond that there was champagne in the basket.

“You are barman, Max.”

“Champagne! How perfectly marvellous!”

Loviebond dealt with the champagne like an expert, and again Mr. Blaber said that he would “Take just a spot.” His wife became even more animated; so did the flies. The second course was being disposed of, veal and ham pie and salad, and in the midst of it Mr. Blaber was heard to protest.

“Bother these flies!”

He reached for the bottle of citronella, but his wife forestalled him. She was in one of her vixenish moods. She grabbed the bottle and tossed it three or four yards away into the bracken.

“Go and do it over there. And leave the flies there.”

Mr. Blaber looked depressed. He unfolded a white handkerchief and draped it over his head. If anyone was to retrieve that bottle it should be Maisie.

“A little camouflage, what!”

Irma was kind to him.

“Do have some pie, Harold?”

“Just a spot.”

Loviebond arose and topped up the champagne glasses.

“Better open the second bottle, Max.”

“My dear” said Maisie—“I’m sure—we shan’t want a second bottle. Please, Mr. Loviebond—Harold mustn’t have any. He gets a liver.”

Raspberries and cream! Perfectly marvellous! But the flies were spreading to the rest of the party, Loviebond in particular. He made a dab at his forehead.

“Damn these flies.”

He was busy with the second bottle, and Mrs. Blaber expressed contrition.

“It’s all Harold’s fault. He does attract them.—O, that bottle of citronella.”

She jumped up to recover it. O, yes, she knew just where it had fallen. She waded into the fern, paused, and uttered a sharp little cry.

“O, there’s a man here, asleep. A tramp.”

All heads were turned.

“A tramp!”

“He must be a pretty heavy sleeper.”

“How horrid!”

Mrs. Blaber retreated abruptly.

“O, he’s awake. He’s getting up.”

The man rose out of the bracken, a hatless, collarless, ragged person with a

little black pointed beard. He stood there for a moment like a man up to his waist in green water. Loviebond, champagne glass raised, stared at him in strange, vacuous amazement.

“My God—Sherring!”

The man gave a jerk of the head. He looked at Loviebond, smiled faintly, stooped, picked up something, and pushing his way through the bracken, disappeared.

4

October drizzle and the dusk coming down like a blanket being drawn over a corpse.

The tramp saw the mouth of a lane and turned into it. He was wet and he was tired, and experience had taught him that so far as camping quarters were concerned a lane was more promising than a high road. He carried an old infantry pack on his back, and his head and face were as hairy as the head of an apostle. The lane, feathered on each side with bracken, led gradually into a shallow, wooded valley. The tramp followed it with an air of alertness, for in such lanes he had suffered adventures with farmers and dogs.

A light winked at him between branches. The wet, autumn murk was not yet complete, and when he came to the rails of a rickyard he stood still and looked about him. The place was vaguely familiar. The siting of the farm house and the dim outlines of the wooded horizon seemed to provoke memories, the setting of some other occasion.

“Just like old Crabtree’s place.”

But he was not concerned with the hypothetical proprietor or tenant—save to elude him. His need was some sort of shelter on a drizzly night, and discerning stacks in the rickyard he slipped over the rail fence. He discovered two haystacks close together. One of them had been cut into, and some loose stuff was lying about. The tramp collected several armfuls, spread it in the narrow space, and sat down.

Unstringing his pack he took out of it some bread and cheese wrapped in a piece of newspaper, an apple, and a bottle of cold tea. This would be a fireless and a lightless meal, but the place was snug and smelled sweet, better than some dubious bed that had been occupied by scores of dubious people. He ate and drank. He listened for a while to the barking of a dog, only to decide that the dog’s barking was haphazard.

Reflecting upon life and its urgencies he was ready to admit that when the weather broke in England the English countryside was no place for an amateur vagrant. Unlike the great war, the tramp's war against society had no illusions. It was a dirty and surreptitious affair without decent comradeship, and if it was to be sustained successfully it whined or bullied and pilfered its way through the world. In wet weather it wandered from workhouse to workhouse. The English summer resembled man's morality in that the few warm and starry nights are rare in their complete serenity. Moreover, if you had a prejudice against foul feet, a roadside pond might oblige you, or it might not.

Sherring felt in his pocket and produced a pipe. He had no tobacco on him, so he sucked for a little while at the empty pipe, and his thoughts went Londonwards. Yes, most certainly he would return to the great city. He had a small cache of clothes and etceteras tucked away in a safe place in the care of a decent old taxi-driver who had been a mate of his in a garage. He supposed that he might revert to the job of washing other people's cars, but jobs were not as easy to find as haystacks.

Presently he snuggled down and slept, and he slept well, for he had been out in the air all day and was tired. He might have dreamed of some French barn and those relatively fragrant nights when he had been a Tommy in 1915. The smell of hay, and the odours of khaki and feet and warm army shirts! There was a great stillness over the countryside, and the grey drizzle continued through the darkness.

In the early hours a cock crowed, and Sherring awoke. He had cultivated the habit of waking early, and often it was very necessary. It was necessary in a situation such as this. He produced a comb and a small mirror from his pack and combed the hay out of his beard and hair; a wash might come later. Some dry bread and another apple served for a breakfast. In his niche between the stacks he could divine the greyness and the dampness of the morning.

He put on his boots, and they were clammy.

Emerging, he glanced quickly round the rickyard and then climbed the fence into the lane. It was a grey and stagnant dawn. The thorn hedges were covered with a film of moisture,—the lane muddy. On such a morning as this smells refused to dissipate themselves, and the place smelled of pigs. Sherring walked a few yards down the lane till he came to the end of a black, boarded fence. Everything was still. He stood and looked at the farmhouse and its garden and orchard.

Inwardly he exclaimed—"Well—I'm damned! If it isn't old Crabtree's place!"

So, he had spent the night in Crabtree’s rickyard! He had known himself to be in the Crabtree neighbourhood, but this coincidence had lacked all premeditation. He supposed, that if he cared to wait, he could cadge a hot breakfast from old Crabbie, and an ounce of tobacco.

But ye gods and little fishes!

He smiled at the sleeping windows of the house, and then swiftly and almost furtively he faced about and stalked off up the lane.

XVII

To people who were interested in society gossip the name of Mr. Bernard Bastable was not unfamiliar, and the curious could infer that Mr. Bernard Bastable—Merchant Banker—ran a racing stable and owned a yacht. There are yachts and yachts, but Mr. Bastable's yacht raced at Cowes, and though he encountered no very great fortune either with his horses or his yacht, these adventures were the relaxations of a rich man. They advertised to the world his phenomenal success. The City knew that Mr. Bastable rented a grouse moor in Scotland, and had built himself a villa on the Riviera. Photographs of Mr. Bastable and Mr. Bastable's shooting party had appeared in one of the sporting journals. The party had included a duke.

But about this period Mr. Bastable experienced what the moralists used to call a change of heart! There was nothing sentimental or Scroogelike in the transfiguration. Mr. Bastable grew bored with certain experiences and became interested in others. His appetites were a little less urgent and personal, and his attitude to life became tinged with philosophy. His philosophy and his choice of a wife surprised many of his contemporaries and saddened some of them, but the realities went to prove that Mr. Bastable was not a mere accumulator. He liked power, and he liked creating the instruments of power, but when he chose to marry a certain lady who was interested in music, pictures and gardening, the wise may have understood that he had ceased to be mere Bastable.

Mr. Bastable dreamed a dream. He dreamed that he was dining at a very opulent hotel with a houri, and the houri—looking at him with eyes of financial affection—said—"We'll make a priceless show together, old thing. I shall be the best dressed woman in London, and some credit to you—what! Supposing we begin with a thousand guinea fur coat? Buy it me to-morrow." And the soul of Mr. Bastable had rebelled. In his dream he had exclaimed—"I'm damned if I will"—and he didn't.

But he did have to contend with certain complexities. He had looked upon the fairness of women and purchased that fairness. He had gathered his Apples of the Hesperides, and, more than one lady, was inclined to demand value for value. Gilt edged securities should be returned in exchange for the apples of gold. Mr. Bastable was threatened with a case in the courts; the lady asserted that she could prove both contact and contract, but she was neither so clever

nor so thorough as Mr. Bernard Bastable. Incidentally, she was an arrant bad lot.

For, in some ways he was an unusual person, and so was the lady he was choosing to marry.

Milady was always ringing up on the phone in the most outrageous and public manner.

“Bunty, if you don’t come to see me and talk things over I shall——”

Mr. Bastable asked her to dinner. It was a most unexpected dinner—a triolet. Milady found herself sitting opposite the future Mrs. Bastable, a woman whose Christian name was Mary, and who possessed some of the attributes of a Mary, but not all of them.

“Caviare, oysters—or grape-fruit, Diana?—By the way, you may like to discuss—our affair—presently—with Mary. She knows all about it.”

Well—really!—How perfectly indecent! To plot a kind of shameless ambuscade!

“Caviare—I think.”

“Mary, grape-fruit for you?”

“Please.”

“Grape-fruit for me too, waiter.”

Was it conceivable that a man and two women could sit down in a public place under the shadow of a cause célèbre, and prepare to discuss it? Milady took refuge in persiflage and irony. She showed great animation.

“I think Bernard is paying for this dinner.”

Said Bastable—“I have paid for many dinners—and other things, and I hold the receipts. No accounts outstanding, Diana.”

Injured virtue!—Could one plead that in the face of a woman named Mary, a woman who smiled and was almost stuffily serene?

“A case—for the courts, my dear.”

“As you please.—You know—really—Di, a woman shouldn’t write threatening letters.—Yes, my lawyer has a whole bunch of them. There is a certain low word beginning with B, and a word of a certain colour. Do you want me to mention it?”

“Don’t be so crude, Bernard.”

Mr. Bastable laughed.

“How is the caviare, Di? Quite—all right? Mary is a great authority on nomenclature. You know those white lilies which grow in cottage gardens?—Let us see, the Latin name is——”

“Lilium candidum.”

“I have also asked Mary to elucidate the origin of the phrase—“Sending a Letter through the Black Post.” She says that she thinks it had its origin in a primitive village community when the village Maypole was draped in black and the pillory was prepared for a person—who——”

Milady looked bored.

“Can I have some toast, Bernard?—Are you putting up anything for Ascot this year?”

“Toast, waiter—please. I am getting rid of my gee-gees. You haven’t heard? Mary and I are interested in Highland cattle and rhododendrons. Mary has had a rhododendron named after her by Waterers.”

“How thrilling!”

In its subtler manifestations the evening was adequate. Neither Bastable, nor Mary, nor Milady danced, but they watched the show from their table, and about 10.30 Milady began to suppress babyish yawns. Yes, she had had three late bridge nights. Mr. Bastable sent her home to her flat in his Rolls. He sat with Mary in the lounge, awaiting the return of the car.

“When a fool and his—indiscretions—are parted, my dear!”

She smiled at him.

“Is—anything—very modern? Even Milady?—When I was twelve I was not allowed to read Dumas.”

“You are a very tolerant person, Mary.—I have an idea that this particular indiscretion will not pursue me any further.”

It did not.

2

The Loviebonds were out in a new car, a brilliant black and yellow coupé, which, having advertised the Loviebond prosperity to the Chislehurst world, was carrying the flag farther afield. Neither Loviebond nor his wife were interested in landscape as such. Loviebond could not distinguish a beech tree

from an oak, and the Forest Ridge and the Downs were just hills, large heads either bald or hairy. Certainly, contours did suggest an intriguing hole on a golf course or a gradient to be climbed on top.

Yet, Sussex on this Saturday afternoon in September introduced to Loviebond and his black and yellow coupé manifestations of a new world, democracy on wheels. Loviebond drove with eyebrows slightly raised, and a sense of surprised irritation. Motors had multiplied. They were of all sorts of shapes and sizes and ages, and they contained all sorts of strange people. One quasi-derelict with rusty wings and full of hatless youths, had hung on to the coupé's tail for a couple of miles, and had then dared to challenge the rich man's machine on a steepish hill.

"Damned cheek!"

Loviebond had taken the middle of the road, accelerated, and pinched those cads out.

"An old tin kettle like that!"

He had left the veteran rattling somewhere in the rear. The very imperturbable young woman beside him listened to his remarks as though they were the products of some mechanism. She knew her Max from monocle to sock suspenders, what he would say on any particular occasion, how he would look in dinner-jacket or pyjamas.

"What are all these damned fellahs doing in cars?"

That Tom, Dick and Harry should take the road in secondhand Chummy Cambridges and fantastic Fords did not worry Irma Loviebond. Cool, complete, in colouring what we moderns call a platinum blonde, she liked crowds provided that she was in a position to transcend them. Shabby people ministered to one's sense of the serenely superior. Why worry? The black and yellow coupé could sleek its way like a thoroughbred through a pack of curs.

She said—"Let them have their show. It's a cheap show. Why worry?"

Her smartness was impeccable. She could drive a car at speed with a delicacy and a coolness that were admirable. Where Max fumed, she was content with a gesture and an oblique and supercilious glance that transfixed the fool. Her husband drove to an accompaniment of "Damned idiot!"—"Why don't you signal?"—"Take the old tin can home." He was always losing his way, and cursing the sign-boards.

He lost it this Saturday. He was making for Crabtree's place north of Midworth. Midworth he did find after sundry circumlocutions, but Darrels was

the very devil. Being in Sussex he had supposed that he could drop in on old Crabtree and tell him that all future armistice reunions were superfluous, and incidentally show off his car. “Some car, old man, what.” But Crabtree took a lot of dropping in upon. He appeared to have hidden himself in some primeval hole.

Loviebond kept pulling up to inquire.

“Can you direct me to Darrels?”

He received various instructions, or no instructions at all.

“Damned fools—these rustics!”

Eventually he did pounce upon a person wheeling a bicycle up a stiff hill, who was definite and confident as to the siting of Crabtree’s farm.

“First lane on your right, just beyond the park gates.”

Loviebond conducted the coupé down a very rutty lane. It was full of pot-holes, and the hedges had not been trimmed. Rampant brambles proposed to claw the coupé’s perfect complexion. Damned Bolshevik brambles! Farm buildings came into view, and fields dotted with corrugated-iron pig shelters. The Loviebond car came to rest outside a high black fence. It stopped there because Loviebond had sighted a section of the lane that was particularly squelchy.

The day was sultry for September, and moist. Loviebond sat for a moment with the air of a man being assailed by some unexpected and unpardonable smell. He looked at his wife.

“I say—what a stuffy hole.”

Imperturbably she pointed out to him that the Crabtree gate was another twenty yards down the lane.

“I’m not going through that squelch. What’s the smell?”

Her cool nostrils savoured it.

“Pigs—I think.”

Obviously so! The Crabtree world was a paradise for pigs. The black fence concealed a thriving community which was emitting grunts and squealings, a community concealed, but lavish with its odours. Irma Loviebond extracted a cigarette-case from her bag.

“How filthy!”

“Bloody awful.”

“Drive on—Max.”

The odour persuaded him to pass that squelch and park his car outside the white gate. He accepted one of his wife’s cigarettes.

“Fancy living with a stink like this!”

She said—“I suppose—it’s—normal.”

Her husband proceeded to get out of the car, but Irma remained seated. This man Crabtree was not expecting them, and judging by appearances he might not be in a mood or a state to welcome the unexpected. Moreover, Mrs. Loviebond was squeamish about details, her bath, her bed, her table-linen and silver, and that porcine smell exulted and mocked at a mere cigarette. It was a hearty, well-greased, succulent stench, medieval in its richness, jocund and unashamed.

“Max.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t want to have tea here. It’s simply too septic.”

Loviebond picked his way across the lane. In material matters he was as nice and fastidious as his wife. The war and its mud were things of the past, though many a farm in Flanders had made him happy, with some French girl who had smothered the smell of the midden with some more personal perfume provocative of sweet, sexual qualms.

He said—“I quite agree.”

3

Loviebond was no gardener. Provided the grass was mown and the drive weeded, and the beds were full of floral decorations, Loviebond was satisfied with the soul of “The Cedars.” He believed that a garden should have a good appearance, like your wife or your car or your dinner table, and the Crabtree garden could not boast of a good appearance. The brick path was green and slimy, the grass uncut and invading what purported to be flower beds. A deck-chair with a rent in its canvas stood under an apple tree. Almost, Loviebond raised his eyebrows at all this slovenliness. It shocked him, but pleasantly so. Obviously poor old Crabtree was not one of the world’s successes. Poor old Crabtree!

A white door with a brass knocker confronted him, but the door was not so very white, and the knocker knew no aids to beauty. Loviebond put a hand to it

as though proposing to make contact with an object that was greasy. He hated greasy things, a spoon, or the steering wheel improperly wiped after his chauffeur had pawed it. His gestures had become somewhat finicking.

“Rat-tat.”

Yes, the knocker gave him an impression of greasiness. He took out a silk handkerchief and wiped his hands. He was replacing the handkerchief in his pocket when the door opened.

An untidy looking woman stood there, a faded woman with tragic eyes. Loviebond thought her excessively plain, the sort of woman who looked as though she had got out of bed in a hurry—and it did not matter. There were no points of light upon which your attention could crystallize, no colour in hair or lips or eyes. She looked like a creature who had been dipped in a pot of drab grey dye.

Loviebond raised his hat.

“Does Mr. Crabtree live here?”

The woman nodded. Her pale lips uttered a kind of noiseless yes. She was most unwelcoming.

“O, my name’s Loviebond.—I’m a friend of Mr. Crabtree’s. I was down this way, and I thought——”

Her eyes stared. Really—she was an awkward sort of cow.

“My brother’s in the yard. I’ll tell him.”

She did not ask Loviebond in. She disappeared down a stone paved passage, leaving him suspended above the realization of her as Crabtree’s sister. Poor old Crabtree! Well—really! What an uncouth person! And in B. Company mess Crabtree had passed as quite a polished fellow, if a little rustic, but then, of course, one’s appreciation of men and gentlemen had been so relative, so conditioned by contact with the awful outsiders whom the crisis had decorated with Sam Browne belts.

Loviebond heard voices in the farmyard where Crabtree was carrying buckets of pig-meal to a squealing and hungry community. Loviebond could not distinguish what was said, for the pigs were making such a devil of a row, but he did get the impression that his intrusion was ill-timed.

“Dave.”

“Hallo.”

“There’s a Mr. Loviebond to see you. He has a car and a woman with

him.”

“O, damn!—I’ve got to feed these beasts. I let Tom off to play cricket. Ask him in.”

“I can’t ask them in. We haven’t anything——”

“Oh, all right. Tell him I’ll be round in ten minutes.”

Una Crabtree returned to the man on the doorstep. She said that her brother would be with him in ten minutes, and would he be so good as to sit down in that deck chair. Her manner was abrupt and awkward. Loviebond apologized for the intrusion.

“I’m afraid we ought not to have cut in like this.”

“O, not at all. You see, on a farm, one cannot always dress up and go out.”

Well—really! What a farouche person! Loviebond strolled across to the deck-chair, looked at it, and sat down with some carefulness. The frame creaked but the canvas tolerated him. He felt huffed, piqued, and almost persuaded to return to his wife and the car and run them both up that perfectly bloody lane and back to civilization. Nice sort of welcome this! Yes, obviously he had perpetrated a gaffe. One shouldn’t surprise people who dwelt in a piggery. The propinquity of the pigs asserted itself even in the garden. Floral perfumes! Ye gods and little fishes!

Loviebond lit another cigarette, and was in the act of throwing the match away, when Crabtree appeared from the house.

“Hallo—Lovie, sorry to keep you waiting. We’re rather in the wilds here.”

He looked it, a roughened, raddled Crabtree, somehow suggesting man with a bloody and bandaged head who had been fighting with his back to the wall. His blue eyes were hard. The complete and clean man-about-town was shocked.

“Sorry, old man, the wife and I were out this way. I wanted to see you about November 11th.”

He thrust his cigarette case at Crabtree.

“Have one. No, we can’t stay. People coming to dinner.”

He was aware of Crabtree’s fingers picking a cigarette from the silver case, and such fingers.

“One of my chaps is off for the afternoon. Things have to be done on a farm. Sit down, Lovie; I’ll get another chair.”

But Loviebond stood.

“No—I mustn’t stay.—About the show—I think we shall have to wash it out. You know—old Sherring did not turn up last year. As a matter of fact—he won’t turn up. Most extraordinary coincidence—but we struck him last year.”

Crabtree stared.

“O, how?”

“We were having a picnic with some people—and I’m blessed if a tramp didn’t get up out of the bracken. The tramp was Sherring.”

“Good God! Did you——?”

“He skinned off—like a Red Hat when a strafe was on. Well, I suppose he didn’t feel like——”

Crabtree looked grim.

“Pretty bloody world for some people these days.—Frankly, I don’t get much time for social affairs.”

Loviebond blew a smoke ring.

“Young Steel’s been sent to Liverpool—and is crying off. Pitt is such a busy man that he won’t promise to turn up. Bernard is rather too big these days for a mutton-worry.”

“Bastable. I see his name in the papers.”

“I bet you do. He’s a marvel; everything he touches goes big.”

Crabtree flicked the ash from his cigarette.

“I wonder what happened to Sherring?”

“He got married, and his wife died. They ran a dance show. Queer, back street affair for a man like Sherring. Rumour had it that he went to Canada. Well, as I was saying, I don’t think a dinner in future is practical politics.”

“Hardly.”

There was a pause, an awkward silence. Their eyes met for a moment, and Loviebond knew that he did not want to tarry here, and that Crabtree was not going to ask him in. If the house was like the lane and the garden and poor old Crabtree’s clothes, that was understandable.

Loviebond forced a cheerful note.

“Well—I must get moving. Come and have a word with my wife.”

Crabtree went with him, but rather like some lean, fierce dog being led on a chain. He was introduced to Irma. Having no hat, he gave her a nod and a curt smile. He kept his hands in his pockets. He explained nothing, apologized for nothing. He looked at Irma Loviebond and the car with harshly staring blue eyes. Mrs. Loviebond's Paris hat might have been a parasitic fungus.

The occasion was something to be dropped and broken with promptitude, like a crock that did not contain gold. Loviebond got into the car, and confronted the problem of turning it. Crabtree, with a queer, ironic smile went to open a gate in the black fence.

"You can back in here."

The rear wheels of the coupé churned up cinders and squelch.

"Thanks.—Good-bye, old man. If you are ever in town, come and lunch."

An ironic smirk still covered Crabtree's face. He raised two dirty fingers to his forehead, his salute to the Paris hat. He turned to close the gate. The black and yellow car swung up the lane.

"Good God" said Loviebond, "old Crabtree's gone to earth. Good God!"

His wife's nostrils looked pinched.

"What a squalid show!—That smell! Did he ask you in?"

"No."

"What a blessing. I simply couldn't have eaten anything."

Loviebond eased the car out of the lane into the main road.

"Yes, too much pig."

4

Una Crabtree had hurried upstairs to change her dress. If the flesh had been caught in disarray, the spirit was not consenting. She knew that David might ask those people in, and that there was no cake in the house, but how absurd that she should feel flurried and humiliated! She had hustled herself into a yellow jumper and black skirt, and run a comb through her hair, and turning to her window she saw her brother and the man walking towards the gate. Was David going to extract that very decorative female from the car and bring her into a house sacred to people who lived upon pigs? Una had very good eyes. She could distinguish all the details of Irma Loviebond's person, for the head of the coupé was down. Mrs. Loviebond was as perfect a product as the car.

And what a car! It was the triumphal chariot in which the denizens of some other world had descended upon pigdom and Darrels.

No, they were not coming in. Thank Heaven! She saw Loviebond resume his seat, and her brother going to open the gate in the black fence.

It was tea-time. In fact, she had been laying the table in the kitchen when Loviebond's knock had disturbed her, and returning to the kitchen, and confronting the old white cloth and the coarse china she was conscious of the consoling bitterness of poverty. It was bedrock upon which no flowery illusions grew. The large iron kettle on the oil stove had a label of vapour attached to its snout. She picked up the brown teapot and poured a little hot water into it.

Her brother came down the passage and into the kitchen. He was smiling; and this smile was the little icy gleam on the face of a man whose belly was cold. She looked at him and then looked away. How pitiful that all her self-negation mated to his courage should have produced nothing happier than this! Fighting bankruptcy and the butchers!

She measured three spoonfuls of tea into the pot.

"Did you ask them in?"

"No."

He sat down at the table and drew the loaf towards him, and as he cut at it his lips retained that edged smile.

"What did they want?"

The bright blade of the knife buried its point in the butter.

"Nothing in particular.—Probably, Loviebond wanted to show off his car.—Going in to Midworth?"

She poured out the tea.

"No; not worth while. What are the Loviebonds?"

"Just—people."

His blue eyes stared at the slice of bread and the butter he was spreading upon it.

"It's a funny world. I suppose the man who sets out to scratch the elementals out of the soil is just what he was in the war, one of the P.B.I. The wise fellow makes his profit out of the fools.—Does that sound bitter?"

She passed him his cup. She felt suddenly gentle and pitying towards him.

He was not built for bitterness.

“To live on pigs—or on paper, Dave?”

“Exactly. In the muck, or in a padded chair.—No use grousing. If one has to cut the throat of the illusion, one can make black pudding of the blood.—Loviebond came to tell me that our armistice show is moribund.”

“No more dinners?”

He nodded.

“Sherring’s gone under. Archie can’t afford the railway fare—or something. Old Pitt’s a slave to his patients. Funny how these things fade away.”

She looked very sad.

“What happened to Sherring?”

“O, he just took a knock, a pretty bad knock, and disappeared. Loviebond says he’s a tramp. One of the post-war casualties.—Why don’t you go into Midworth, Una? Do you good.”

She swallowed bread and butter and a spasm of emotion.

“I would—if you’d come.”

“Me?—I can’t.—Work.—Besides, I might meet a butcher.”

He laughed.

“I stuck a German once. There wasn’t any pleasure in it—after I saw his poor face—but I could stick a butcher, my dear——”

“Don’t—Dave.”

He looked at her with sudden contrition.

“Sorry, old thing. One shouldn’t talk rot—like that.”

Afterwards, she went up into the Great Wood, and sat down on a felled larch in a little clearing where the sun came through. Her brother had sold some of the timber during the previous winter, but the Great Wood was still a place of peace, a sanctuary for birds and woodland flowers. In the spring it was full of bluebells, primroses, and white anemones, but now the bracken was breast high under the larches and beginning to tinge. There was less bracken under the oaks, and none at all under the great beeches. Peace reigned, a stillness that seemed supreme until you sat at the feet of the wood’s silence and heard its lips utter secret, sybilline sounds. Here were perfumes other than the

stench of pigs, the smell of bracken, of moist leaf mould, of creeping honeysuckle.

She sat bareheaded in the patch of sunlight with the trunks of the larches rising about her like the masts of ships. No wind moved; the woodland fleet lay in harbour. She felt the warmth of the sun on her face and bosom, and her secret self seemed to creep out to bask like some little animal. The wood's beauty was hers. She could still steal to it as to a sanctuary, and forget for a while that sordid show down yonder.

But on this September day she could not forget. The increasing bitterness of those post-war years passed before her like the days of a wet and dreary summer. O, these English summers with their sad, green gloom! To-day, the sun was shining as though to cherish in you the smart of a wounded illusion. Why was she sitting here? Why had she not rebelled? Why had she let herself become involved in her brother's battle against bankruptcy and butchers and bad seasons? Was it because no one else wanted her, and she knew it? No, not wholly that. Her honour—somehow—had become involved. She, too, was a Crabtree, a big, raw-boned creature who could pull her weight. The meanness of man and the cussedness of things had incensed her. She had stood beside David, and harnessed herself to his show.

She had watched him change his methods, and try to adapt to changed conditions. She had watched him grow more harsh and silent. Muck and misery. Did cultured folk who wrote prettily about the land know of the little mean minds the land can breed? The little, mean, cheating minds of the small exploiters. The dealer, the butcher, the auctioneer who was—so often—the dealer's pimp. Bad weather, bad prices, the market rigged against you, sales forced under the secret threat of commercial ostracism. The middle-man's cynical excuses.

Her brother had fought in a second war. He had manœuvred against fate with a growing army of pigs, hundreds and hundreds of pigs, boars, sows, yelts, porkers, black and big, white and middle white. He had explored new markets. He had contrived to circumvent the local gang. He ran a light lorry which carried his pigs to two or three firms who had entered into contracts with him. The lorry brought back foodstuffs purchased in bulk.

David was holding his own in the rough and tumble, but with backward and anxious glances at other and more treacherous enemies. She knew that he had secret dreads—disease, infectious abortion, swine fever. It seemed that the man on the land had both men and Nature against him.

He endured, and she had endured with him, watching with anger and pity

the coarsening of their lives. These years on the farm had aged and changed her brother far more than those four years of war. There seemed to be no comradeship in this business, and she had tried to give him comradeship. Poor old David, he had come back loving his farm, and almost it had taught him to hate his fellow men.

This wood was the only unpigged place that was left her. Every field carried pigs. She lived in the odour of pigdom. But this wood—! She left it with the sun slanting through the trees, and went down the field to her labour. She cooked and cleaned and kept the books, and grew each day a little older and plainer and more inarticulate. She had ceased to read as she had read of old. It tried her eyes too much, for she was long sighted, and she had secret vanities, a dread of spectacles. Spectacles would be so final.

That night at supper her brother dealt her an unexpected blow.

“I’m going to use the wood, Sis. Ought to have thought of it before.”

“The Great Wood?”

“Yes, beech mast and acorns. Pannage for hogs. Of course—they’ll root a bit.—I shall have to run pig-wire round most of it—but I’ve reckoned that it will be worth while.”

She looked shocked.

“Must you? It’s the only place left, Dave.”

But he was not looking at his sister’s face.

“That’s just it. Must use every bit of one’s ground.”

XVIII

At a certain point in Surrey the Loviebond car was held up where the London-Brighton road crosses the main street of Reigate. Loviebond's car was the first of a waiting queue, and he could observe the returning Brighton crowd at close quarters. Loviebond was late; he had lost his way again on the return journey; he held out the clutch and kept the gear-lever in first speed while waiting for these obstructionists to pass. He was impatient and not a little scornful.

"Tom, Dick and Harry, publicans and sinners!"

To Loviebond it was a cheap crowd, and mostly its cars were examples of the new product. A part of it ate oranges and bananas and chocolates, and strewed the road with skin and paper. Motor-bikes detonated. Loviebond, realizing that the policeman on point-duty was not yet prepared to look in his direction, slipped the lever into neutral and released the clutch.

A blue four-seater passed with a man and a small boy in the front seat, and two women and a girl in the back. Loviebond's jaw seemed to drop; he stared.

"Well—I'm damned!"

His wife was lighting a cigarette.

"Why—damned, dear?"

"If that wasn't Kettle, Kettle in a Swallow Twelve."

"A friend of yours?"

"Not exactly. A chap who was mess orderly in France; runs a greengrocer's shop in Islington. Well—I'm damned!"

Loviebond had not been mistaken. Mr. Albert Kettle and family, plus his sister-in-law, had spent the day at Brighton with a picnic basket and other etceteras. They were returning, not to the Essex Road, but to a house in Highbury New Park with a garage of its own. Mr. Kettle's business premises in the Essex Road now comprised a double-fronted shop with accommodation overhead for a married assistant. Kettle employed three assistants, a man and two girls; also a van-driver. His wife translated to Highbury New Park, was very much the lady of the house, and managing it with assurance and authority. She had added to her social responsibilities, and cultivated more refinements of speech. To the cook-general Kettle was always "Mr. Kettle" in particular. The

children were at school. Mrs. Kettle's sister-in-law was part pensioner, part housemaid, or rather—lady-help.

Mrs. Kettle had insisted upon the printing of visiting-cards. Her husband carried cards in his wallet.

Mr. ALBERT KETTLE

ST. OMER,
HIGHBURY NEW PARK,
LONDON, N.5.

He visited Covent Garden each morning, but with an air of authority and of a man whose custom was very much worth considering. He collected his produce by the hands of his man, Fred. He directed the two shops, not in a white sweater and cap, but in a neat blue suit and impeccable collar, tie and black boots. He was breezy and bland, and perhaps just a little bumptious. He would himself attend to particular customers, exceptional clients who purchased grape-fruit, and strawberries when they were a little out of season. Asparagus was not very marketable in the Essex Road, but Mr. Kettle had penetrated into Highbury where a few houses of substance still remained. Society segregated itself for Mr. Kettle into Asparagus and Spring Cabbage.

The passing of the Kettle car through Reigate had reminded Mr. Loviebond that Kettle was still a member of The Seven Club. Its Achilles might be a vanished shade in Hades, unvisited even by Odysseus, and Troy a pile of ashes. Loviebond was a meticulous citizen. He had a number of letters typed in his office, and one of them went to Mr. Kettle in the Essex Road. Kettle found it with other postal matter on his desk in the office. Kettle had a rather casual way with such letters. He stuffed them in his pocket and read them at midday dinner. He rather felt that such preoccupation impressed his wife.

She was not easily impressed. She still treated him rather like a large boy whose hair and collar had to be watched. She censored his language, and tried to control his aspirates, but not very successfully so. In moments of heat, Mr. Kettle would sometimes use that popular and British sanguinary word, but its ruddiness was lapsing more and more from his vocabulary.

"Albert—I won't have that word used in my house."

"All right, old dear."

She had her justifications, for, assuredly a man who was in danger of becoming a payer of super-tax should not utter the word "Bloody"—even in apostrophizing Inland Revenue Officials. "Bloody taxmongers." Chislehurst might so demean himself, but Highbury New Park—no.

Kettle had a slight difference of opinion that morning with his chief assistant, who, being an employed person was, by nature of things and the world movement, a socialist. Mr. Kettle was true blue, and Mrs. Kettle even more so. Tebbs the assistant, a man who rather suggested the member of some Learned Society masquerading in a white apron and selling potatoes, and who wore pince-nez; his combative ruff of hair, had persuaded Mrs. K. to christen him The Cockatoo. Mr. Tebbs had objected to the pricing of a certain commodity. Mr. K. was charging the public too much, and Kettle, knowing his Tebbs, understood that Tebbs' conscientious objections were like his political opinions, inevitably Tebbs.

"What's the grouse to-day, Maxton?"

For Mr. Tebbs, like his political idol, was full of eternal and windy woe. He was something of an orator. In public he referred to such people as Mr. Kettle as "Sweaters of Souls"—"Slimy Exploiters"—"Gold Bugs." Mr. Kettle knew this. He was always trying to tempt Mr. Tebbs into hurling these condemnations at him personally and in private, but Tebbs did not find Mr. Kettle so easy to address as some excited, fool crowd.

"I'm saying nothing, Mr. Kettle. I'm—not responsible for this shop."

Kettle was in a heckling mood.

"Well, if you ain't, who is? What do I pay you three pounds a week for. Talk sense."

As usual, Mr. Tebbs was in the unhappy position of being a have-not with a tongue that he had to tie up like a dog that was allowed to bark only when it was off the chain.

"I've said—it is not my shop."

"You talk too much, Maxton. If you'd kept your potato-trap shut and attended to business, you might 'ave 'ad a shop of your own by now."

Mr. Tebbs looked sanctimonious and shocked.

"God forbid."

"Well, if you don't like it, get out. I don't want your 'ighfalutin bunk in here. Bolshie blather. Keep it for the soap-box, old lad, and bloodywell shut up."

Mr. Kettle walked to Highbury New Park for midday dinner feeling that he had given the prophet one on the jaw and something to think about. Good biz.! He was becoming bored with Tebbs, one of those fellows who squint down

their noses at the product of success and ascribe it to luck or roguery. Mr. Kettle had buried his buccaneering pre-war youth; he had become a pillar of society, a man of property; on the whole he gave the public good value for its money; he paid Mr. Tebbs fair money. Yes, a damned sight more than the blighter was worth. Tebbs had been under the bed during the War. Bloody munitioneer!

The yellow brick gateway and the solid face of “St. Omer” had a soothing effect on Kettle. This was some house, his freehold property, and a sure symbol of success. Probably he would never become bored with success, for he had a healthy appetite for life. He glanced at the green and nicely varnished doors of the garage. Miss Swallow Twelve waited behind those doors for the week-end jaunt. Kettle was fond of pottering about in the garage attending to Miss Swallow’s person. He kept her well oiled and polished within and without.

Kettle entered St. Omer, and was met by a savoury odour of steak and onions, which odour was not quite in order according to Mrs. Kettle’s standards, but Eliza would leave the kitchen door open. Kettle hung up his hat. He had been taught not to leave it about on chairs and tables.

“The proper place, Albert, for a hat is the hat-stand.”

“Exactly.”

Mrs. Kettle was a punctual person, and dinner was served promptly at one o’clock. In another five years that meal would become lunch, and with Mr. Kettle opening two other shops, one in the Seven Sisters Road and another in Stoke Newington, dinner would be promoted to seven-thirty.

“Hallo, mother.”

Kettle stood in the dining-room doorway, sniffing appreciatively.

“Smells good—what?”

Mrs. Kettle did not wholly approve of that odour, but she liked to be kissed, and she was still very kissable, perhaps all the more so, because she used some nice sort of face powder.

“Somethin’ else smells good, old dear.”

Mrs. Kettle would never make a perfect gentleman of her husband, and she might have liked him less if she had.

At dinner Kettle remembered his letters. He was allowed to read them. Such preoccupation impressed Sister Eliza and made her realize Mr. Kettle’s

significance as a man of affairs. The second letter that he opened was Mr. Loviebond's, announcing the death and dissolution of the The Seven Club. Mr. Loviebond had dictated that letter in his best office manner.

> "My dear Kettle,
>
> "In view of the fact that several of our members may be unable to attend future Armistice Reunions we have decided with much regret to dissolve the Club.
>
> "Mr. Steel has left the London area. Both Mr. Bastable and Dr. Pitt are unable to promise attendance. Mr. Crabtree is doubtful. As you know, Captain Sherring has not attended the last three dinners, and his present address is unknown.
>
> "I very much regret this decision—etc——"

Kettle's slowly moving jaw suggested that the steak was tough, and if he was occupied in masticating it, he was also occupied with other matters. His wife, observing him in a set stare, became curious as to the contents of that particular letter. Her husband's expression suggested that one of their flash customers was protesting that he was unable to settle Mr. Kettle's account for vegetables and fruit. One of the asparagus people.

"Anything wrong, Bert?"

Kettle came out of his stare.

"The dinner's orf."

"It's best rump, Albert."

"I don't mean this dinner—I mean Mr. Sherring's show. We've all got too bloody busy to—— Beg pardon, mother, but I'm a conservative bloke. There's one thing I should like to know."

Mrs. Kettle waited to hear what this thing was, but her husband did not humour her. He relapsed into a state of munching meditation. Possibly he was back in that French farmhouse, listening to Captain Sherring who talked while he sat and warmed his hands at the stove. Did men foresee things? And where was Captain Sherring now? In Queer Street? If so, it was a bloody shame.

Kettle's lean jaw with its masticating muscles in action, dealt with a steak that was tender, and a problem that was not.

Irene Steel sat on the terrace of the club-house. The sun was shining. Below her the green baize surface of the eighteenth green gently undulating like a miniature sea, exhibited to her a succession of serious couples putting out. She was expecting Archie and his partner for tea. The Steels had become golf maniacs, though Irene was not playing this afternoon. She had beaten Gladys Jones in the morning by three and two, and Gladys Jones was a very conceited person, so Irene was content. Archie had won the monthly medal for August, and the club committee had reduced his handicap to six. Moreover, Archie was chief cashier at the busiest bank in the city of Liverpool, and was expecting to manage a branch of his own. Master Steel had grown into a lusty child. All was well with the Steel world.

Irene was an intelligent little person, and she had learnt to conceal her cleverness from her husband. She might meditate upon marriage, and confess to her secret soul that marriage was an unintelligent relationship, but like most sensible people she had come to realize that the married state is not founded upon intelligence. Archie was really a very lovable ass. His limitations were self-evident, but there is comfort in limitation. Archie had settled down; he was calculable, responsible. His habits were those of a man pleasantly tamed who went regularly to work, and in whom the spirit of adventure expressed itself in mild physical relaxations.

Archie talked golf and thought golf. The superfluous sex of him appeared to vent itself in smiting a little white ball. He enjoyed life; he enjoyed Irene; he was as keen as an average Englishman can be on his job; he was splendid with his small son. Yes, Archie was a lovable ass, and a kind one.

She saw him and his partner—Arthur Bateman—appear on the eighteenth tee. Archie had the honour. The hole was a short one, a good mashie shot, and Archie laid his ball on the green for a safe three. His wife had been able to judge from her husband’s posture on the tee and from the swaggering waggle of his club that all was well with him. He had effaced Arthur Bateman. Bateman was a tall, sallow, superior young man who talked at you like a lecturer, and who would have made an admirable hotel manager of the de luxe order.

Bateman put his ball in a bunker. Failing to play it out he—with a suggestion of casual ennui—picked up—and stood to watch Archie putt out. Archie was meticulous as a putter out. The ball went in click for a two. Mr. Bateman drawled at him.

“Good shootin’.”

He could patronize a fellow even when he was down to him, and Mrs.

Steel, watching them stroll up together knew from her husband's triumphant, jocund friendliness that he was the victor. He would arrive on the terrace with concealed modesty.

"Had all the luck. Arthur had me cold at the thirteenth. What about tea?"

She had ordered tea for three.

"You'll join us, Mr. Bateman?"

Mr. Bateman did not say he would. He just sat down; he was that sort of man. He took your tea and never thanked you for it, and very rarely did he act as host.

"How's the prodigy, Mrs. Steel?"

Irene looked at Mr. Bateman's legs. She knew that in trousers he was slightly knock-kneed, but how was it that she knew that he was a little sensitive about his legs?

She said—"Sorry you were off your game to-day.—Oh, Archie, tell them—raspberry jam."

"Right ho. Raspberry all right for you, Arthur?"

"O—perfectly."

Off his game indeed! Steel's wife was always a bit of a chit, but what reason had she for being so complacent? Her husband was only a bank cashier, whereas Mr. Bateman was seriously and snobbishly in shipping.

Archie enjoyed his tea. He pressed raspberry jam on Bateman. He described with naïve egotism certain of the thrilling moments of the round, how at the long fifth Bateman had hit two "screamers," and he—Archie—desperately valiant and forlornly hoping to make up leeway, had taken his brassie and put his third on the green, hole high and about two yards from the pin.

"Some shot—that—for the babe. And what do you think Arthur did to me?—Put his chip shot in the hole for a three."

"What a brutal fluke."

Mr. Bateman helped himself to more jam. He proceeded to explain to Mrs. Steel that he had played for the hole, and that if you calculated the possibilities correctly, and the strength and direction of the shot were exactly what they should be, and no chance irregularity deflected the course of the ball, inevitably your ball would arrive in the hole. To the mathematically minded there was no such thing as fluking. Mrs. Steel listened, as though waiting for

him to finish, capped his little lecture with an “Indeed, is that so,” and promptly asked her husband what he did at the tenth.

Archie told her all about the tenth hole. He had pulled his second into that infernal little bunker to the left of the green, taken his niblick and exploded the ball on to the green. Arthur ought to have had him at the tenth, but Arthur’s short putt had run round the hole. Irene listened with an air of bright attention, and Mr. Bateman felt nauseated. Steel was such an obvious and cheerful ass that any woman of sense should yawn in his presence and not allow him to describe all his exploits at length and in detail. Yes, he would give Steel a miss in the future. He jabbered. It was impossible to concentrate on your game with a chap who jabbered.

At a quarter to six the Steels drove off in their jolly little two-seater. Archie allowed his wife to drive. He was not quite the fool Mr. Bateman thought him.

“Old Arthur was a bit peeved.”

“Glad you licked him, Archie.”

“As a matter of fact—so am I. Took five bob off him, so we had a free tea. Arthur doesn’t like losing.”

“He never loses.”

“Oh! How do you mean?”

“The mathematical probabilities are against him.”

Archie laughed.

“Rene’s no fool—what!—What time are the Butlers coming in?”

“I asked them for a quarter to nine. Mr. Butler likes port, and to be five shillings up.—One should always remember——”

Her husband gave her a gentle dig in the ribs.

“Naughty—naughty, playing up to the Mammon of Unrighteousness!”

Mr. Butler was Archie Steel’s financial C.O. He liked Steel and Steel’s wife, and a game of bridge at Steel’s house, all of which was good for Archie.

3

Sherring lay in bed and looked at the slit of light between the curtains. In colour these curtains had once been yellow, but now they were like a head of golden hair that has faded and gone grey in streaks and patches. It was about

half-past eight on a winter morning, and Sherring had watched the slit of light gradually increase, but the morning brightness was relative, for the sky was a wet and dirty dish-clout. Sherring knew that it was raining, for a rainpipe that suffered from some obstruction gurgled at him confidentially——

“It’s wet, my dear; it’s wet, my dear.”

Sherring lay on his back and thought.

“I can do nothing.

“I am worth nothing.

“I am nothing.”

What a triolet to sing on a December morning! He had had influenza; he had been in bed for a week; he had lost his job, though the job had been nothing to prate about, that of car-washer in a West End garage. Mud, and oil and water, hoses that leaked, a concrete floor that was never dry, rubber boots that made your feet feel like dead fish. And one or two of his fellow workers had not been kind to him.

“A bloody toff in gum-boots.” They had treated him with rude and facetious candour. A broken man, but still offensively the gentleman. Bloody toff!

Sherring’s head moved on the pillow. He heard footsteps coming up the stairs; they suggested soft slippers and solid, well-padded feet. He lay as though stressing the significance of that approach; he tried not to shrink from it; a part of him did not shrink. Mrs. Bloom was well fleshed, and at the top of the stairs she paused for a couple of seconds before her slippers slithered towards Sherring’s door.

It opened. He saw the largeness of her, face, throat, bosom, lips. Her name was Florence, and it suited her, for she was florid and yellow, a woman in the thirties and in the fulness of her bloom. She was wearing a light blue jumper, a black skirt and pink bedroom slippers. Her large bosom rose and fell, and its movement suggested other associations, other forms of breathlessness.

“What’ll I get you for breakfast, dearie?”

Sherring smiled at her. He could still smile, even at Florence Bloom, and after all—this woman had been kind to him. She had brought him his food, and washed his face and hands for him, and even helped him to shave. That he happened to be her fancy for the moment, a free fancy interpolated between more professional affairs, seemed to be part of his fate.

“Tea and toast, Florrie, if you can manage the toast.”

She came and sat on his bed. He had come to associate her large, plump body with the smell of cheap scent and perspiration, and the cushioned softness of a very full bust and ample stomach. When her fancy was free to choose it was strong and ardent. She clasped a man to her big, warm body, and drew him down into the deeps of the primitive struggle.

“Try an egg, dearie. How are you feeling?”

“Better. I’ll get up to-day.”

As she sat on his bed and fondled him he was conscious of the succulent, submergent bulk of her sex. She was a strong creature, and he was feeling very weak, and his weakness made him shrink from her, and from the significance of her. There were moments when she filled him with nausea, she and this shabby house, and her dreadful old mother who would sometimes emerge from the dark basement like an ancient rat. Mrs. Dagnall and her daughter let “lodgings.” Mr. Bloom was undergoing five years incarceration for blackmail. In his absence his wife exploited various sorts of men, and was not anxious for the return of the native.

Sherring closed his eyes. Something in him shuddered. This woman was a symbol of what life had become of him, and all the more so because he had taken to her as some men take to drink. She was watching him, and he knew it. He had for her all that in modern parlance is known as sex appeal.

“Like the curtains drawn back, dearie?”

“I’ve still got a bit of a head.”

Her large, soft hand rested on his forehead.

“I’ll go and get your breakfast.”

Her tenderness for him was physical, and he was conscious of a sudden fear of things that were merely physical. He was just a body that she had attached to herself. She would suck satisfaction from him until she was sated with him, and then—He lay very still and waited for her to go. He wanted to cry out. He was no longer body, but a kind of Lazarus suddenly awake in the reek of his own dead flesh. He wanted to be out in the air, clean and free, and with the Christ that is every man’s other self.—It was raining, and the water-pipe gurgled. Almost, it seemed to laugh at him with sounds of wet and sodden mirth.

XIX

WHEN a man becomes the slave of his own success he may be able to compromise with fate or be compelled to capitulate to it, and Penrose Pitt was pursued by the devil of incipient obesity. Nothing dates one so unescapably as a paunch, and if Penrose Pitt's numerous patients had caused him to ride in a car, on every possible occasion he walked. There were certain incidental and supplementary visits that could be made on foot. He climbed stairs both for exercise and profit. He was massaged. Night and morning he gave fifteen minutes to physical jerks.

On this winter afternoon he walked to Tynemouth Terrace to see old Giraldi who had high blood-pressure and a heart. He had put Mr. Giraldi to bed for a week, but the business was to keep him there, for Giraldi was a man with a passion for his own particular business. He directed the Hyde Hotel. He had a European reputation.

Pitt saw a car, a very large car, waiting outside No. 9 Tynemouth Terrace; somebody's Rolls; it might be Giraldi's Rolls, for he could afford one. A flight of steps led to the door of No. 9, and Pitt went up the steps on his toes, chest expanded, abdominal muscles tense. Nature and not a body belt should compress that corpulence.

The door of No. 9 opened as Penrose Pitt arrived at the top of the steps. The confrontation was a surprise to Pitt, and less of a surprise to the other man.

"Evening, doctor. I have just been seeing your patient for you."

It was a genial and almost friendly Bastable who put out a hand, a Bastable, who, as a somewhat public person, had begun to wear a social halo. Pitt was more formal, though he accepted Bastable's hand.

"You know Giraldi?"

"My dear man—does—anyone who dines—as he should—not know Giraldi?"

Pitt noticed that Bastable was plumper. The spirit of him felt appeased.

"That's true.—My trouble is to keep the great man in bed. He's a fanatic."

"We—who succeed—doctor—are fanatics."

Pitt smiled. Bastable, a fanatic in overcoat and topper, with a Rolls waiting

for him! But he understood what Bastable meant.

“One becomes a slave to one’s public.—But you, Bastable, dictate to us.”

“O, no, Pitt, not the strong, silent touch—please. Only doctors dictate. For my sake, keep Giraldi in bed. Good-bye.”

But he turned on the steps just as Pitt was entering the door.

“O, by the way—have you ever heard or seen anything of Sherring?”

Pitt paused, head up, like a man about to box.

“No.—He—disappeared some time ago.”

“Missing?”

“Just that.”

“Rather a pity.”

Bastable went on and down to his car where a sedulous chauffeur tucked the rug round his legs, and Penrose Pitt deposited his hat on a hall table, and realized that Bastable had surprised him. Did prosperity chasten a man? Pitt had always understood that it tended to make him arrogant, and Bastable was much less arrogant than of old. That was Penrose Pitt’s impression. And that epitaph upon Sherring’s submergence? Rather a pity. A faint flavour of patronage perhaps, but pity postulates patronage, a little more or a little less.

Pitt found himself in presence of the elder Giraldi girl, a dark, merry creature.

“Well, Miss Francesca, how is the world to-day?”

“Doing cross-word puzzles.”

“Is that a piece of the new symbolism?”

“No, doctor—old thing—it’s a sign of peace.”

Pitt crinkled up his face at her.

“Look here, young woman, if you call me an ‘old thing’ there won’t be peace.”

“Not even if I call you a ‘dear old thing?’ ”

“Hussy, I will go upstairs.”

He found Giraldi sitting up in bed, and somehow conveying the impression of alert activity even when supported by pillows. He had a close-cropped white head, a high colour, brown eyes that looked bright and black. Pitt sat down

beside the bed, observed his patient, felt his pulse, and talked.

“I met an old acquaintance on your doorstep. Mr. Bernard Bastable. Didn’t know he was a friend of yours, Giraldi.”

“He owns fifty-one per cent. of our ordinary shares.”

“What, of the Hyde?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t know he dabbled in hotels.”

“He doesn’t dabble.”

Pitt nodded.

“I see. Newspaper proprietor, hotel proprietor, super-financier, race-horse owner.—Yes, pulse much better.—Between ourselves, my dear sir, how do you find—Mr. Bastable?”

“As I take him.”

“Like my medicine?”

Giraldi’s dark eyes twinkled.

“He’s a great man.”

“Like half the novels that are advertised. But you don’t read novels. Your hotel is your novel.—May I see your tongue?—Excellent. Bowels open?—Good.—Just how great is a man like Mr. Bernard Bastable?”

“He’s big, doctor; big in his ideas and in his carrying them out. What is of more interest to me is that he will allow another man to have ideas, and if he approves—he will back the other fellow’s ideas. He is generous.”

“That’s a rare form of generosity, Giraldi. How long have you known Mr. Bastable?”

“Ten years.”

“Has he changed?—What I mean is—some men mellow.”

Giraldi took a moment to consider that question.

“Yes, he has changed. One would say that he has grown with his career.—When I knew him first, doctor, he was rather like a sullen young bull in an arena. He had to break down certain barriers. It has been a wonderful career. You see, I have worked with the man, and when one has worked with a man ____”

“Exactly.—You suggest that he is one of those men who had to contend against prejudice.”

Giraldi gave a little, characteristic hunch of the shoulders.

“You English have prejudices, physical prejudices. You say of a certain man—he is a Jew, or a dago. If he runs a restaurant—it does not matter. If he jostles you in big business——”

“But, my dear Giraldi, the Jews are with us in Parliament and high finance ——”

“With you—yes. Some men are accepted—only when they have compelled acceptance. Mr. Bastable is—now—one of the accepted.”

Pitt smiled and nodded.

“You’re quite right, Giraldi.—I think I had better keep you in bed for two more days. That pulse of yours is much softer. Be patient. It is worth your while.”

Mr. Giraldi laughed.

“I am—always—patient. Do I not direct an hotel?”

Penrose Pitt took a three mile walk before returning to Chandos Street, and his physical parade led him through some of the most typical streets of his quarter, where life was cheap and crowded and noisy. His reflections upon life, and especially upon modern life, were not wholly those of a physician, though as a physician he did see the sores in these street scenes. Distortions, ulcerations, ugliness. And as a physician had he any cure? None whatsoever, save—perhaps—a vast lethal chamber and a shrug of the shoulders.

Modern life, and especially urban life, was just a damned funny show. He saw no esoteric meaning in it. He saw no salvation for it. Cockroaches in the basement, and cocktails upstairs. A crowded confusion hurrying perhaps to some prodigious crash, with the little, refined voice of the B.B.C. announcer informing the public that Big Ben had fallen into the Thames, and that rats were being sold at a shilling apiece. Yes, a damned funny show! Was there any meaning in it?—He could see no meaning in it whatsoever.

2

Sherring took a little walk. If not quite an old man’s toddle it was very like it, for a week in bed with influenza had left him frail. His legs carried him into the Brompton Road, and then suddenly suggested to him that they had sufficed

sufficiently for the moment, and would he be so good as to sit down. Perplexed in his need to satisfy the demands of these appendages he took refuge in a building whose exterior was familiar to him, but whose interior was strange.

He ascended the steps of the Brompton Oratory. A service was in progress and entering, almost hesitantly like a beggar straying into the vestibule of God's Grand Hotel, he stood, hat in hand. Lights, music, warmth, the scent of incense. These sweet, soothing, sensuous impressions intensified his feeling of faintness. He had the Englishman's horror of making a scene; he found a seat and relapsed into it. He was conscious of relief; it was as though his frail and shabby figure tossed along on the tide of his fate, had floated into some quiet backwater where green things were reflected in the water. Soft sounds, an otherness of atmosphere, warmth, a support for his poor fool body. He sat as in a niche, looking towards the lights, and the robed and sacramental figures. A strange show, but somehow soothing and stately, and symbolizing man's feeling for the ineffable mystery that is man.

And suddenly he wanted to weep. The music moved him. He put his elbows on his knees, and rested his head in his hands. Where had he read of a man's bowels yearning, and of his blood turning to water? Wine and bread. "Come unto Me, all ye that are heavy laden." His temples throbbed. Prayer? He had not prayed since he was a child. He had felt so sure that there was no one to pray to. Prayer was just self-suggestion. But what if some manifestation of a mystery revealed itself in prayer? Did this sensuous world conceal that which transcended the senses?

He was so alone, a shabby, workless creature who, at the moment, was dependent upon the concupiscent kindness of a prostitute.

He wanted to pray—but to whom?

The Unknown God, the venerable and bearded figure of his credulous childhood?

He tried to pray.

"O, God—I am nothing. If Thou art God—pity my nothingness. Let me be—something."

He sat with his head in his hands, conscious of an utter inward silence. He listened to the silence within himself. Would anything happen? What could happen? He heard a voice chanting somewhere, and the sudden deep rolling notes of the organ. They seemed to reverberate within him. Who was it that made such music? Mere man? Or did these sounds penetrate through man, God translated and interpreted in music?

He straightened in his chair.

It was as though the deep voices of the pipes filled him to the lips with emotion, and with more than emotion. If he was man he was more than a poor sack of skin and bone and flesh. He was a live instrument upon which strange fingers played. For a while he sat gazing into space, and then rising, he bowed his head towards the altar, and turning walked out into the daylight to descend the Oratory steps upon legs that felt strengthened.

3

On the pavement he wheeled right, and paused to save himself from colliding with a fellow ship in full sail. The other man, balked in his stride, pulled up with an almost military precision, as though the voice of coincidence had shouted “Halt!”

A familiar face, a blond moustache, two prominent blue eyes, a red and polished chin.

“Hallo, Sergeant-Major!”

Cragg stood with his heels together. His hand went to the brim of his bowler hat. His very blue eyes stared at the thing that was Sherring.

“Fancy meeting you, sir.”

There was a strangeness to Sherring in that “sir.” Was an ironic world pinning upon his breast the old tag of a conventional decoration? He stood looking into Cragg’s face.

“How’s the Green Cat these days, Cragg?”

“Dead and buried, sir.”

“And the boxing school?”

“Gone the same way, sir.”

Sherring observed his man. Cragg’s lounge suit was well cut and new, his bowler hat of a convincing blackness. He wore no overcoat, but then the ruddy solidity of him was that of a well fed furnace. Cragg appeared prosperous.

“You look as though you had had a month in a good billet, S.M.”

“Not so bad, sir.”

“What’s the world doing for you?”

“I’m head porter at The Hyde.”

“The Hyde! By Jove, Cragg, you must be a plutocrat among porters. Pity you can’t find me a billet.”

He spoke whimsically, only to realize how utter and poignant was his seriousness. He was aware of Cragg’s eyes observing him as they had scrutinized many a man upon parade, but kindly so, and with a suggestion of apology. There were decencies in this other man. “So and so, you look a bit tucked up this morning. What’s the trouble?” And Cragg was saying to himself —“Good lord—what’s wrong with Captain Sherring? He looks a down and outer. Go softly, old lad.”

“If you were serious, sir—I could find you a billet.”

“At the Hyde?”

Cragg was feeling embarrassed, and to cover his embarrassment he became jocular.

“Not your style of billet, sir. I can’t see you taking gent’s hats and coats.”

“Can’t you, Cragg?—But I can. I’ve been a car-washer at a garage. I’m serious.”

So was S.M. Cragg. If Mr. Sherring was as serious as all this, well—jocularity could be discarded.

“I’m going to The Hyde now, sir. I’m due back on duty.”

“I’ll walk with you, Cragg, part of the way.”

“Do, sir.”

As Sherring turned to go with him he looked into the other man’s eyes.

“It’s nice of you to call me ‘sir’—but let’s drop it. I’m no longer an ornamental person.”

Cragg took the outside of the pavement.

“You look as though you’ve been ill, sir.”

Sherring gave a whimsical shrug of the shoulders.

“I have. Lost my job—such as it was. Look here, Cragg, if I were an under-porter at The Hyde I might be calling you sir.”

“The pages do, sir.—It’s good for the young devils’ discipline.”

“But about this billet? I’m serious.”

“We are short of a cloak-room attendant. Mr. Giraldi told me to look

around.”

“It isn’t a very difficult job, is it?”

“No, sir. A good appearance—manners——”

“In fact—you want a gentleman, Cragg.”

“Well, sir, in a manner of speaking——”

“I used to be a gentleman. I might make quite a passable cloak-room attendant. One wears livery, I suppose?”

“A green coat with gold facings, sir, black breeches and stockings.”

“And the pay?”

“Not so very great, sir—but then—the tips.”

“Quite. I would take the job, Cragg.—I’m not a boozer or a sneak-thief.—I’m just a post-war misfit.”

Sergeant-major Cragg’s experience of the London world was considerable, for his activities had been various. He knew his Soho, and he knew his Mayfair, and as the tenant of a house in South Kensington, and the father of a family he was a somewhat responsible person. He knew the smartly shabby world, and the shabbily smart world. He had had to deal with night-club *habituées*, touts, tarts, amateur gentlemen, gate-crashers, revolutionary foreign waiters, indignant Americans, credulous Colonials, Duchesses, undergraduates out for a rag. He knew that a great part of the world was a sponge. If a man had money he could be touched for something. The most surprising people attempted to borrow money from the head-porter of The Hyde.—“I say, Craggo, could you lend me a fiver? I’ve come out without my cash.” Gentlemen who came to dine and dance requested him to pay off the taxi and disappeared without making any refund.

Cragg cleared his throat.

“If you happen to be short of cash, sir.”

He was aware of that curious little smile on Sherring’s face.

“No, thanks, Cragg—I can manage.—What about the procedure? I’m serious.”

“I shall have to speak to Mr. Giraldi, sir. Probably, he will want to see you. He takes nothing for granted. Our staff has to be—it.”

“I suppose you had better tell him that I’m an amateur? Yes, tell him that, Cragg.”

“I shall, sir.”

“All right. And supposing I’m taken on—when would they expect me to begin?”

“Next week, sir. Say—Monday. I’ve got one of my under-porters on this job at the moment. I do all the detailing for duty.”

“You’re still the S.M.”

Where the Brompton Road joined Knightsbridge Sherring paused. He held out his hand to Cragg.

“I won’t let you down, S.M. Shall I come round to The Hyde to-morrow and report for orders?”

“I think you had better, sir. I’ll see Mr. Giraldi at once.”

“It’s jolly good of you, Cragg. I’m—grateful.”

“Not at all, sir; not at all.”

Sherring walked back down the Brompton Road. He reclimbed the steps of the Oratory, and stood for a minute just within the doors. He had prayed to the Unknown God—“Make of me—something,” and his Unknown God—ironic and compassionate—was proposing to make him a cloak-room attendant! He had sent to him his prophet—Cragg. Or was this a judgment of Solomon?

4

Sherring reported at the Hyde Hotel. He was received a little mysteriously by Sergeant-major Cragg, and conducted to the staff quarters in the basement. He was shown a little room, and a suit of livery arranged upon a chair.

“Get into those clothes, sir.”

“Am I to see Mr. Giraldi?”

“Possibly. I am to put you on duty.”

“Now—at once?”

“Yes, sir.”

Sherring slipped off his coat and began to unbutton his waistcoat.

“I say, Cragg—I wish you’d chuck the sir. Tell me a few things. I just take in hats and coats, etc., and pass out tickets?”

“That’s it—sir. And you are responsible—for the spit and polish—of the

show. There’s another lad in charge of the lavatory. That’s not your business.”

Sherring, in shirt and pants, proceeded to dress himself in the new kit.

“Socks and collar off, sir.”

“From the right, number! Quite like old times. Stay and inspect my buttons, Cragg.”

“I’m going to do that, sir. I do that every day here. I’m responsible for the pages’ hair and teeth and finger-nails.”

Cragg watched him dress, and when the process was complete Sherring stood stiff and erect in the middle of the room, and Cragg walked round him.

“O.K., Mr. Sherring. This is a new issue; it fits you quite nicely. How about the shoes?”

“All right. All correct, Sergeant-major.”

They smiled at each other.

“Left any money in your other pockets?”

“Half a crown.”

“Change it over. Now, I’m going to post you. Nothing to get rattled about, sir.”

“I shall get rattled if you keep calling me ‘sir.’ ”

“I shan’t call you ‘sir’—upstairs. You’ll be just Sherring, sir.”

“You’re an obstinate devil, Cragg, but you are being damned good to me.”

“Wait and see, sir.”

The gentlemen’s cloak-room of The Hyde opened off its very brilliant lounge. Brilliancy was The Hyde’s distinction. The cloak-room was all polished wood and brass and parquet. Cragg raised a flap in the counter, and spoke to another attendant in green and gold.

“All right, Smith. Take the side-entrance for an hour.”

It was a quiet moment in the cloak-room’s day. It contained a few coats and hats and umbrellas, and two golf-bags. Cragg pointed out these articles.

“You are responsible for these. Nothing passes out without a ticket, except to residents.”

“But I shan’t know.——”

“You’ve got to learn to remember faces.”

“I see.”

“Now, you carry on.”

Sherring began by counting the number of articles in the cloak-room and making a mental note of them. He had observed the brass slit in the counter down which tips were dropped. He peered under the counter, and saw a kind of metal container with a lock. So, tips were controlled. He found a duster and a feather-brush under the counter, and he was using the duster—though he could see no dust, when a gentleman entered.

Sherring met him with a pleasant smile.

“Good morning, sir.”

He did not realize it, but he took the other gentleman’s coat and hat like a gentleman. He was preparing to issue a ticket.

“No need. I’m staying here.”

Sherring, still smiling, looked at his face so as to be able to recall it.

“Very good, sir. I shall remember.”

Five minutes later Cragg walked in. He was looking pleased and sly.

“Remember the gent with the white head?”

“Yes.—I’ve only had two others.”

“That was Mr. Giraldi.”

“The Director?”

Cragg grinned.

“Just gave you a trial trip. He’s passed you O.K., Mr. Sherring.”

“O.K. Sir Robert Cragg!”

5

It was dark and foggy when Sherring returned to Cable Street, whence Mrs. Bloom went out to ply her profession. The street lights were blurred, the stuccoed fronts of the houses a grey smudge, and if Sherring was feeling surreptitious, this shabby back street humoured him. Collar turned up, hat over eyes he came to the Bloom doorway. He possessed a key. He slipped it into the lock, and made a noiseless entry. The stuffy, airless passage smelling of sour

cabbage was the same septic mouth. A gas jet turned low showed him the lower treads of the stairs covered with worn linoleum.

He tip-toed to the stairs. He was half-way up the first flight when a voice from the nether regions challenged him.

“ ‘oo’s that?”

He held his breath for a moment.

“All right, Mrs. Dagnall.”

“Oh, it’s you. Florrie’ll be back at six. She wants you to go to the pictures.”

“Right you are. I’ll be ready.”

He climbed the stairs to his room, lit the gas, and after glancing at his five shilling watch, lugged an old suit-case from under the bed. He packed furiously, though his possessions were few, and he bundled them promiscuously into the suitcase. The thing was done. He produced some small silver, and selecting three shillings and four sixpences, he placed them on the chest of drawers. That sum would clear his debt, for by pawning a few articles he had managed to pay the women to the end of the previous week, and only two days were owing. He turned out the gas, and carrying his suitcase, crept down the stairs. On the lower landing the suitcase bumped against the banisters and he cursed it.

“Damn you.”

He had reached the front door when the hag’s voice from below assailed him.

“ ‘oo’s that?”

He did not tarry to explain or to excuse. He dragged the door open, slammed it behind him and fled. He cut across the road, and with head down, made desperate haste out of Cable Street. He passed the pub at the corner, and one of the swing doors opened as he went by. He could not resist a furtive side glance, and through the momentarily open door he saw a woman with a glass to her mouth. Then—the door fell to, and the woman and her glass vanished. That was his last glimpse of Florrie Bloom.

XX

THE apple trees were in flower, some in full bloom, others more pink with their virginal buds, and under the trees the grass was very green. A small branch of Pyrus Japonica had strayed across one of the kitchen lattices, and its red flowers lay against the glass. Una Crabtree was spreading the pages of yesterday's newspaper upon the kitchen table. The days of her week were a domestic calendar, with no Saint's Day included in them, though she herself was both shrew and saint. She could not say just why she was this or that. Moods, moments when a mysterious beauty manifested to her both within and without, other days when her soul was as harsh as the weather. This was her cooking day. She had her cleaning day, her washing day, and each repeated itself twice a week. On the Sunday she would sit, and holding her soul like a crystal globe in her hand, consider its strange secrets. Sometimes she was afraid of that crystal and of the things that she beheld in it, darknesses, little gouts of blood, a dimness as of angry tears. If she endured, in spite of inward and bitter discontent, it was because of the candour with which she had come to treat herself.

She would say—"You are thirty-five years old, ugly, quite uninteresting. In that other world for which you have yearned you would be nothing, undesired, unwanted, some sort of social drudge. Here—you are something. You may be a drudge, but you are wanted, and you have your dog."

Her brother had given her a dog—a mongrel, part rough-haired terrier, part problematical. She called him Bob, for the name suited the affectionate simplicity of the creature. He followed her everywhere. He slept in a basket at the foot of her bed, or lay in a chair and watched her work, or rushed out with leaps and joyful clamour when she took him out for exercise. Sometimes she would take Bob into her arms and let him lick her face. His kisses were the only kisses she had known.

Somewhere, pigs were squealing. The sound was familiar, and yet she could never quite accustom herself to the sanguinary significance of the sound. Pathetic porkers being loaded into the light lorry and driven off to be transmuted into meat. Pork chops, sausages. The farm was an efficient machine that ground out pigs, and week by week their squeals assailed her.

She would say to herself—"Don't be silly. Men must eat and live."

She had placed her pastry board on the spread pages of yesterday's paper. It was a pictorial page, and in the left hand upper corner the photograph of a man remained uncovered, a head whose solidity and swarthiness and swell of forehead reminded her of the Italian dictator. She found herself reading the letterpress below the photo.

"Mr. Bernard Bastable, the distinguished financier—now Lord Burgage."

Bastable? The name was familiar. There had been a Bastable in her brother's battalion. She was dipping a hand in the crock which contained flour when she heard David's footsteps in the passage. He was going out to-day with the lorry-load of pigs, for a week ago two casual slaughtermen had broken the legs of two pigs while unloading them and had then declared with insolence that the beasts had been injured in transit. Dave was coming in for an early elevens. She had his milk and a slice of cake ready.

His silences had become more frequent and protracted. He looked more lean, more tanned, more leathery, his blue eyes set in staring preoccupation. Sometimes he did not hear what she said. Or he would blurt out some obvious and monosyllabic word.

"Milk."

The glass looked a frail object in his large hand, and this morning his face had a harshness.

"Going to make sure there's no sabotage to-day.—Because I don't tip some of these brutes——"

She hated these harsh moods of his. They hurt her, because she felt the hurt of him in them. She knew how much he had to contend with, and that much of the world in which he moved regarded him as a gentleman to be plucked. "Bleed the toff. Do him." O, yes, David knew all there was to be known about the marketing of produce and its little filthy meannesses. She spoke to him gently.

"There is something here—in the paper, a photo."

He came and stood beside her and she pointed.

"Wasn't there a Bastable in your show?"

Glancing up and round she surprised the ironic gleam in his blue eyes.

"Bastable. That's the fellow. Lord Burgage. By God, that's funny! They've made him a baron."

And suddenly he laughed, holding the half-empty tumbler shoulder high.

“Pork and beans! Baron Beans.—I’ve got the pork all right.—Eminent financier! The fellow was the most bloody little funk in the unit.”

She scattered more flour on the board. Blood! White flour, the ugly snarl in her brother’s voice.

“You don’t envy him, do you, David?”

“I?—I may breed swine—but——”

He tossed off the rest of the milk.

“Well, that’s damned funny. This world’s an ironic show. Old Sherring gone—God knows where, and Bastable a baron!—Marvellous show!—And I’m off to see that Bolshie brutes don’t mishandle my pigs. Splendid!—Well—I’ll be moving. You might tell Carter to turn those two sows into the five-acre. Hallo—Bob, old lad.”

He paused to pat the dog’s head as he walked towards the door.

“Shall be back by one.”

She answered him in a quiet and almost soundless voice.

“Very well, David.”

He went out.

She sometimes thought of Sherring, and she thought of him that afternoon when she walked up to the Great Wood. David had been magnanimous to her about the wood; he had turned the pigs out of it before primrose time. She had pleaded for the wood and its wild flowers. The bluebells were there in sheeted blue amid the young crooks of the fern; tassels of the larches were still emerald green, and the beech buds bursting. She had brought a deck-chair with her, and she placed it in the little clearing among the larches where the sunlight fell. Sunlight was so precious and so rare in England. With eyes half closed she lay low in the chair and looked through the fairy forest of the young fern at the sheeted blue of the wild hyacinths. There was stillness here, a consoling peace, nothing was bought or sold in this wood, and even that most modern of pests, a lout stunting in an aeroplane, was a thing unknown. She lay and dreamed, but into her musings reality crept like some little goblin shape stealing through the fern. She thought—“Our fate is to sell and to buy. All the idealism that ever was piles its ship on the rock of commerce. There may be a very few to whom money does not matter, and in our economic world—they—do not matter. The idyll of life on the land! What it might be—and what it is!—David and I are at cross purposes here. We do not link up somehow. It is as though we needed some third person, someone who can laugh.—We never laugh.”

And then she remembered her brother's laughter when she had shown him the portrait of a distinguished financier.

Poor old David! No one had ever stroked his head, or made him play silly games, or taught him to forget the butchers and the dealers. Did David ever long as she had longed for a mate? He was so harshly celibate, and she was growing harsh with celibacy. Some day she would have a beard on her chin and a congested nose like the elderly shrew in the village post office. Her youth and all the beauty of its unborn love would be sealed up in a seared old skin.

Bob was at her feet, a Bob who would remain still so long as nothing too provocative appeared. A cruising rabbit set him off, and broke her mood of melancholy. She watched the dog's white stern shoot like a shuttle through the green warp of the fern. She sat up and smiled, but her smile was whimsical. It was like Sherring's smile—wistful and gently humorous. "Why quarrel with things? Life has always been like this. Medea and the Golden Fleece. The glamour of gold and the glamour of woman! But the glamour of gold outlasts the glamour of woman."

She rose, picked up her chair, and calling to the dog, went back by another way. It led her into the valley, and into a little field by the stream that was known as Rushy Mead. Both the name and the place fascinated her: the green and tufted rushes, the sallows and the willows, boggy places studded with yellow kingcups. She wandered over the wet meadow to the stream where water crowfoot would soon be in bloom, a white shroud for some dead Ophelia. She heard a cuckoo calling. The bird winged across the meadow, and settling in an oak tree, seemed to mock at her.

But she did not take it as mockery. She stood there, a plain and ageing woman with youth in her eyes. For the moment she felt like a child; she mimicked the bird.

"Cuckoo, cuckoo."

Bob, puzzled, looked up at her with his head on one side.

"Why this thusness, my mistress?"

She was watching the bird flying away, just as life flew away, and then returned to tantalize you with the coming of another Spring.

2

Sherring yawned, because there was no one in the cloak-room to surprise

him in the middle of a yawn. It was both the slack and the silly season, and London was not unlike a lettuce cut yesterday and exposed on a hawker's barrow. The Hyde Hotel had been lavishly equipped with electric fans, but the cloak-room possessed no such fan, and save on the brightest of days artificial light became necessary. The architect, ingenious fellow, had arranged the entrails of the hotel in a kind of abdominal cavity, a high central court or well. Up above the frosted windows of bathrooms, lavatories, and pantries opened into it, also the windows of a few of the cheaper bedrooms. Spent matches and cigarette ends, and the little envelopes in which safety razor blades are wrapped when tossed from these windows, descended upon the cloak-room skylight.

Sherring was allowed a stool upon which to sit when business was slack. He sat on it now, and after yawning, studied his legs in their black silk stockings. He had perfect legs for the part, gentleman's legs. He kept two books and a copy of the daily paper under the counter; the books were French and German conversational manuals. For, since his escape from Florence Bloom, he had passed a month in the desert confronting his own particular devil. The old spirit of restlessness had assailed him. There had been days when he had been urged to tear off that green and gold livery and rush out naked into the world. But perhaps he was growing a little afraid of such nakedness. Social man has to be clothed; he has to sit or stand at a counter or sit at a desk; he has to harness himself to the social scheme. Monotony may be fate of the masses, but massman endures.

He had lacked endurance. He had confronted life with that whimsical smile of his; he had met monotony with a little shrug of the shoulders, and walked away from it. He had tried to elude life's unexciting labour, and civilization had revenged itself upon him. It had made of him not a Drake or a Cromwell or a Prince Charlie, but a car-washer, a prostitute's man, and now a cloak-room attendant. His whimsical smile was against himself. He had come to know his limitations, and what those limitations signified. He was without originality, without any base or noble greed, lacking in knowledge, a little irresponsible. Always he had wanted to play, to drift, to be free, and save for the singular and the few there is no such freedom.

In the language of the war and of the plain man he had said to himself —"Stick it." Though why should man confront danger, wounds, death and transcend them even in moments of hopelessness? For honour—because of pride? All the old-fashioned values! Glory at the cannon's mouth! But what glory was there to be got in carrying through some obscure task which would never exhibit you as rich and singular and splendid? Tommy in the trenches,

enduring the mud and H.E. and hoping for nothing but dry socks and rations and the rum issue and a hypothetical leave. These city streets were like huge trenches in which men stood to repulse some enemy. The cloak-room of the Hyde Hotel was his particular dugout.

Stick it.

He sat alone with that which was fickle and infirm of purpose in himself, and looked it in the face, and felt in his vitals a new solidity. He would control those restless qualms. He might long to be out in the street, or in the open spaces of life where the sun shone and the wind blew. He sat among other men's coats and hats. His job chained him. He could not come and go as he pleased like these more fortunate people. But fortune, chance? Were there such things, or had luck been invented to save the faces of the mediocre men, to salve their souls with a plausible excuse?—"I've had no luck." Did the social grouser and raucous objector ever ask himself whether he deserved to be anything but what he was?

Sherring drew the daily paper from the shelf under the counter. He too looked at the picture page, and he too saw something to pique him.

"Lord Burgage opens the Cripples' Colony."

Bastable in top hat and frock coat in the centre of a group of children, nurses, and civic worthies! A beneficent Bastable, a slightly obese and smiling Bastable! Pork and Beans transmuted into the Philanthropist, one of Society's Fairy Godfathers!

Sherring smiled, but something in him winced.

"Marvellous!"

But Bastable had been one of those who had won the war-after-the-war. There was no such thing as peace.

Cragg happened in on business.

"Mr. Mulrooney left an attaché case here. He wants it sent up to his room."

Sherring had Mr. Mulrooney's case carefully secreted under the counter. He extracted it, and after handing it to Cragg, he pushed the paper at him.

"There's a fellow who was my sub. Bastable, now—Lord Burgage. Opening a show for crippled children."

Cragg had seen that particular picture; he was in a hurry, and so was Mr. Mulrooney.

"I've seen it. He's our Big Bug. Got me this job."

“What, Bastable?”

“Sure. He owns half this hotel.”

“Does he come here?”

“Often. But not in here. He goes straight to Giraldi’s room.”

Cragg vanished, and Sherring looked again at the picture of Lord Burgage and the children. To all intents and purposes he—Sherring—was one of Bastable’s employees. It was very much a case of Vice Versa.

3

Every other Sunday Sherring was off duty.

He lodged in a little street somewhere off the Edgware Road, and each morning he walked across Hyde Park. On Sundays he sat or strolled in it, and listened to the band, and watched the boats on the Serpentine, and children, dogs, and lovers. He would have liked to own a dog, but he had decided that it would not be fair to the dog. A dog’s life should be as good or better than its master’s.

Sometimes on Sunday evenings he would revisit the London of a memory, the London of Mira Manetti and Mrs. Flanders. Mr. Zakopulos still sold articles of vertu in Monmouth Square, but the hat shop in Quorn Street had changed hands, and Sherring wondered about Charles and Connie Flanders. Had they gone up or down in the see-saw? He supposed that he would never know. On one summer evening he sat on the very same seat in Regent’s Park where Penrose Pitt had seen him so absorbed in telling a dark young woman that he would make a better lover than husband. Had it not been true? He felt so much older now, resignedly older, and life was not throwing him into the arms of women. It was as though Florence Bloom had inoculated him against the hyper-secretions of sex. His was a hat and coat world and, like the war, mainly male. As for his lodgings in Silver Street they were neither lined with silver nor base metal; the small house was let to a widow-woman of precise virtue whose two daughters went out to work. They were very plain and earnest young women, and politically minded, who attended Labour demonstrations and lectures given by ferocious young men who gave tongue as though they were snarling dogs straining at chains. These pale and plain young women were blood-red revolutionaries. The elder of the two had attempted to make a convert of Sherring. Surely, a cloak-room attendant at a luxury hotel should be the very person to be inspired by hatred of the capitalist and all his

works.

“You ought to be one of us.”

Sherring was not tempted, and the woman in her was more piqued than he knew. She would have chosen him for partner in some procession of protest, his arm linked in hers, both of them waving little flags. One evening he happened to meet her returning from one of these adventures, minus hat and spectacles, her hair in disorder and her dress torn. She had the face of a woman who was not quite sane.

“What’s happened? You haven’t been knocked over by a car?”

Almost, she had spat at him.

“If you men had guts—the police wouldn’t be left on their horses. Cowards—swine——”

Yes, she had the face of a woman who was not quite sane.

But No. 13 Silver Street became so argumentative at night that Sherring could not get to sleep. Raucous idealism and unadulterated envy danced together under his window, so he abandoned Silver Street and found an attic in a high old house not far from St. James’s Square. He was saving money, for in the world of labour his post at the Hyde was a lucrative one. He carried his savings in a pocket under his waistcoat, and he wore this waistcoat under his official garment, but when these notes began to accumulate the wad became like some large plaster, rather oppressive. He bethought himself of a bank.

The Branch of the Westminster at which he and Mira had banked was not half a mile from the Hyde Hotel, and he decided to renew his association with that branch, but his official hours at the Hyde did not permit him to visit banks. He spoke to Cragg. He asked to be relieved for an hour one morning at a time when matters were slack. He had business to attend to.

“All right—Smith can relieve you.”

Sherring changed into mufti and hurried off to the bank. He interviewed a clerk who, after certain formalities, disappeared to consult the manager. Sherring stood holding the wad of paper money, with an eye on the bank clock.

The clerk reappeared.

“Do you mind stepping into the manager’s office, Mr. Sherring? He would like to see you.”

Why all this formalism? Sherring was passed through a private door, and a

stout little man rose from a desk chair. He was affable; he held out a hand to Sherring.

“Are you Mr. Sherring?”

“I believe so.”

“But you have an account here. It has been puzzling me for some time. We tried to get into touch with you. Please sit down.”

Sherring sat down.

“My wife had an account here. When she died—the account stood in my name for a week or two. I wrote a cheque that cleared it.”

The manager consulted a ledger.

“We have £370 standing to your credit.”

“But I don’t understand.”

“You say you wrote a cheque?”

“Yes, to clear a debt. It left no balance.”

“Who was the cheque drawn to?”

“A Mr. Mason.”

“Well, obviously—he did not pay in the cheque. It was never cleared. The money remains to your credit.”

Sherring looked rather pale.

“Well—I’m damned! It is the sort of thing Mr. Mason would have done. I must make inquiries. Meanwhile, I want to pay in some money.”

“Very pleased to oblige you, Mr. Sherring.”

Sherring went back to the Hyde, a man who had between four and five hundred pounds standing to his credit. He changed into uniform, and during a quiet ten minutes he got out a telephone directory and looked up Marlow. He could find no Mr. Mason in the Marlow list, but he remembered the name of Mr. Mason’s house.

He rang up Marlow. He found the Marlow operator unexpectedly sympathetic and helpful.

“Mason? The White House. That Mr. Mason died two or three years ago.”

“Sure?”

“Absolutely. My father was his butler.”

The voice became facetious.

“I can’t put you on to heaven. Yes, he went there if he went anywhere.”

“That’s true,” said Sherring; “I’m very much obliged to you,” and he rang off.

Obviously, Mr. Mason had accepted his cheque to placate another man’s curious feeling for the fitness of things, and then had torn up that piece of paper. He could make no restitution to a Mr. Mason who was dead, and remembering that very unpleasant young woman—Mr. Mason’s daughter—Sherring was not moved to pay over three hundred and sixty pounds to Mr. Mason’s heirs. The account was closed between them. If man survived in some Paradise or Cosmic Penitentiary, then, Mr. Mason might be imagined as looking down beneficently from Paradise upon a hotel cloak-room attendant who—to his astonishment—had joined the ranks of the minor capitalists.

But Sherring took the matter very seriously. He was still something of a Quixote in his attitude to finance.

Ought he to pay that money over to some charitable institution?

His urge was to stick to it, but should not the base urge be chastened?

He consulted Cragg, for he had a respect for the head-porter’s common sense. He explained the case, and Cragg, using the cloak-room clothes-brush on his gold-laced cap, asked the obvious question.

“What’s worrying you?”

“Ought I to keep the money?”

Cragg put down the brush and stared at Sherring.

“Ought you to keep it?—What’s the idea?—If the old gent didn’t want it back——”

“Well, you see, Cragg——”

Cragg donned his cap.

“Fact is—Mr. Sherring—you’re—o—well—you’re a gentleman. But so was the old gent, I guess. Some of you gentlemen have funny ideas, not all of you, o—no—not all of you. There are gents—and gents. You stick to the money, my lad. I remember my old dad talking about salvation coming through prayer and fasting. He was that sort. But I’ve learnt a thing or two. Salvation comes—nine times out of ten—through hard cash. Getting warm and

feeling warm, Mr. Sherring. Don’t you believe the Bolshies. They only want to blow your stuff because they haven’t got any of their own to blow. Let ’em try it on me. I’ll give ’em machine-guns. You stick to the cash, Mr. Sherring.”

Sherring stuck to it.

XXI

HEAT, stillness, thunder in the air!

As the prophetess she could have challenged the gentlemen who prepare the weather forecasts, and whose language is so very colourless and gentlemanly. A complex depression in the south-east; a likelihood of local thunderstorms. O, certainly!

She was sufficiently conscious of the depression. She could have informed the experts that both roses and pigs smell more sweetly in sultry weather. David had business in Midworth, and ostensibly it was business that smelt of pigs. The whole world seemed to smell of pigs.

She could not stand it any longer. She would have to go and scratch in some corner for herself as one of those women who maintain a modern and precarious independence. Did it matter what the job was provided you retained the prerogative and pride of giving notice? You could not give notice to a man who accepted you and your labour as he accepted trousers and the decalogue and his Saturday bath, and who regarded all that you did as inevitable. No, she was not feeling the heat, but she had decided to tell David that she was leaving the farm.

Thunder! Splendid! She was feeling like a storm.

David would have to marry or get a housekeeper. The positions were somewhat synonymous. Nature could justify some form of cohabiting, a partnership of board and bed. O, yes, she would have felt more self-respecting and necessary as a harlot, or as a lady who dispensed beer and badinage from behind a bar.

The room had grown dark, but the garden and the field and wood beyond were strange and lurid. She stood as though in a cave, primitive woman looking out at some elemental world. And suddenly her cave was lit up, and the sky crashed overhead. She was thrilled. She was wearing an old cretonne frock, and just as she was she went out into the meadow and up the slope to the Great Wood. There was a breathlessness in the air, a stillness in the valley as though that first flash had been that of a signal gun, and the world waited for the battle. Perhaps the war had been like this, exquisite fear, exquisite anguish, live flesh trembling to be torn. She saw the beech trees in front of her, green and motionless. Then, suddenly, something happened. The black sky cracked.

She saw a green canopy split, and the foliage fall apart with a sound like a ship cracking. The tree had been struck less than fifty yards from her. She exulted. She walked on and into the wood.

She reached the wood just as the first rain drops fell, large, solitary drops striking the leaves above her. A sudden little wind shuddered through the wood. The patter of the rain's feet quickened, and the sound, ceasing to be separate, became a moist, multitudinous murmur. She stood under one of the trees and saw a crack of light split the sky almost above the farm. For the moment she was untouched by the rain, for the dense foliage of the beech and the set of its leaves dealt with the rain as it dealt with the sunlight. A delicious coolness descended. It soothed her. Surely the trees rejoiced in the rain, and looking upward she was conscious of the tremor of those myriad leaves. The whole wood was vibrating under the rush of the rain.

A drop struck her face. Two more buried themselves in her bosom. The soaked green canvas of her tent was beginning to drip. She, too, would be soaked, and something in her was glad. Deliberately she walked through the streaming wood until her hair and her dress were wet. The fabric clung about her knees and shoulders; her face was wet with the rain.

How lovely Nature could be, how lovely and how cruel; rain after drought, lightning slaying a tree, pigs rooting joyously in warm wet mud!

She turned back and walked down across the meadow through a kind of silver curtain. She could feel the impact of the thousand rushing drops. Her shoes squelched. When she reached the garden gate a miniature torrent was running down the brick path. She noticed an overblown rose hanging an overweighted head. A gutter was overflowing and splashing its contents upon a windowsill. Pipes gurgled. Her own hair was like a wet mop, her clothes clinging to her skin.

She went up to her room, and stripped herself. She felt soothed, and standing at her window with a towel over her shoulders she dried her wet hair. The rain had ceased as suddenly as it had begun. The sky seemed to burst asunder and sunlight poured through upon the drenched and glistening greenness. It was very beautiful.

She thought—"I can tell him now—quite calmly. Poor old David—but it has got to be. One doesn't want to blurt things out. Yes—I'm quite calm now."

She slipped into dry clothes. The sun poured in on a strip of the faded carpet, and touched her feet. She was sitting on the edge of the bed putting on dry stockings when she heard the sound of a car in the lane. It stopped by the farmyard gate. She supposed that someone had given her brother a lift.

Her lips firmed themselves as she fastened up her stockings.

“Pull up your socks, my lad!”

She smiled. Yes, some hardness was necessary to save one from the sentimental shambles. She would tell him at tea, gently but decisively.

She heard David calling her.

“Unie—hallo—where are you?”

She went to the top of the stairs.

“Just coming. I got caught in the rain.”

“So did we. Something to show you.”

His voice had a gaiety. It was kind, and suggesting some surprise. We! What did he mean by we? Had he something feminine to show her? How much more easy it would be for her if he had come back to surprise her with a prospective wife. She hurried down the stairs and saw him standing in the passage.

“Someone with you, David?”

He was smiling at her.

“No. Got shoes on?”

“Yes.”

“Come on then. A bit wet in the lane. I had to drive through that deluge. A good test for the hood.”

She followed him down the path into the lane, and as he opened the gate she had a feeling that some other fate was closing upon her. She saw a small blue car standing in the lane, a very wet car, and her brother was looking both sly and shy. “It’s only secondhand, Unie, but quite all right.”

“You’ve bought it?”

“Yes—for you.”

She felt breathless.

“For me?”

“Yes, my dear. I’ve been wanting to do it for a long time. You’ve been such a sport to me. You’ve helped me to get through. I’ve always felt that it must be damned dull for you here.”

She stood voiceless. She wanted to weep.

“But—David—dear——”

“It’s quite all right, Sis; I’m on the right side of things now. I want you to get out and about more. When you feel like it just get in and trundle off somewhere. She’s a good little bus.”

She made herself walk to the car. She felt it to be like some strange child that had to be praised and propitiated.

“David—you’re too generous.”

“Not a bit of it. I owe you a good deal. What shall we call the little beast?”

She was struggling with herself. He was looking so happy. How could she dash that happiness?

“Call it Peter Pan.”

He laughed.

“It is a bit of a pan.”

“My dear, it’s lovely.”

She opened a small door and got in, and her bosom almost touched the steering-wheel. She wanted support—something solid and hard. She pressed her bosom against the wheel.

“David—I——” “You’ll have to learn to drive.”

“Of course. Let’s try her—now.”

It was just what he wanted, and she knew it. She slipped aside into the other seat, and he inserted his long self into the small space. His head almost touched the hood.

“That’s the self-starter, see. Gear lever in neutral.”

She appeared absorbed, enthralled, but within her a voice was crying—“I can’t tell him—I can’t tell him now. I shall have to stay. How life gets one!”

2

Sherring’s trouble was his feet.

They had passively to support his weight for so many hours a day, and though a stool was provided, the etiquette of The Hyde demanded that he should not be caught sitting. He was at the mercy of the unexpected, while being expected to stand in the presence of the casual patron and produce his

smile and a polite salutation.

“Good morning, sir”—or “Good evening, sir.”

So, frequently when he was proposing to sit, someone would stroll in and destroy his confidence in the safety of sitting. Mr. Giraldi was an autocrat, but a just one, and his attendants had to stand like guardsmen, no slouching, no loafing. Moreover, Sherring’s knee-breeches and stockings necessitated the wearing of a light pair of shoes which appeared to give less support to his insteps.

He spoke to friend Cragg about it.

“I suppose they wouldn’t let me wear trousers?”

“Trousers?”

Sherring explained the situation, but Cragg did not think that the conventions could be relaxed.

“Got corns, sir?”

“No; my feet ache like—the devil.”

Cragg, as a late amateur professor of physical culture, was able to advise an incipient flat-footedness.

“It’s the standing about. I’ve had a touch of it myself. What you want to do is to exercise the muscles.” “Which muscles?”

“The calf muscles. Practise tip-toeing. If your muscles get slack, sir, they let the arch of your foot down. Afraid you’ll have to stick it.”

“I’ll stick it, S.M.”

No very heroic business—this, bathing your feet night and morning in brine, and keeping the muscles of your calves up to scratch, but Sherring stuck it. He could suppose that there were such disharmonies as shop-feet and hotel-feet to match the trench-feet of the war. Being shut up in a dry tank—though the tank was nicely veneered and tiled, did not conduce to physical fitness, and there were days when he felt like a chained dog. He wanted to be out in the air; he craved for movement, wind, rain, the quickening of blood and muscle. Moreover, unlike a chained dog he could not strain at the leash and bay at intruders. He had to smile and stand to take hat and overcoat, and carefully put them away. He was the perfect lackey handling other men’s clothes, thousands and thousands of hats, innumerable coats, scarves, umbrellas, etceteras. Certainly, the hats and coats varied within calculable limits. Some hatbands were less new than others; some coat collars showed a slight greasiness along

the edge and at the lining. Some gentlemen had scurfy heads. Some garments were ready-made; others bore the seal of fashion, the names of eminent tailors. Perhaps Sherring was a little more tender to the coats that suggested struggle, a conflict with appearances. If his feet ached, so did many hearts.

But there were certain people whom he hated, especially the suave and superior cads who were so perfectly sure of themselves and of the subservience of the lackey. They exacted service and ignored the server, save—perhaps—to fling a piece of silver on the counter.

He was even more polite to these curt cads.

“Good night, sir.”

And perhaps he added to himself—“O, go to hell.”

3

Loviebond was tying a white tie. In shirt and trousers he stood in front of a mirror, and with meticulous patience produced the perfect article. There were few more important things in life than the proper production of a dress tie. In fact Mr. Loviebond would have divided the community into the elect who tied their own ties and the bounders who buckled on ready-mades. Moreover, to The Cedars the occasion was distinctly one of social significance. Irma had had a new frock specially created for the occasion by “Angelique.” Backs were being exposed, and Mrs. Loviebond’s spine was visible from her brassy head almost to the lumbar region. Such details were both topical and typical, for the Loviebonds now belonged to the order of Bright and Brassy People who did all that the exponents of contemporary “chic” told them to do. The Loviebonds were up-to-date. They knew just which restaurant should be patronized, and which establishment had become passé by some six months. If the Bright and Brassy World was drinking “Side-Cars” or “Pickled Passion,” the Loviebonds drank those drinks. They knew where to dance and where not to dance. The Cedars’ culture was complete.

Lord Burgage’s stockbroker and his wife were dining with Lord and Lady Burgage at the Hyde Hotel. Lord Burgage’s marriage was of recent date. It had surprised the world, and especially the Bright and Brassy World, for Lady Burgage was neither bright nor brassy.

Loviebond, getting into a white waistcoat, spoke through the open door of his dressing-room.

“Bernard gets one guessing. Babies.—I hear she’s going to have a baby. I

suppose that means——”

Irma’s brightly metallic voice replied to him.

“You’ll have to look at her tummy, Max.”

“Don’t make me blush. Do I ask the woman to dance?”

“Of course. You are not supposed to call no bid unless she’s obviously—passing.”

Loviebond scrutinized himself in the mirror.

“I feel like it to-night. Bertie’s Band is absolutely it.”

“Does his lordship perform?”

“Bernard? Well—Bernard on the boards—is not quite up to standard—but if he wants to—policy—you know.”

His wife was using lipstick.

“No tips needed, my dear. My toes are at his lordship’s service.”

“Good baby.”

The Loviebond car, a limousine driven by a chauffeur in beige-coloured livery, pulled in at the Hyde main entrance at five minutes to eight. It was Cragg who opened the door, Cragg in green and gold with a cockade in his hat.

“Good evening, sir.”

“Evening.”

Cragg handed the lady out while Loviebond spoke to his chauffeur.

“Better garage, Prince, and get some supper. Be here at 11.30 sharp.”

Cragg swung the revolving door for Mrs. Loviebond.

“Lord Burgage here yet?”

“I think not, sir.”

Loviebond strolled across the foyer. Irma had gone to the ladies’ cloak-room, and Loviebond went to deposit his opera hat and coat with the attendant. He was not expecting any such confrontation as that which awaited him. Monocle in eye, coat and hat proffered to the man in green and gold, he became rigid, shocked and statuesque.

“Good evening, sir.”

An unashamed, impersonal and unshocked Sherring waited for the hat and

coat.

“Good God!”

Loviebond’s stare was blatant.

“Good God——!”

Having so exclaimed he was voiceless. Obviously, the social subversion of Sherring was too utterly utter. A crash—almost a scandal. And Sherring, strangely amused, had to reach and relieve the gentleman of his hat and coat.

“Why—good God—Lovie?”

Loviebond wriggled his neck as though his collar was constricting it.

“Well—rather a facer, you know. Suppose I ought not to have recognized you. Not tactful of me.”

Sherring produced a ticket.

“Your number, sir. No, no disguise. Last time, you know, I was a tramp.”

Loviebond accepted the piece of paper and tucked it into a pocket of his white waistcoat. His face expressed shocked obfuscation. Well—really! What did you say on an occasion like this? Or was it best to say nothing at all? He stood and stared at a Sherring who was hanging up his hat and coat, but before he could produce more voice two other men walked into the cloak-room, and Loviebond walked out of it.

“Well—I’m damned!”

He found his wife brightly poised on a settee, and was about to tell her why he was damned when Lord and Lady Burgage entered the foyer. Loviebond’s face became bright and social, and so did that of his wife. Lord Burgage, apologizing for being late! O, not at all. It was Chislehurst that was disgracefully early. “Our chap’s a road-hog, you know.” He looked at Lady B. obliquely, and at Lady B’s figure. By Jove, the woman was almost dowdy! A matron! She had a bust! Lady B. was talking to Irma as though Mrs. Loviebond’s face was a microphone and one had to address it with distinct and kindly formalism. Loviebond offered to help Lord B. with his coat.

“I’ll take it for you, Bernard. By the way, most extraordinary coincidence. Remember Sherring?”

“Don’t bother. What about Sherring?”

“He’s the cloak-room attendant here. I walked slap up against him in there. Some shock.”

Lord Burgage looked less surprised than Loviebond would have expected.

“Is that so. I think I’ll dispose of these things myself.”

Lord Burgage walked into the cloak-room as two other men were leaving it. Sherring was busy for the moment putting hats and coats away, and Lord Burgage placed his hat and coat on the counter. When Sherring turned to face him, Lord Burgage smiled at him pleasantly as a man of large social consciousness smiles at a porter or a golf caddie.

“Look after these—will you? Thanks.”

For the moment Sherring’s face was a mask, and his eyes slits. Either Bastable had not recognized him, or the new Lord Burgage was other than Bernard Bastable and capable of understanding things that were hidden from the world of the Loviebonds.

Sherring’s smile was sudden.

“You will not need a ticket, sir.”

In the eyes of both men there was a momentary glimmer, the beginnings of a mutual comprehension.

4

The Burgages and the Loviebonds dined.

The Hyde could produce one of the best dinners in London, and for Lord Burgage its most special chef had been detailed to preside over the product. Mr. Giraldi himself came and stood at Lord Burgage’s table, and bowed to Lady Burgage, and was courteously curious to know that the occasion was in order.

“Everything as you wish, sir?”

“Everything. O, Giraldi, can you give me two minutes later on?”

“At any time you please, sir.”

“Half-past nine in the lounge.”

“I shall be there, sir.”

The tables were arranged round the yellow dance floor. At nine o’clock Bertie’s Band would persuade the diners to assist digestion and respond to the champagne by fox-trotting between the courses. Meanwhile, Mr. Loviebond exerted himself to talk to Lady Burgage, and Irma talked to Lord Burgage

without any visible effort. She conversed like a revolving lantern that flashed beams of animation rhythmically upon all and everything. Caviar and fish and entrée found her full to the lips with an increasing vivacity.

But Max laboured in low gear. It was of importance that he should be polite to the great man's wife, but Mary Bastable was not of his world. She had blue eyes, a head of fair serenity, a bosom, and a mysterious little placid smile; many men found her very easy to talk to. She had the supreme virtue of being happy with a happy self. She did not respond to the overstrain of egotism, or to obvious artifice, and Loviebond was all artifice, his tie, his shirt, his monocle stuck in a silly, sententious face.

She did not like Mr. Loviebond and she did not like Mr. Loviebond's wife. Brassy people. She was interested in other sounds and colours, a child of the "Immortal Hour," an expert pianist, a painter in water colours. Loviebond was talking like a daily paper, trying headline after headline on a public that was a little amused and a little bored. Why had Bernard asked her to meet these people? They were so very smart and trashy, poor things.

"We have got to hold on to gold, Lady Burgage."

Obviously! But did he think it necessary to flourish the gold standard in the presence of a financier's wife?

She asked him if he kept chickens.

"Chickens?"

"Yes—I like my own fresh eggs. We have them sent up from the country."

No; the Loviebonds did not keep fowls. Really—Bernard might have married his cook!

"You have a farm—I believe?"

"My Petit Trianon, Mr. Loviebond."

Now, what the devil was a Petit Trianon?

Loviebond exclaimed—"Most interesting."

He removed his monocle and polished it. The orchestra was preparing to play dance music, and Loviebond stole a glance at Lady Burgage's figure. Did the woman dance? Would he find her easier to dance with than to talk to?

He began to tell her about Sherring, and she listened. She listened attentively, critically, as though recording the conventional creakings of the Loviebond philosophy.

“Rather terrible—you know.”

She looked innocent.

“Why—terrible?”

Well—really, a gentleman behind a counter! The dreadful, shabby failure of the thing! He cleared his throat.

“I must confess that I was shocked.”

“And was—he—shocked?”

“My dear lady—one tries to consider the other fellow’s feelings. I must say—he took it very well.”

“I’m glad.”

The band began to blither, and Loviebond’s face expressed sudden relief. This was language that he understood.

“Perfectly marvellous band—this. Er—do you dance?”

“I’m afraid not.”

What—the woman didn’t dance! Then—of course—she must be enceinte.

“How original of you.”

Lady Burgage’s eyes met the eyes of her husband. They smiled at each other.

“Mrs. Loviebond—please dance with your husband.”

“O, but I’m sure Lord Burgage——”

“I’m not up to proof, Mrs. Loviebond. Now, be good children.”

The Loviebonds danced; they danced very well together, and thought so too. The yellow floor was covered with black boots and coloured shoes.

“By Jove—Irma, I was beginning to feel cold. What on earth made Bernard marry that——?”

“Yes, she’s rather a vache, dear; very middle-class.”

“I couldn’t get her to talk about anything—intelligent.”

“I think Lord B’s rather a lamb.”

“O, Bernard’s all right; just a bit pompous.”

Lord Burgage had slipped into Loviebond’s vacant chair.

“Not much head, my dear.”

His wife gave him a droll smile.

“Afraid I’m not interested, Bernard.”

Lord Burgage nodded.

“Once—will be sufficient.”

He removed the ash from his cigar.

“Do you mind if I slip away for five minutes. I want to see Giraldi about the man in the cloak-room.”

“Mr. Sherring?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, do. The musical boxes will keep on playing. You are going to be kind.”

“There are various ways of being kind. I’ve learnt a little from you about it.”

“What people want, not what you want to give them?”

“Relatively—yes.”

Mr. Giraldi was waiting in the lounge for his lordship.

“Sit down, Giraldi. I want to ask you about one of your staff, the man in the cloak-room.”

“Sherring.”

“Do you know all of them by name?”

“The names of those who are important. This case was a little unusual. Perhaps you know, sir.”

“I met the man in the war, Giraldi. How did he come here?”

“A protegé of my head-porter’s.”

“Satisfactory.”

“So far as I know—absolutely so.”

“How long has he been here?”

“A little more than a year.”

Lord Burgage returned to his table. The Loviebonds were dancing, and

Lord Burgage stood by his wife's chair.

"May I ask a certain person to dinner, Mary?"

"Mr. Sherring?"

"Yes."

She smiled at him.

"The world has labelled you autocrat, and yet——"

"I remove the label in your presence. Any particular night?"

"Any night next week."

Lord Burgage stood a moment observing the dancers. He saw the Loviebonds demonstrating Chislehurst chic, Loviebond's left hand holding his wife's right hand up in the air by two fingers in a swanlike curve. That particular pose had been portrayed by *Punch* under the heading of "See what the cat has brought home." Lord Burgage exchanged a smile and a look with his wife, and walked out into the lounge. He was thinking that Loviebond had a poor little head. Sherring happened to be alone in the cloak-room when Lord Burgage passed through it into the lavatory, and since the lavatory attendant was absent for the moment, Sherring went in to serve.

He stood holding a towel while his lordship washed, and Lord Burgage, bending slightly over the basin, was very conscious of the other man's presence.

"Is there going to be a dinner next year, Sherring?"

"I don't know, sir."

"I think there should be. You ought to take the old place."

Lord Burgage removed his hands from the basin, and Sherring handed him the towel.

"O—by the way—I want to ask you a favour. Will you come and dine with us next week?"

Sherring stood quite still.

"I haven't any dress clothes."

"Informally—in mufti—with my wife and myself—Portland Place."

"I'm afraid I'm on duty, sir."

"O, that will be all right. I'll mention it to Giraldi."

Sherring took the towel from him, and picking up the clothes brush, dusted his lordship’s collar and shoulders.

“I’d rather not meet—the Loviebonds.”

“It won’t be a Loviebond evening.”

Lord Burgage put out his hand, and Sherring accepted it. They smiled at each other. Life could be strangely humorous, and in savouring the humour of it they were reconciled.

XXII

PIGS were paying. Concentrating on his breeding of Middle Whites, and producing a steady and regular supply of 60 to 80lb. porkers, Crabtree had made sure of his market. As a producer he was able to satisfy his London buyers. They could rely on the steady flow and the quality of the product. He had bought the best boars. He allowed his gilts to mature before breeding from them. He gave his beasts plenty of grass, and a diet that was regulated to a nicety. Automatic dry-feed hoppers saved time and labour, and were both clean and efficient.

Rustic pessimism had warned him.

"Pigs don't pay. When you've got pigs to sell—there's a glut. And when the price is up—you haven't got a pig to sell."

Exactly! Haphazard methods, a casual opportunism that was at the mercy of the local butchers, no foresight, no sound staff-work. Crabtree, the lean and the indomitable, a man who could look ahead and take trouble, was prospering on pork.

"Peter Pan" had become a busy little car, much beloved by mongrel Bob. Possibly Peter Pan trundled out more often than was necessary because Bob was such a car-fan. With his hind legs on the seat, and his forepaws on the wooden ledge below the wind-screen he protruded a tongue and smiled at the world.

"Unie—I want you to have a girl."

Una consented, but the girl materialized in the shape of a woman of three and forty, a person who had passed beyond passion, if retaining her prejudices. Jane would have it that men were mucky beasts. She preferred the kitchen cat and a portable wireless set that Darrels had to accept as a sop to Cerberus. If Jane was not a complete treasure, she at least did stay put, and was not to be caught in the hay loft with one of the men. She suffered from varicose veins, and that also limited her love and her mobility. She liked to put her feet up of an evening and let the cat warm her tummy.

Peter Pan went thrice a week into Midworth where Una shopped and chose her books, while Bob took his responsibilities very seriously. He guarded the car. He showed his teeth at intruders. He was proof against all blandishment. If

he objected to anything it was to his mistress's recovered passion for reading. When she sat out in the garden when the day's work was done he would—after allowing Una some licence—come and squat on his tail and put two large hairy paws on the book.

"Come on, play with a fellow, tickle his chest. After all—life's to be lived. You let me get my teeth into one of those strange and stuffy literary products."

Una Crabtree may have agreed with the dog, but when life denies you some of its completeness—you are apt to revert to paper. She had recovered from much of her restlessness. She was helped by the help in the house, her dog, her books, her brother's smoothed out face. She would have said that wisdom begins to come to you when you recognize and accept your limitations—both physical and mental. Darrels was not Chicago. That which is beyond your scope may console you for that which is within.

She could say to herself "My dear, you are one of the women whose complexion does not matter, nor your stockings, nor your shoes. Your dog does not care a damn whether you powder your nose or not. You might even sit down and write a book on 'The Confessions of a Superfluous Woman,' but it would not be quite sincere. It would have to be edited by Bob."

She began to tease herself by assuming a comfortable resignation. She might become a member of the Horticultural Society, and go yearly to the Chelsea Show, and keep bees and a jam cupboard, and join the Midworth Literary Circle. It did not matter. She was accepting dowdiness and dates.

Her brother's letters were not many; hers practically non-existent. David opened at the breakfast table such letters as he received and usually read them without comment. Exclamations from him were rare and arrestive.

"Well—I'm damned!"

She looked at him across the table. He was excited, and pleasurably so.

"Who do you think I've heard from?"

"No idea."

"Old Sherring. He's in England. He writes from the Hyde Hotel. Must have struck oil if he's staying at The Hyde."

Was she completely conscious of the significance of that inward flush?

"Any news?"

"He wants to come down and spend a Sunday with us."

"Well—that's quite feasible. By himself?"

“He doesn’t mention anybody else. What about giving him a date, Unie?”

“Why not. Next Sunday week.”

“You could pick him up at Midworth with the car.”

“I might.”

“Well—I’ll write to him this evening.”

So, she was to see Sherring again, a strangely resurrected Sherring, just when she was proceeding to bury the bridal figure of her youth. She was fortyish and a self-confessed frump, and yet—! She found herself addressing Bob as she cleared away the breakfast things.

“Don’t be an idiot.”

Bob puzzled over the remark, his head on one side. Who was the idiot? And what was an idiot? The second did not associate itself with anything he understood.

For, the hypothetical visit of Sherring had suggested to his mistress that she needed a new frock, and more than that. Might she not get her hair waved at Midworth? And her nose was such a country nose!

“Idiot!”

She was guilty of mental flouncing. She would permit herself no hair waves, no adventurous aids to the complexion. No, most certainly not. Did these absurd feminine qualms never subside? She would go and meet Sherring as the complete dowd, with burnt nose and unadventurous hair, and in stockings that were most unprovocative. Figging up the silly sex-doll because a mere man was expected! Just like some little wench. If a man was not capable of appreciating a woman’s soul——

But did she want Sherring or any other man to appreciate her soul?

She remarked to Bob—“My dear, what humbugs we are.”

2

A manservant opened to Sherring the door of Lord Burgage’s house in Portland Place.

“Good evening, sir.”

The drollness of the situation made Sherring smile at the man as though in a community of clowns the jest should be self-evident. One lackey opening the

door to another lackey and addressing him as “sir”! Sherring himself stood to serve every day of the week, and it did occur to him on occasions that the livery he wore had impressed itself upon his essential self. Was he a gentleman in livery, or a lackey with the soul of a lackey? And what was the soul of a lackey? Did not every man wear a livery, and become the creature of his clothes?

Lord Burgage’s man did not return Sherring’s smile. His face was suave and expressionless. He took Sherring’s hat, conducted him upstairs, and opened the door of a room.

“Captain Sherring.”

It was a very pleasant room, not quite the room that a sensation-loving public would have expected to find in the house of a super-financier. It was full of books and flowers. It had an air of rich and comfortable shabbiness, and of remarkable tranquillity.

Mary Bastable put a book aside and rose from her chair. She was wearing a blue morning frock, and its colour was the colour of her eyes.

“I hope you will forgive my husband for being late, Captain Sherring. He rang up and asked me to apologize.”

Lord Burgage apologizing to a cloak-room attendant, because business detained him! Well—why not? A completely courteous world might be considered to be completely democratic, every man the inevitable aristocrat.

“Your husband is a very busy man, Lady Burgage.”

His impression of her was that of a woman who—like the perfect frock—expressed a supreme simplicity. Her naturalness was silk, and not the artificial article. He was conscious of surprise. He liked her as instantly and as whole-heartedly as she liked him.

“We all become slaves, you know, Captain Sherring. You will find cigarettes on that table.”

He offered her the box. No, she did not smoke, and he put the box back on the table. The trivial cigarette seemed superfluous here. He sat down.

“What is your particular brand—of slavery?”

She liked his whimsical touch.

“My chains hang lightly. Being somewhat publicly social when I feel otherwise.”

“Not on all occasions?”

“I should not call this a social occasion.”

He smiled at her.

“Thank you.”

They talked, and he realized her intimate kindness, her catholic and quiet courtesy. She was the sort of woman who made you feel that you were sitting in a very pleasant garden, with no mosquitoes or midges to infect you with the world’s restlessness. And Bastable had found and married her! Well, in such case Bastable could be credited with the mature wisdom of the connoisseur.

They were discussing the new London when Lord Burgage walked into the room. He apologized to Sherring for being late, and his apology was not of the board-room. His voice was a quite small and quiet voice; he had the face of a man who was tired, and to Sherring there was a strangeness in a tired Bastable. It made him more human, likeable, and surprisingly so.

Lord Burgage kissed his wife on the forehead.

“Shall we go down?—You know—in B. Mess, Sherring used to tell me off, and I deserved it.”

He smiled at Sherring, the smile of a man who had learned to make jokes at his own expense.

“We were rather a crude crowd, sir.”

“Or were we more honest?—Come, let’s go down.”

In the doorway his hand rested for a moment on Sherring’s arm.

“Man is always revaluing his possessions, or seeking a new set of values. My philosophy includes a preference for dining at home.”

Again Sherring smiled at him.

“Well—it’s understandable.”

The dinner was simple and perfect. Sherring had been offered no cocktail, and he noticed that Lord Burgage drank no wine. He allowed himself one whisky and soda a day, and Sherring too drank whisky. The room was on the small side, intimate, and furnished in the period of Queen Anne, the room of a man who liked to control his environment. On public occasions Portland Place collected its guests in a much more spacious and modern room, flood-lit and decorated much as the Hyde Hotel was decorated. Lord Burgage dined those who hoped to exploit in him in such a room. To them Queen Anne was dead.

Lord Burgage’s tiredness passed during the meal, and Sherring,

remembering the sallow, sullen second lieut., tried to analyse the sublimation. Lord Burgage was pale, and in his maturity less obese; his very skin seemed to have lost its vellum-like heaviness, and become lighter in texture. His eyes were humorous and shrewd, his voice much more subtle in its inflections. He was neither aggressive, nor an exhibitionist. He looked often and with peculiar meaning at his wife as though he drew something from her and needed it, and felt relaxed and at ease when near her.

At the end of the meal Mary Bastable left them alone together. Port was put on the table. Sherring took a glass; Lord Burgage refused it.

“Have a cigar, Sherring. Or do you smoke a pipe?”

“A cigar, please.”

Three boxes were presented to him, and he chose a Corona. It was pierced for him by the manservant, and a lighted match provided.

They were alone, and perhaps both of them were suddenly sensitive to the strangeness of the occasion. That farmhouse in Flanders, and a truculent and combative Steel, and Sherring the man in authority, and the clashing of personalities. Lord Burgage savoured the smoke from his cigar. Would he have said that success had educated him, or that he had discovered that the world was a sponge?

“Ever feel shy, Sherring?”

It was an unexpected question.

“It depends—on the people——”

“I think I am more shy of you—than you are of me.”

Were they going to argue that point, elaborate it? Sherring sat mute and then, with a sudden movement of the head, he looked at the other man’s face.

“I’m a failure, Bastable. I beg your pardon——”

“No, don’t. I like to sit in this room—and be—well—what?”

“Yourself?”

“What is myself? For—that which was myself ten years ago is not myself to-day. And you?”

Sherring sat and reflected.

“One discovers one’s limitations, one’s weak points.”

“Or the limitations of others?”

“Possibly; I’m not in a position to be hypercritical. I work by the clock.”

Lord Burgage, allowing himself to sit deeply in his armed walnut chair, was thinking how few people came to his table disinterestedly. Even while drinking his wine and smoking his cigars, and flattering him, they were proposing to make use of their host. Perhaps they needed his influence, financial or personal, or hoped for private information, or wanted to borrow money. In becoming rich, Lord Burgage had become like a dead beetle in the garden over which ants swarmed. People were quite shameless about money, but they dressed up their shame in fulsome phrases. To be rich is to discover the fewness of your friends, the multitude of your greedy acquaintances.

And here was Sherring, a failure according to the world’s standards, and yet perhaps a successful cloak-room attendant. Would Sherring be like all those others, ready to fawn upon him for what he could get? Would it not be interesting to test Sherring? But would it be fair?

He was moved to strange frankness.

“Do you know, Sherring—I should like to change places with you for a year.”

Sherring’s smile was oblique—whimsical.

“I should make a horrible mess of your affairs.”

“Perhaps—! You would find out a lot about my life. Yes, nine people out of ten are up for sale. No—I’m not speaking as a cynic. Most of the people who dine here—look on me as a person who can distribute favours. Supposing I were to suggest that you were to ask me for a favour?”

“Is it a game?”

“Let’s call it a game. What do you want?”

Sherring laughed. He appeared to reflect, as though Lord Burgage had given him a riddle to solve. And again he laughed.

“There is only one thing I can think of.”

“Well?”

“You have some influence with Mr. Giraldi.”

“A little.”

“I wonder if you could get me permission to wear trousers?”

Lord Burgage’s eyebrows went up.

“Trousers! Why—trousers? Let’s see, you wear knee breeches, don’t you?”

“Yes, and silk stockings. They necessitate pumps or light shoes. I have to do a lot of standing, and there is no substance in pumps.”

Lord Burgage removed the ash from his cigar into the saucer of his coffee cup.

“Trousers would allow you to wear boots.”

“That’s it. More support for one’s feet.”

Their eyes met, and a smile passed.

“Is that your idea of a favour, Sherring?”

“Well—yes.”

“I’ll speak to Giraldi.”

“It—really—would be a great help to me.”

3

They joined Lady Burgage in Lord Burgage’s music-room. It was fitted with an electric gramophone, a pianola, and a unique wireless set, but these mechanisms were subordinated to Mary Bastable’s hands. Her grand piano was a Bechstein, a portion of Lord Burgage’s wedding present to her. She was one of the best amateur pianists in London, and superior to any professional in that she was not professional, and interpreted as she pleased.

“Care for music, Sherring?”

“Yes; but I’m frightfully simple. I mean—I don’t understand some of the moderns.”

Lord Burgage laughed.

“Do—they? Three quarters of our so-called art is pose. My wife plays Chopin better than anyone I know.”

Lady Mary played two of Chopin’s waltzes for them, and at the end of the second Lord Burgage excused himself for a moment, and went to ring up the Hyde Hotel. He was put into communication with Mr. Giraldi. Their conversation was brief and practical.

“O—Giraldi—I have a friend dining here, your cloak-room attendant. Would it wreck the hotel if he wore trousers instead of knee-breeches?”

Mr. Giraldi sounded polite and puzzled. Why trousers? And Lord Burgage explained.

“I don’t think it will bring down our profits, Giraldi!”

“No, sir.”

“Don’t assume this to be interference.”

“You interfere so little, sir.”

“Perhaps because it isn’t necessary.”

“I’ll have the—transformation—arranged for at once.”

“Thanks, Giraldi.”

Lord Burgage returned to listen to more music. Lady Mary played them some of Johann Strauss’s waltzes, anticipating a later public passion for anything Viennese. The strangeness of the evening was rendered into music for Sherring by these sweet sounds. They made him muse sentimentally. Poor dead Mira! And how strange that he should be sitting in Bastable’s house listening to Bastable’s wife playing Viennese waltzes! Life’s humorous and whimsical surprises! They chatted for a while, but shortly after ten o’clock Sherring rose. He had not forgotten Lord Burgage’s tired face. As a matter of fact Lord Burgage went to bed at half-past ten whenever it was possible.

“I have a car waiting for you, Sherring.”

“Oh—it’s quite unnecessary, sir.”

“But the man’s there.”

“It’s very good of you.—I’ve been—happy—here.”

Lady Mary made him promise to come again, and Lord Burgage accompanied him down the stairs.

“I think we are a little less shy, Sherring.”

“Much less shy, sir.”

“How much older are we?”

“Does it matter?”

Sherring asked Lord Burgage’s chauffeur to drop him in St. James’s Square. He might have been some eminent club-man going to sleep at his club. He tipped the chauffeur, and making his way to the particular street in which he occupied one small top-floor room, he ascended to it, locked himself in, and sat down on his bed to reflect. Bastable intervening on his behalf and

petitioning the great Giraldi to allow the cloak-room lackey to wear trousers! So, Bastable had shed some illusions. Did the passion for power pall on a man, especially so when his ante-room became crowded with clients, and the world flattered him for favours? Supposing he had asked Lord Burgage for a ten-pound note, or requested him to find for his guest some comfortable sinecure? Probably Lord Burgage would have begun to feel bored with him. Yet one more little cadger suggesting to the great man how the great man could dispose of his wealth.

Sherring removed his boots, socks, and trousers, and filling the basin with cold water, sat on the edge of the bed and bathed his feet. Mr. Standfast Sherring survived by reason of his feet.

Next morning Cragg came to him in the cloak-room.

“Boss’s orders. Smith is to relieve you for an hour. You are to go and get measured for a pair of trousers.”

Obviously, Cragg was intrigued and wanting to be told how the management had been persuaded to relieve Sherring of knee breeches, stockings and pumps.

“All right, S.M. Many thanks.”

“You needn’t thank me, sir.”

“Then I won’t.”

4

On the Saturday before Sherring went down into Sussex to spend the Sunday with the Crabtrees two things happened.

Lord Burgage lunched at the Hyde, inspected Sherring’s nether garments, and had a short conversation with Cragg. About half-past two Cragg came into the cloak-room, and borrowing the cloak-room clothes-brush, passed Sherring a piece of information.

“His lordship’s just given me a tip.”

“Paper, S.M.?”

“No, not that sort of tip. Something to put my money on. Ever heard of Greyhound Racing?”

“Vaguely.”

“Seems it’s going to be a new stunt. His lordship said to me—‘Cragg, if

you want a good thing and have any spare cash lying about buy Kennington Stadium ordinary shares. They are to be had for five and a tanner. They may be worth a quid at the end of the year.' "

"Are you going to do it?"

"Am I going to do it?—When a man in the know like Lord B. gives you a cert! I'm going to buy five hundred of those shares. What's more, my lad, Lord B. says to me—'If you've got a friend, Cragg, pass it on; but not to everybody.' "

"The bucket or the baby?"

"Don't be silly, sir. His lordship isn't that sort. I call it damned decent of him. I'd have a bite if I were you. Even ten quid's worth it. It's a cert."

Sherring retrieved the cloak-room brush, and giving some attention to his new trousers, reflected upon this incident. Lord Burgage had not tipped him after lunch, but he had given Cragg that indication and had told him to pass it on. Had he intended it to be passed to Sherring? Was that the rich man's gesture to the man who had asked no more of him than his influence in the matter of a pair of trousers?

Sherring mused upon the matter all that afternoon. Later, he asked Mr. Cragg if Mr. Cragg employed a firm of brokers. That aristocrat among porters did. He offered the name and address of the firm to Sherring: Messrs. Mears & Nolan of Draper's Gardens. Sherring smiled to himself. He had decided to put a hundred pounds into Kennington Stadium ordinaries.

The second incident had its origin in the social ambitions of Highbury New Park. The Kettles possessed friends in Highbury New Park who, whenever Mr. Kettle opened a new shop or purchased a new car, became thin about the nose, and acidly genial. Mrs. Kettle had said to Mr. Kettle—"Albert—I want to show the Smithers and the Barklets—what's what. It's time they realized that we're not artificial silk. You've got to swank with some people; take the sneer off their faces."

Mr. Kettle agreed with his wife.

"Well, what's the idea?"

"We'll take the Smithers and the Barklets out to dinner."

" 'Alf a mo—waste a couple of quid on people like the Smithers and the Barklets?"

"Yes. It is time, Albert, that we taught Highbury New Park what our bank

balance is worth. Nasty, supercilious lot, some of them. And it won't cost you two pounds, my lad."

"Well—that's something."

"No, it will cost you ten. We are going to dine the Barklets and the Smithers at the Hyde Hotel. The Hyde is it.—As a matter of fact—I've asked them."

"Great Moses!"

"I've rung up the Hyde, and fixed up a table. Mrs. Smithers won't go about again saying we live on beer and cold ham and pickles. So—that's that, Albert."

Mr. Kettle grinned at her.

"Ten quid to put a little more vinegar into Ma Smithers and Ma Barklet! Well—I'm on. Smithers dines once a year at the Cosmopolitan. He's always talking about it. Let's give 'em a dose of the H-yde."

So, on that Saturday night Mr. Kettle, white waistcoated and white tied, walked into the cloak-room of the Hyde, and looking a little self-conscious, was confronted by Sherring. Mr. Kettle had his hat in his right hand, and his coat over his left arm, and a white silk scarf still round his neck. He stared; his jaw dropped; he was voiceless.

Sherring leaned over and took Mr. Kettle's hat and coat.

"Fancy you fancying—me—and The Hyde, Kettle."

Kettle had the face of the village idiot.

"Well, sir—it—is extraordinary—sir—marvellous. I 'ad 'eard you were in Canada."

"I've been in all sorts of funny places, Kettle. How's your wife?"

"Champion, sir."

"And all the little Kettles? Full steam up?"

Almost, Kettle's face suggested that he had been sweating on leave, only to hear that all leave had been stopped.

"We've been lucky, sir."

"I'm glad. Do you remember that first Armistice night, Kettle? What we said to each other?—Life's a bit of a surprise packet—I'll have your scarf—though."

Other men had entered the cloak-room. It was Sherring’s busy hour. Mr. Kettle divested himself of his white scarf, and passed it to his particular hero.

“Wish you’d come and see us at ‘ighbury New Park, sir. You’ll find us in the telephone directory.”

“I’d love to come.”

“Make a night of it, sir.”

Waiting gentlemen stared. Why was this person in full war-paint addressing a cloak-room attendant as “sir”?

XXIII

LIFE had denied Una Crabtree so many things that when it met her with a friendly gesture she was not to be conciliated. She mistrusted life's overtures; she snubbed its advances; she was so dreadfully afraid of being fooled. The casual world accepted Miss Crabtree as one of those rather aggressive women with male contours and weather-beaten faces who recover in forcefulness what they lack in looks. To the casual eye Miss Crabtree was completely without charm. She could not manage her feet or her hands; she was abrupt; she strode. She was—in fact—rather like an awkward boy who concealed a dreadful shyness behind an aggressive, blurting candour.

Sherring's Sunday.

She attended to the house, though she refused to allow herself any personal blandishments. She saw that there were flowers everywhere, and especially flowers that smelt sweet, white elder and sprays of honeysuckle, and roses. She had persuaded David to refrain from keeping pigs too near the house. After all, if one was more prosperous one could pick and choose one's perfumes. But she did not have her hair waved, or use face-powder. She appeared at breakfast in a faded yellow pullover and a brown skirt, and when breakfast was over she took Bob out into the garden and groomed him.

Sherring was to arrive at Midworth at 10.53. Her brother spent his Sunday mornings in a general tour of inspection, and at ten o'clock Una ran Peter Pan out of the old coach-house. Bob became excited, and she had to be firm with Bob. Peter Pan was a two-seater, and Captain Sherring could not be expected to nurse a dog. Firmly, but kindly, she took Bob up to her bedroom, kissed him on the nose and shut him in.

When Peter Pan was climbing Three Firs Hill she suddenly realized the beauty of the morning, for somehow her pragmatism had kept her busy and absorbed. It was one of those serene, English summer mornings, so very gentle, slightly hazed with heat, both brilliant and soft. Distant hills were tinged with blue. The oaks in Abbey Wood rose dome by dome to the skyline. In shady, moist places under the hedgerows umbelliferæ spread white lace. The hay was both standing and cut, and in one field the pale swathes untouched as yet by the rake, were giving up their scent to the sun.

She felt so very plain in so beautiful a world. Almost, it hurt her, and with

the car cresting the hill she pressed her foot firmly on Peter Pan's accelerator and made him hurry. He fussed and bumped into Midworth where the church bells were calling to the old above the noises of the new. Motor-bikes roared past people who were going to church. A large yellow dog pursuing some interesting smell had to be avoided. She conducted Peter Pan to the station approach, and parked him with his stern against a white fence. The down signal was lowered, but she remained sitting in the car; she was acting as her brother's chauffeur, and Sherring was her brother's friend.

But she got out of the car when the train steamed in, and went and stood by the doorway of the booking-office. The 10.53 deposited five passengers at Midworth, two girls, a youth, an elderly working man and Captain Sherring. It had occurred to Una that Sherring might not remember her, but their eyes met as he came through the booking-office, and his hand went to his hat.

It was the same Sherring, and instantly he had for her the same quality of whimsical sadness. She was conscious of silly, inward confusion. Her face had lit up. She did not offer to shake hands with him.

She emphasized the obvious and the casual.

"Good morning.—David delegated me to meet you."

He was looking into her eyes, and his look embarrassed her.

"It is very good of you to trouble."

She turned and walked towards the car, and he—with an air of surprise at finding a certain unexpected reaction in himself, walked beside her. A brusque and angular woman with beautiful eyes! Her neck—too—was—comely. What was it in her that piqued him—her reality, her suggestion of elemental and emotional vigour? Had he seen so much cream and sugar at The Hyde that a bramble with its passionate thorns was—somehow—more pleasing?

She flung a door open and flounced in, and put her foot on the self-starter button before her passenger had seated himself.

"Lovely morning. David always tramps round on Sunday mornings—looking for possible snags."

Sherring slipped in beside her and closed the door. His elbow touched hers.

"Sorry."

She seemed to give a toss of the head.

"Yes, a bit cramped, isn't it. We call it Peter Pan."

She got into gear, and accelerated, and whirled Peter Pan out of the station

yard. The little car's response suggested breathlessness. Really—Miss Una was treating him very roughly. "Get on with it—you little beast." He got on with it.

Sherring sat rather primly in his own particular bucket seat.

"How's old David?"

"O, very well.—Never known him ill. Plenty of hard work."

"More work than worry?"

"Less worry than there was. How do you find England?"

"Find it?"

"Yes."

"Well—I never lost it."

"But you've been abroad?"

"No."

"We thought you had."

"Sorry—I haven't fulfilled expectations."

She took her eyes off the road for a moment, and finding him looking at her in a peculiar way, she resumed control of the road. Peter Pan had digressed towards a grass verge. Had she surprised a smile in Sherring's eyes, a curious kind of smile, as though something in her both amused and attracted him? Attraction? What rot! She was annoyed.

She said—"No one fulfils expectations. Things play tricks, cars—and books."

Peter, coerced at full pressure up a steepish hill, seemed to scream in his shrill small tummy.

"Does Peter play tricks?"

"When he dares."

"But not often. Yet—I'm sure you are kind to Peter."

Was he being facetious? She changed gear rather badly, and frowned.

"Well, he has to put up with one's moods. That was a rotten change."

"Some of life's small change.—But isn't England lovely to-day? Those woods!"

She had to allow the woods their beauty.

“Oaks, yes. I think I prefer beeches. Those Scotch firs, there.”

“Sunning themselves.—I wonder why the devil one lives in cities. Smoke-stacks instead of trees.”

“Is it silly?”

“Surely.”

They reached the mouth of the lane. She slowed Peter Pan up and swung him into the green tunnel and into a fretwork of light and shadow. In turning the wheel her elbow touched Sherring.

“Sorry.”

He smiled at her, and saw a patch of sunlight momentary upon her face.

“Yes; one’s more near things in the country, green things instead of brick.”

Crabtree was waiting for them at the end of the lane, all brown as to clothes, face and hands. Seen at a little distance he suggested one of those figures in a modernist poster, a patch of light on one-half of a red-brown forehead, a streak of white for the teeth and the smile. He was as mixed as most of us are. He was glad to see old Sherring, very glad, and he wanted old Sherring to see what a fine thing he had made of the farm. Yes, success, and your friend’s realization of your success.

He had Sherring by the hand before Sherring was out of the car.

“You old devil—where have you been all these years?”

“Nowhere.”

“How do you mean—nowhere?”

“Just nowhere. Knocking around.”

It was Una who understood that Sherring might be a little shy of too many questions, and especially so in front of a woman.

“Dave, you can put the car away.”

“Can I!—Thanks.”

But he put the car away in the coach-house, and Sherring remained with his sister who strode decisively into the garden and towards three chairs that had been placed on the grass under one of the apple trees. The grass had been mown late on the Saturday with no box on the machine, and the sun had dried the cut grass and made it fragrant. She indicated to Sherring the particular

deck-chair in which he was to sit.

“No, that one; the other two are a bit shaky.”

He looked at her whimsically.

“Am I to leave—you—one of the shaky ones?”

“Oh—I know its tricks. I’m going to get some milk and cake. Can you manage elevens?”

“Sussex milk?”

“Yes; our own cow and our own cake.”

Sherring sat down.

“I should think so.”

She reappeared with a tray just as her brother joined them, and pouring the milk from an old blue and white jug into the glasses she handed the milk to the men. Sherring smiled up at her, but her eyes were fixed upon the tray. He took a slice of plum cake from a plate.

“Home made, old man.”

“Real cake. You ought to get fat, Crabbie.”

“I never shall. Have you ever seen a fat farmer? Besides,—you’re not particularly—obese.”

“My job doesn’t run to it.”

“What’s your job, old man, these days?”

There was a pause. Una was placing the tray on the grass. Then she heard Sherring’s voice answer that question, quietly and deliberately.

“My job? Oh—I’m cloak-room attendant at the Hyde Hotel. I get two Sundays off every month, and this is one of them.”

2

If the beauty of the day had begun for her with a suspicion of irony, the irony did not survive full noon. She admired Sherring for the way he had answered that question, and she admired him freely and full-heartedly. Her brother’s silence had shown like a gap in a hedge, and Sherring had walked through it, and with an air of pure naturalness had proceeded to describe to them the day of a cloak-room attendant.

“It’s really quite humorous, old man. I receive all sorts of celebrities, and old friends. Loviebond blew in one night. Lord Burgage is one of my patrons. You should have seen Loviebond’s face when he saw me.”

Crabtree was filling his pipe.

“Damned snob—old Lovie.”

Una had forgotten the Loviebonds. If she had felt that her secret self had to be defended against Sherring, she threw that shield aside. This man was real. He had the kind of courage that appeased her.

“Who do you think I had last night, Crabbie?”

“The Prince?”

“Guess again.”

“Charlie Chaplin?”

“Try again.”

“Get on with it.”

“Old Kettle.”

“Dining at the Hyde?”

“Very much so—top hat, white waistcoat and tails. Poor old Kettle. He was quite upset. I begin to feel quite guilty, Crabbie. I seem to have let the Seven Club down rather badly.—I’m the one and only failure.”

Crabtree squinted down the stem of his pipe.

“Shouldn’t say that, old man.”

His sister said nothing at all; but, remembering that Bob was still shut up in her bedroom, she went and released the dog, and brought him down.

“Captain Sherring—this is Bob.”

Sherring and Bob were instantly friends. Bob got in a complete kiss on Sherring’s chin, and Sherring laughed.

“That’s the beauty of dogs. No cash on delivery about dogs. You are an emperor to your dog. They don’t care whether you sell tooth-brushes by the million or poach rabbits. I suppose they would prefer the poacher.”

Una called Bob to her and kissed his head. She was thinking that she felt as Bob did about things, especially about her brother’s friend. If he was a failure, which she denied, life had cleansed him of affectation. He was so real, so very

real to her, even more real than the dear, rustic realist, her brother.

She said—“I often think I should like to be a tramp.”

She met Sherring’s eyes. How was it that he looked at her as no other man had looked at her.

“I tried it for six months, Miss Crabtree.”

“Don’t call her Miss Crabtree, old man.”

“And how did you like it?”

She had read Maxim Gorky, and had not been fooled by his deification of the lousy blackguard. Nor had she ever had any fancy for the scum in red ties.

“I didn’t like it, Una.”

Inwardly she coloured.

“Why—not?”

“A tramp is supposed to be free. Well—his freedom is from all the—decencies—that we—— O, yes—I know decent is supposed to be a horribly English word.—Well—I like to shave and to wash, and to have a clean shirt to put on. Primitive pigging in a ditch may be fashionable Muscovite—but I think I would rather have my scoundrels sleek.”

“Even—Bastable” said Crabtree.

Very gently Sherring corrected him.

“Lord Burgage isn’t Bastable, old man. We put up a figure and make a cockshy of it. Prejudice. Lord Burgage is really big because he has been so consistently inconsistent. He’s turned himself inside out and outside in.”

Crabtree did not quite grasp the subtlety of the thing, but his sister did.

“Napoleon the Jacobin, and Napoleon the—creator.”

“Exactly. And Napoleon the poor little man with aching death in his—interior. We lump things together so much, don’t you think so, Una? Life isn’t a box of tin soldiers.”

She smiled at him.

“No—life flows.”

Before dinner—Darrels dined at one—Crabtree took Sherring over the farm, but he did not display it as he would have displayed it to an acquaintance whom he wished to impress. Poor old Sherring! Rather beastly to swank about

success to a man who looked after a cloak-room. So Crabtree treated the farm as nature and not property. They strolled across fields and through woods, and Sherring was shown what Crabtree called his Quartermaster's Store. It was a cement floored building in the yard in which Crabtree stored, weighed and issued his feed. He had worked out a thoroughly practical method by which raised and rat-proof bins delivered the various feeds into receptacles.

"I know just how much I am issuing, and where it goes. Each week I check the bulk of the feed that has been issued. Yes; I always do the issuing myself."

"Just to be sure?"

"Well, you know, Skipper—there are jolly few people to be trusted. It isn't always crookedness. Didn't we divide a unit into the first, second, and third raters, in ratios of about 33 per cent. The first rater could be trusted; the second had to be watched, the third—coerced. First raters are precious. One has to keep an eye on things, meal, petrol, eggs. No—I'm not suspicious by nature—but the boss is fair game to most of these chaps."

"What do they call it—scrounging?"

"Getting level with the employer, old man. I tell you one thing—I'd go big, expand this show—if I had a partner; but one only has a certain amount of time and energy. Men can't be left unwatched. I've only had two chaps who were absolutely straight, and one left me to run a little place of his own."

Duck and green peas and gooseberry tart and custard for dinner. Also—beer. And Sherring noticed that Una Crabtree had changed into a summer frock; also, she appeared to have done something to her hair. Sherring had two helpings of gooseberry tart and a second glass of beer, and then Crabtree asked him that question.

"What would you like to do after dinner, Sherring?"

Sherring looked mischievous.

"What I can't do—on other days. But I'm afraid Una would think me—casual."

Her glance at Sherring was oblique.

"You'd like to go to sleep."

"That's real understanding."

"A deck chair and a cushion in the shade. I do it myself."

"May I? It's a real holiday to sit when you've been standing all the week. You don't want me to go for a route march, do you, David?"

“No, have a nap, old man. What about tea in the garden, Unie?”

“Jane’s going out—but I can manage.”

Sherring went to sleep under the shade of an apple tree, and he was still sleeping when Una carried out the three-legged oak table, and spread a cloth on it. Bob was at her heels, and Bob displayed a desire to go and sniff at the sleeper’s legs. Very softly she called him off, and her glance at Sherring was compassionate. Poor lad, he did not enjoy many such days as this. He had to stand in a veneered and marbled tank, and receive and issue hats and coats.

“Bob, come here.”

But Sherring had slept his fill. He woke while she was walking back to the white porch. He sat up, and saw the table and her retreating figure. He sprang up.

“Una—can I help?”

She turned, and the sunlight was in her eyes.

“Hallo. Slept well? It’s four o’clock. Yes, if you want to help.”

He walked towards her over the grass.

“I’d love to.”

3

Sherring was to catch the 8.49 from Midworth, and after supper Una drove him to the station. There was a freshness in the air and he held his hat on his knees like a basin, and in it reposed a bunch of roses. Like the city man’s catholic day in the country, it returned to the city crowned with flowers.

He said—“You have been awfully kind to me, you two.”

Her eyes were on the road.

“We haven’t found it very hard.”

Strange how one summer day had softened the rather haggard squareness of chin and forehead. She too was bareheaded and her hair had become live and vibrant. This man liked her, which was most strange. He had sat for an hour talking to her after tea; he had gone round the garden with her when she had cut those roses, and she had known—as a woman knows—that he had found it good to be with her.

“You must come down again.”

“May I?”

“If you want to.”

“O, yes—I want to. Do you ever come up to town?”

“Hardly ever.”

“I can get an afternoon off. We could do a matinée. Will you come?”

She was suddenly and most strangely shy of him. Some of her hypersensitive and harsh contrariness returned. He was being polite to his friend’s sister.

“O, you don’t want to be bothered with women.”

He looked at her curiously.

“That’s perfectly true, and that’s why I want you to come.”

Almost, she held her breath. What did he mean? Was she just a good sort, half man, half woman, a social hermaphrodite who could be described as safe?

“If you can put up with a dear old frump——”

He seemed to flinch. Surely he had not given her the impression that he was out to return favour for favour?

“I don’t know the lady. I want you to come, Una.”

She dared to look at him.

“Why?”

“Because I do.”

Her foot went down on Peter Pan’s accelerator.

“All right—I’ll come.”

Her voice sounded almost off-hand and ungracious. She might have been a wild briar set with thorns, a creature of sensitive and passionate integrity.

“I’m not a bit smart, you know.”

He said—“Aren’t you?—Well, thank God—anyway. Can’t you be satisfied with my wanting you to come?”

She gave a little, self-conscious laugh.

“It sounds quite a good reason.”

At Midworth Station she did not get out of the car. She might have wished to convey the impression that she had done her duty by her brother’s friend,

and brought a social occasion to a correct conclusion. Sherring had taken the roses out of his hat, but he remained bareheaded. He stood on her side of the car, and rather close to it.

“Well—I’m taking a bit of you back, anyway. No one has ever presented me with roses.”

She said—“It’s the proper thing to do—when someone comes down from town.”

“Just—proper. Well—I’m coming down again. Good night, Una. Hallo—there’s the train.”

He was still bareheaded when he turned in the booking-office doorway, and waved the roses at her, and for a moment she sat quite still in Peter Pan, her hand on the gear-lever, her eyes on the doorway through which Sherring had passed. Peter Pan’s engine was running, making a kind of ruminant murmur. The gear-lever was pulled over, the brake released; the little engine emitted a kind of shrill wail.

But she drove home slowly. She wanted to feel the freshness of the earth, to smell the hay, to be touched by a beauty that hurt. Oh, exquisite pain! The slanting gold, and the green glooms, white elder flower, purple foxgloves. But how ridiculous! The summer heat had got into her blood. Had he looked at her with eyes of desire? It wasn’t credible. She had seen him through a shimmer of illusion, and her squareness could fall into no sensuous curves. A sexless creature! She—sexless? Was there any other woman in the world who could give more richness in her nourishment to a man like Sherring? Give? Both give and understand.

She put Peter Pan away and closed the white coach-house doors. She tried to close the secret doors of her self.

“Don’t be an idiot.”

Bob came bounding to her, and she held his head between her hands and kissed him. O, desire—the dear—beloved head! For her, surely, it could be no more than the head of a dog?

Her brother was at the gate, smoking a last pipe. He opened the gate for her.

“Poor old Sherring.”

Something flared in her.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, rather pathetic—failure. Though—he’s very plucky about it.”

She controlled herself. It would be dreadful if she betrayed her secret.

“I think he is rather less of a failure—than some of you men. He can smile in the face of the thing you call failure, Dave.”

Her brother took three pulls at his pipe.

“That’s true. We men are awful snobs about success. There’s a sort of dignity about old Sherring. He always was like that. Even if he was in rags he would make a chap like Loviebond look a flashy cad.”

She bent her head.

“Yes.”

Passing her brother she walked to the white porch, and her face was raised to the sky. It had a beauty, a beauty of which she was unconscious, but Sherring had seen that beauty. He had revealed it, but that he did not know. Nor is there any beauty quite like that of a plain woman when she looks upon the thing that is beloved.

She murmured a few words to herself.

“O, my dear, my dear, a failure—you!”

XXIV

About this time quite a number of people appeared eager to assist “Poor Sherring”—Lord Burgage, Lady Burgage, Mr. Kettle of Highbury New Park, Mr. David Crabtree of Sussex, but Sherring displayed a gentle obstinacy. It was very kind of them, but he was quite all right, thank you. If they did not mind he would rather stand on his own feet, though they creaked and complained on occasions. An order had passed from Mr. Giraldi through Cragg permitting Sherring to sit whenever it was possible for him to sit. Sherring was grateful, but he did not stand to receive favours.

For some five years Lord Burgage’s unofficial affairs had been conducted by a private secretary named Miss Himmel. Miss Himmel was a lady of considerable tact, and in dealing with Lord Burgage’s mob of correspondents she had been constrained to separate them into three simple categories.

A. Nice fools.

B. Nasty fools.

C. Professional foolers.

Miss Himmel had grown very dexterous in relegating Classes B and C to the waste-paper basket. Class A was sifted and reconsidered; references were asked for, inquiries made, but no case was placed before Lord Burgage before it had been completely censored. No doubt Miss Himmel would have placed Sherring in Category A had he petitioned the great man’s favour, but Miss Himmel was leaving to be married, and to Lord Burgage the lapse was pardonable, but of importance. Miss Himmel had been a subtle defender of his private door, no gorgon, but a charming little person with a smile of seductive simplicity, a secretarial asp curled up in a basket of fruit. The predatory people and the ingenious spongers had found themselves unexpectedly stung by Miss Himmel.

Moreover, Lord Burgage was going abroad for six months. Lord Burgage was one of three financial experts who had been invited to advise a Foreign Power upon the rehabilitation of its finances. The Foreign Power’s credit had been gravely compromised; it desired greatly and urgently a loan from some Friendly State, but the world was sceptical. The prospective borrower had been told to import some impartial and ruthless strong man and allow him to suggest economies and readjustments, and not only to listen but to obey. Lord Burgage

had collected a small staff of expert assistants. Sir George Garside, the eminent accountant, was accompanying him, but Lord Burgage needed a confidential secretary to replace Miss Himmel. He offered the post to Sherring.

Sherring might not be able to write shorthand, and be no great performer on a typewriter, but in Lord Burgage's opinion Sherring possessed qualities that outweighed these disadvantages. He knew something of the shabby world; he possessed integrity. He belonged to the shabby world, and yet he had shown no disposition to sponge. To Lord Burgage such a quality appeared somewhat unique. Moreover, Sherring was a gentleman with a sense of humour.

Sherring refused Lord Burgage's offer.

"It is very good of you, sir, but I have private reasons."

"Not—prejudices, Sherring?"

"No, not prejudices. Something quite personal—that only concerns—me ——"

"I'm sorry. I should like to have had you with me."

Lord Burgage left it at that. He was not offended. He had come to regard Sherring as a somewhat unusual person, a man whose particular reservations were to be respected. Lord Burgage, who had become bored with the clamour of his crowd of suppliants—and the cry of "Yea, o—Lord, we hasten to lick your boots," rather preferred a man who could say no, and gave no reasons for saying it. Possibly Sherring had private commitments and secret prides, and that was Sherring's affair. Lord Burgage had no wish to ask Sherring to take down his trousers. The world in general was only too ready to take down its trousers.

Lord and Lady Burgage sailed for abroad, and Sherring remained the man of hats and coats. He was enjoying an unexpected renaissance among those hats and coats. He was a lackey evolving a philosophy that was not that of a lackey. He was not going to be anybody's pet monkey. No, sir! It was even possible to perfect your pride in performing the duties of a cloak-room attendant.

But about this time he changed his attic in clubland for a minute flat in Savage Street. Savage Street belied its name, and Sherring's flat was at the top of the big building that was occupied by workers of all descriptions. Sherring had some sixty stone steps to climb, but there were only two other tenements on his landing, one occupied by a police constable and his wife, the other by a draper's packer; and neither couple had children. At the top of those sixty stone steps Sherring found comparative peace. He had one small sitting-room,

one small bedroom, and a kitchen high above the itinerant fruit stalls and turmoil of Savage Street. His neighbours were quiet people, and Benskin's Buildings had been built by a man who had possessed a sense of responsibility towards his fellow men and an inadequate feeling for profit. Mr. Benskin had been a Quaker. Sherring enjoyed furnishing his small flat. He bought one or two small pieces of old oak, a few bright rugs, an armchair and a sofa. His bedroom was somewhat austere, his kitchen an improvisation, for he took most of his meals at The Hyde. He even indulged in a window-box, though the watering of his petunias and lobelia had to be done with care, or pedestrians in Savage Street suffered.

2

They sat on two green chairs in St. James's Park.

He had taken her to see "Bitter Sweet," and given her tea at the Scotch Tea Rooms. In his letter he had said to her—

> "I get my half-day next Wednesday, and I believe Wednesday is the countrywoman's day. Cheap tickets and much shopping.—I can get tickets for 'Bitter Sweet'—if the thing appeals to you. If you will meet me in the foyer of His Majesty's—I shall be happy."

She had said both yea and nay to herself for a day, for in his letter she thought she had detected a casual note. Was he returning favour for favour? Her diffidence matched his, nor did she divine in him the fear of a man who was afraid to be too much in earnest. She had even consulted her brother.

"Captain Sherring wants me to go to the theatre with him."

There was no yea or nay about David.

"You'll enjoy it."

"Do you think I ought to go?"

"Why—not?"

His blue eyes had reassured her. He was just the person who was needed when your self-consciousness wavered. She had prevaricated.

"Well—the expense. I feel I oughtn't——"

"I don't suppose that's worrying old Sherring."

She had put on a black frock that had been made for her in Midworth. Had

she read somewhere, or had her own secret sense assured her that a plain woman looked less conspicuously plain in black? She had lunched at a tea-shop and caught glimpses of herself in a tea-shop mirror, rather a beastly mirror. It had made her hat look lop-sided. She had walked to the theatre feeling out of humour with herself and her hat. Why had she come? She might be vibrant with some secret, foolish thrill, but she could supply no thrill. She had sneered at herself.

He had been waiting for her just inside one of the doors. She had seen his face light up.

“Una—awfully good of you to come.”

She had felt herself gazing at him like a very shy girl, confused, conscious of the strange reality, yet almost mistrusting it. He had looked at her as she had never hoped to be looked at.

“I’ve got stalls.”

So she and the occasion had been worth stalls!

On this green seat she sat with her hands in her lap, watching the water and water-fowl and listening to him. He was telling her about Lord Burgage’s offer of a secretaryship and how he had refused it. The great man had desired to be kind, but there were moments in one’s life when one did not ask for kindness or for that sort of kindness. Did she understand that? She understood it only too well. The world was so ready either to patronize or to ignore.

“One has to fight to be one’s self.”

“Then you don’t think I was an ass?”

“I would rather you were an ass than the shadow of an ass.”

He laughed.

“I hope you are not referring to Lord B! It is usual to say that success brutalizes a man, but in his case it seems to have developed the sahib. So, my prerogative, Una, is to insist on myself as a cloak-room attendant.”

She met his eyes for a moment. He was leaning forward on the chair and looking up and round at her with whimsical and shy seriousness.

“But I’m doing all the talking. Let’s talk about you, Una.”

Actually, she blushed.

“Oh—I’m not particularly—interesting.”

“It’s no use your telling me that.”

She sat watching a very fat pigeon walking past them with an eye cocked for possible favours. Bitter Sweet! She was full to the lips with the sentimental seductions of the play. She knew that she too would have thrown reason to the winds and gone off with her penniless musician. If a woman is worth while she is capable of being supremely and exquisitely foolish. Moreover, what would life be without such foolishness? Cold mutton and boiled potatoes.

“I’ve always been—rather—inarticulate.”

“A little mysterious.”

Mysterious? She—mysterious! O, blessed magic! She did not know how his concept transfigured her in the flesh.

“Well, one can’t discuss a mystery.”

“No, one accepts it.—Weren’t you in the war, Una?”

“Yes—I nursed.”

“I wish you had nursed me. I might not have made such a mess of things.”

She sat motionless.

“My dear, you haven’t.”

“O, yes—I have.—My old pater used to say—“Have nothing to do with unlucky people—failures.”

“You’re not a failure, Sherry.”

“Perhaps—not—completely so—yet.”

“I’m not afraid of failure.”

“But I am, my dear, and for other reasons. Think that over from my point of view.—I say, it’s a quarter-past six, and that train of yours——”

As he stood up an attendant appeared to claim the coppers for their chairs. Sherring found fourpence and smiled at the man.

“No, we were not going to welsh you.”

He took the two tickets and as they moved away he showed them to Una, and then slipped them into a waistcoat pocket.

“Going to keep them—for luck.—Worth it, too. Fourpence—for talking to you.—Do you ever do silly things?”

Her eyes were his.

“I could do.”

“Like the girl in the piece?”

“O, yes,—if——”

“But ought the fellow to have——?—Well—I don’t think so.—But that music does stay with one.”

She wanted to tell him—— But how could she tell him? say—“Sherry—if you blacked boots—I shouldn’t care.” It would be like admitting that he was a failure, and with a kind of pathetic gaiety he was confronting his failure. She walked beside him to the gate leading into Birdcage Walk. They had to pause to let a car and two taxis pass.

She said—“Sherry—I shall always understand.”

He laid a hand gently on her arm.

“Now.—Yes—I believe you would, Una.—One’s so dreadfully afraid of exploiting people, especially certain people.”

She crossed the road with him walking with an air of strange pride.

“You need never be afraid.”

At the station he said to her—“May I come down on my next free Sunday?—It won’t bore David, will it?”

“Nothing bores David. Besides——”

“Well—I may come? I want to.”

He looked steadfastly, but with a suggestion of shyness into a face that was transfigured.

“Of course—Sherry. I want you to come.”

3

Sherring walked back through St. James’s Park, and in the park he sat down again on a green chair close to where he and Una had been sitting. He remembered with a smile that one of those tickets was still valid, but his sitting there was both an act of spirit and a condescension to the flesh. He was tired; his legs ached. Most unromantically he had begun to be troubled with varicose veins; so much standing about; he had a hard blue knot in his right calf. O, damn the body! It was always producing some miserable little grievance of its own. Were elastic bandages any good?—He might consult a doctor about it.

But what a day they had had, he—and Una! The mysterious Una. There

was something in her eyes that made him think of a strange dusk with bits of sunlight shining through. She was so different—— She seemed to understand things. She made him feel less of a sorry failure.

If a man could call a woman like that—comrade?

Yes, and more than comrade.

But—how impossible—unless—— A cloak-room attendant! How could he go to old Crabtree and say “Crabbie, I want to marry your sister.” No, something would have to be done about it. If you were in love with a woman, and disinterestedly so——? But was love disinterested?

O, damn it—he could not suggest to Una that she should come and live in Benskin’s Buildings.

Besides, Una might not care sufficiently.

He took out those two twopenny tickets and smiled at them.

XXV

SHERRING looked up Dr. Penrose Pitt's name in the telephone directory. Penrose Pitt's address in St. John's Wood had not changed and Sherring rang up Penrose Pitt at an hour when the doctor might be expected to be at home.

"Can I speak to Dr. Pitt?"

"What name, please?"

"Sherring."

Pitt was dining out and in the act of producing a bow tie when his man came to tell him that someone was waiting to speak to him on the telephone. Pitt's man had bungled the name. He rendered it to the doctor as Sherwin, and Pitt knew no one of the name of Sherwin.

"Where's he speaking from, Thompson?"

"The Hyde Hotel, sir."

"Say I'm engaged, and take the message."

Pitt was buttoning up a white waistcoat over an abdomen that was insisting upon a prosperous maturity when Thompson returned to say that the gentleman was desirous of speaking to the doctor in person. Pitt grunted, gave a tug to his waistcoat, and hurried downstairs into the hall. There were occasions when he damned the telephone and longed to disconnect it. Also, he had come to regard the waste-paper basket as one of civilization's principal contributions to man's comfort. He picked up the receiver, and with feet well apart and head thrust forward, adjusted his attitude characteristically to some possible assault.

"Hallo—who's that?"

"That you, doc?"

"Pitt speaking."

"This is—Sherring."

"Sherring!"

"Yes."

Pitt's stout figure fell into an easier pose.

“Well—I’m damned!—Where have you been—all these years?”

“Knocking about.”

“Speaking from The Hyde?”

“Yes. Could you give me an appointment, old man?”

“Of course. To-morrow.”

“Could you make it between five and six? I can get off then for an hour. I’m the cloak-room attendant here.”

“The—what?”

“Cloak-room attendant.”

Pitt appeared to stare hard at the machine as though he suspected it of playing tricks on him.

“All right, old man. Say five-fifteen to-morrow. Got to go out and dine. Expect you to-morrow. Nothing serious, is it?”

“No. Varicose veins. Thought you might be able to do something about it.”

“Right. Come along to-morrow.”

Penrose Pitt’s attitude to life had become that of an intelligent and kindly materialist. The mystery of matter was symbolized for him by the mysterious secretions of the endocrine glands. The human body was a marvellous aggregation of cells and relationships, and so many of his patients spent their lives in upsetting the balance of Nature, and in rushing to him to have it restored. He gave them advice, he spent his life in giving advice, and in combating in himself an incipient adiposity.

When Sherring was shown into his consulting room Pitt looked at him with the eyes of a doctor and a friend. It was the same Sherring, and yet a different Sherring, a man going grey at the temples, a finely-drawn, fragile creature whose very smile suggested a wincing consciousness of secret strain. Pitt had always insisted upon an impersonal and dispassionate attitude towards his patients, but it was difficult to feel impersonal towards this shadow of the old Sherring.

“Sit down, old man.”

They looked at each other with eyes of affection, but for the first minute each was conscious of a certain constraint. Pitt knew—or felt—that he had to be careful of the man as well as of the patient, and Sherring was conscious of this carefulness.

“Well—what’s the trouble? Veins?”

Sherring smiled at him.

“What you’d call an occupational disability, doc.”

Pitt’s smile was a little broader than Sherring’s.

“One did not bother about long words—in the old days. Show me. No—trousers off.”

Sherring, preparing himself for the inspection, became explanatory.

“You see—I have to do a lot of standing, loafing about. They let me sit as much as possible.—But I think it’s the lack of exercise.”

“How many hours a day?”

“O, roughly—twelve.—I get relieved—of course——”

“Face the light, will you, Sherring. H’m—yes, that right leg. Feet bother you?”

“Yes, a good deal.”

“Slight flat-footedness—too.”

He ran his deft, spatulate fingers up Sherring’s legs and thighs, and frowned, and while he continued his examination he asked questions. Sherring, answering those questions, made his confession more humanly complete.

“You see, doc, it’s silly to be put out by a fool thing like this. I’ve made rather a mess of life, but as jobs go—this isn’t a bad one. Besides, if you understand me, having made a mess of most things, a fellow can be quite keen on making a success even of—peeling potatoes. I’m not squealing.”

Pitt’s fingers were resting on a knot of veins.

“You never were a squealer, old man. Just lie down on that couch, will you.”

Penrose Pitt’s brain was as active as his eyes and fingers. He was thinking that modern life produces so many disharmonies which appear to be inherent in the very texture of the social scheme, knots and tangles like these veins of Sherring’s. Man was expected to walk and run and leap, not to stand about like a wooden dummy. Sherring was not built to be a sort of lay figure. He had been created to move swiftly out in the open air.

“How old are you, Sherring?”

“Forty-five.”

“Young enough to try something else.”

Sherring, lying on the couch, smiled up whimsically into the other man’s face.

“I thought you’d say that.”

“Well—I’m going to be honest.”

“And tell me to chuck the one job that I seem to be fitted for. Old man, if a fellow’s a failure—and if his damned legs can’t stand up to the one thing he can do——”

Pitt sat down on a chair beside the couch.

“Let’s discuss—possibilities.”

“The thing is—what can you do for me, doc? Can you do anything?”

“Certainly.”

He proceeded to explain to Sherring what could be done. In some cases the new injection process was tried; in other cases operative interference was indicated.

“That means I should be out of action for a while?”

“Yes.”

“How long?”

“Perhaps a month. But surely the Hyde would allow you a month?”

Sherring lay and stared at the ceiling.

“I’m not worrying about the six months hence, old man. I’m thinking of next year, the afterwards.—If I try to stick this job—will the trouble recur?”

Pitt was silent a moment. Then he spoke slowly and kindly.

“Look here—Sherry, one has to do the best one can, and prophesy as best one can. I don’t like the look of those veins. They have been getting worse rather rapidly, haven’t they?”

“As a matter of fact, they have.”

“Well, let’s get down to bedrock. How long have you had this job?”

“Nearly two years.”

“Any veins—when you started it?”

“Nothing to speak of.”

“Just what I thought. Now, supposing we gave you injections, or operated on you, we should be dealing with a result and not attacking the cause. You would be better for a while—but I’m pretty sure the trouble would recur. There is all the difference in the world between active work—and passive tiredness. The inference is obvious, isn’t it? Yes, you can dress.”

Sherring rose to a sitting position on the couch.

“But it’s too damned silly to have to humour a few veins in one’s legs. If it had been my heart or my lungs——”

“Be grateful that it isn’t.”

“I’m not so sure, old man. I think I’ll get you to do what you can, and carry on.”

“Why not consider an alternative?”

Sherring pulled on his trousers.

“There isn’t one.—But what sort of alternative?”

“Something out in the open air—something more active. I don’t think you’re made for sitting or standing.”

Sherring smiled at him.

“I’m not worth anything in the open-air market. I have been seeing something of old Crabtree, but supposing I went to him and said—‘Crabbie, find me a job on the farm’—I should feel rather an ass, shouldn’t I, and a useless ass.”

“Not necessarily.”

“O, yes, old man, you are trying to be kind. Try something radical on me. What will it be, hospital?”

“It’s a surgeon’s job, and surgeons——”

“Cost money.—I have some money. But could you get me into a hospital?”

“Yes.”

“And what’s your fee, doc?”

“Nothing.”

“O, look here—Pitt, old man—I won’t stand for this. I can afford to pay, and I’m going to pay. If you don’t take a fee I shall clear out and go elsewhere. I don’t want to go elsewhere.”

Pitt looked hard at him and nodded.

“All right—seven and sixpence.”

Sherring produced three half-crowns and laid them on the desk.

“Thanks, old man.—I appreciate it. What happens next? I wait till you can get me a bed?”

“Yes.—I think I can manage that fairly soon.—But, one moment; I should like you to have a month’s rest after the op. Anywhere you could go?”

“O, well—to the seaside.”

“Why not go down to Crabtree’s?”

“Can’t be done, doc. Private reasons. Well, go ahead with the show. I will speak to our manager.”

“By the way—it’s Giraldi, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“He’s a patient of mine. I’ll see him about it, if you like.”

“Not a bad idea, old man. Tell him I want to keep the job.”

“Yes—I’ll tell him that.”

2

On that Sunday early in September, three days before he was to be admitted into St. Martha’s Hospital, Sherring went down into Sussex. The day was September in its most English mood, golden, serene and still, and as Sherring sat in a third-class corner seat and looked at England he was moved to wonder at city life. To most people life was like fruit sealed up in a cannery, tinned apricots, bottled sunshine. And yet, what was the alternative? What was his alternative? In an economic world it did not exist. He was a canned man sealed up in a cloak-room, pickled in the juice of his own mediocrity. Each day he went through a series of prescribed movements, smiled the cloak-room smile, produced formal sounds—“Good morning, sir”—or “Good evening, sir.” There was no escape. Even those silly legs of his were incapable of running away.

O, well, he supposed that he would stick in his trench until his particular shell came over, or Fate drove him out of the trench. And what of the counter-attack? Would a counter-attack recover the lost ground?

As the train drew up in Midworth station he saw through the white palings the blue stern of Peter Pan. Una had come to meet him. He was feeling shy of Una. Woman might mean too much or too little. He was not going to tell her about his hospital holiday. Why should he tell her, whimper to a woman about his legs, when beautiful and impossible words would remain unuttered?

He walked out of the station. She was waiting for him in the car. She was wearing a flowery cretonne frock, and somehow she seemed part of the sunlight. He thought that he had never seen her look quite like this. What was the word? Yes, that same word—mysterious.

He stood for a moment beside the car, with his hat in his hand. He wanted to say certain things to her, tender, teasing things, and he was mute.

“Well, how’s Peter?”

Her shyness matched his.

“He’s been behaving rather badly.”

“Is it possible?”

“I’m afraid he will have to go into hospital next week.”

He joined her in the car. Almost, he was tempted to tell her that he too was going into hospital. He and the car were a pair of crocks, but less was expected of a car than of a man.

“How’s old David?”

“Just as usual.”

She could not help comparing her brown brother with Sherring’s bleached surface, David’s great fist with the hand that rested on the crown of Sherring’s hat. She saw all that Penrose Pitt had seen, the grey temples, the waxy skin, the suggestion of secret strain. All day and every day he was shut up in a glorified hutch, a sensitive and restless creature fastened to the end of a chain.

“Sherry—you don’t look quite fit.”

“Oh—I’m all right, my dear.”

He displayed to her a bright and superficial gaiety, and her shyness felt itself rebuked.

“Don’t you get a holiday?”

“Of course.—Would you like me to buy a bottle of Artificial Tan?”

“When do you get your holiday?”

“They may let me away at the end of the month.”

For the moment Peter Pan required all her attention. He appeared to mislike the hill he was climbing; his small engine spat and stammered, and concluded a spasm of protest with one loud bang. It sounded to Sherring exactly like “Damn,” and Sherring laughed.

“He’s talking to you, Una.”

She had to put Peter Pan in bottom gear and allow him to swear his way up the hill.

“One has to humour—cars.”

“He wants a new pair of legs. Shall I get out and push?”

But her face had become suddenly and strangely poignant. Why was he hiding from her behind this fooling like a man who had made up his mind to be flippant? Or was she to accept this playfulness as the reality, and pretend to him that she liked it? Almost, she was angry with him.

“Don’t be an ass, Sherry.”

“My dear!”

She looked hot and confused.

“Sorry.—All right, go on fooling. We are having plum tart and cream for lunch.”

He glanced at her with a kind of amused wistfulness.

“Do you want me to be serious, Una?”

She was mute.

“One may not have—the impertinence.—Some things—like the war—may be so damned serious.”

“Did you run away from things in the war?”

He looked stricken.

“No. One couldn’t; one can now. What I mean is—my dear——”

But they were to get no nearer to each other that day, for she was turning the car into the lane, and in the mouth of the lane her brother was waiting. Peter Pan let out yet another explosion, a forcible expostulation—“How inopportune, damn you!” Crabtree’s white teeth showed in the shadow. He laughed.

“That’s what Peter thinks of me! Hallo, Sherry.”

“Peter doesn’t like working on the Sabbath, old man.”

Crabtree looked at his sister.

“Behaving badly?”

“He’d hardly climb Stonestile Hill.”

“Bad boy, Peter.—I had better drive Sherry back to-night. Peter will have to go and be vetted. Get out and walk, old man.”

Sherring slipped out of the car with the feeling that for Crabtree’s sister—and perhaps for himself—the day’s impulse had been frustrated.

3

In brief it was David Crabtree’s day, whole-heartedly and perhaps inevitably so. His sister withdrew herself. For her the feeling of frustration was more acute, because of the passivity that men like Sherring and her brother appeared to regard as part of a woman’s heritage. Woman should be veiled; she should make no advances, nor blurt out her soul in the face of a manifest misunderstanding. Both Sherring and her brother were so male, and Englishly male according to those old pre-war standards. The younger generation would have said of them that their intelligence was Victorian, but though the younger generation’s ideas may be more fluid, its backbone is perhaps less erect.

She withdrew herself. She saw the two men go off to walk round the farm. She would have said to herself that David was so strong, and that at times his strength made him stupid. Would he see in Sherring’s face that which she had seen? He would walk his friend five miles, and the friend—being man—might endure the route march without complaining. Yes, the very strong could be so obscure.

But her mood of the moment had its limitations. She sat in the garden with the dog at her feet, and her passion carried on its invisible conflict with man’s illusion of pride. Why—pride? Why that bright, brittle, casual surface that refused to crack just because a certain creature wore a conventional petticoat? Had not Sherring once said to her laughingly—“Someone once told me I was too damned disinterested.” Could any description have been more apt?—But in her brooding she too was incomplete, just as one’s knowledge of a brother’s inwardness may be incomplete. David had to deal with strong things, stiff soil, stubborn men, the intricate and persistent vigour of pests, the obstinacy of instinct, but to the face of his friend he could be sensitive. In Sherring he

would see that which he might not see in the eyes of a farm-hand, for some men arouse a quick tenderness in other men. Crabtree had always experienced a feeling of fatherliness towards Sherring. Superficially casual and obvious in their surface interactions they were linked by that subtle affection which the English do not advertise. Crabtree would have understood and have accepted that which made Una rebellious. He had fought the soil as Sherring had fought misfortune, and if he understood starkness and a shut mouth, he knew that few men come to such stoicism unwounded.

In fact, in walking up the long meadow to the Great Wood he realized that his long legs were covering just too much ground for Sherring. The rhythm was wrong, and in Sherring's eyes he divined a vague distress. Crabtree slowed up his stride, and in the doing of it he discovered other revelations. This man whom he called his friend had the air of a soldier who was carrying a pack that was too heavy for his shoulders. Crabtree knew that look so well, the distressed eyes, the pinched nostrils, the head thrust forward like that of an animal straining to pull some weight.

In the Great Wood a pile of larch poles cut for fencing and left to season, offered a seat.

"No hurry, old man; let's squat."

"Not a bad idea.—Fact is, Crabbie, I'm not very limber on my legs these days."

Crabtree had pulled out his pipe.

"O—What's wrong."

"Veins. Perfectly fatuous that one should be turned into a C3 by such things. I'm going into hospital on Wednesday to have the worst of them vetted. Old Pitt's advice. By the way, don't tell your sister."

Crabtree, filling his pipe, stared into the deeps of the wood.

"Why shouldn't Una know?"

"O, just silly sensitiveness on my part. A man ought to loathe being a crock, or chattering about his infirmities. I expect the doctors will put me right."

Crabtree lit his pipe, and after sucking at it till the tobacco was burning well, he threw the spent match into the fern.

"What are you doing afterwards?"

"Going back to hats and coats."

“Not at once?”

“I may have a week or two somewhere.”

“Why don’t you come down here?”

“Very good of you, old man; but——”

Crabtree with knees drawn up and his elbows resting on them, sucked at his pipe. There was purpose in his very blue eyes.

“I suppose that job has given you veins. Standing about. Like trench feet.”

“Possibly.”

“Why don’t you chuck it.”

“My one and particular funk-hole, old man.”

Crabtree spread his brown hands and gazed at them.

“Look here—why don’t you join me down here?”

An arrow of sunlight slanting through splintered itself on Sherring’s face.

“A lot of use I should be on a farm.”

“Exactly—you would be.”

“Nothing doing, old man.”

Crabtree’s stare became more intense. He did not look at Sherring, and Sherring did not look at him.

“I think I told you I wanted to enlarge this show.—Well, there would be scope for you here. You could take over the transport, and the checking of food, and the accounts, and you’d soon pick up the language. There’s a small farm coming on the market. It joins mine, and it will go for nothing, and give me room to expand, but I shall want help in the Q.M.S. department. I’m not gassing. Do you mean to tell me you ran a Company as you did, and that you couldn’t——?”

Sherring had lit a cigarette.

“Thanks, old man. It’s generous of you.”

“Don’t be a silly ass, Sherring; it’s business.—If you have a little capital —— Have you?”

“Yes, unexpected, but true.—But, my dear old man—I’m a crock.”

“Rot. What you want is a different sort of life. You’d get it here. You could

put up with us to begin with.”

Sherring smiled, and his smile was defensive.

“Crabbie, the one thing I should loathe to do would be to let you down. I’d rather wait and see how my op. turns out—— You understand?—I’m not going to come and sponge on my best friend.”

Crabtree turned to him.

“Not very likely.—Think it over. Come down and stay with us when they let you out of hospital.”

Sherring avoided his friend’s eyes.

“Perhaps.—I’m damned sensitive about some things, Crabbie.”

“I ought to know that. You can kick me—if I show signs of offering favours.—Fact is—you—could—help me here. I’m not a plunger. I’ve figured things out.—Well, that’s that.”

Sherring reached out and laid a hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“I’ve been grateful to you for many things, Crabbie.”

“Don’t, old man.”

“Give me a month.”

“Ten—if you want ’em.—Well, let’s stroll.—I’ll show you a few things.”

4

At the midday meal she wondered why these two men had so little to say to each other. Obviously the food was to their liking, and they made her think of a couple of boys who had come back hungry after some escapade. They did not tell her where they had been or what they had been doing, nor was their voicelessness the result of boredom.

“Have some more tart, Sherry.”

“I will.”

“Take plenty of cream.”

Certainly, if two normal men could not enjoy their food and be honest about it, something was wrong with the world. Also, purple plum juice and white cream can be sensuously satisfying, but why did Sherring avoid her eyes, or look at her as if he and she were in danger of committing some secret

sin? She would have sinned with him to the seventh heaven or hell. Was he aware of her dear recklessness, and somehow afraid of it, because as a partner he dreaded his incompleteness? He was a man of delicate scruples and secret prides. He would still talk of playing the game, and be fastidious about it, and refuse to borrow from a woman that which she yearned to give.

O, wretched money!

Yet, she would have said that her brother was—for some reason or other—in a particularly happy mood. Well, that was understandable, for David had his friend and men could talk to each other without being distracted by the sweet anguish of sex. Her brother was the happy host, and yet his happiness was not wholly that of a man who displayed to his friend the contents of the flesh-pots.

“Have some more beer, Sherry?”

She noticed that David looked at Sherring with very kind blue eyes. Gentleness—without patronage. Yes, old David was very much a dear, and he could be kind to her beloved when she could not. O, tantalizing maleness! What simple creatures men were!

“No, don’t open another bottle, Crabbie. I shall fall asleep.”

“That’s just what you are going to do, my lad. Isn’t he, Una?”

Her smile was constrained.

“Let him do what he pleases.”

“And tea in the garden?”

“If you would like it there.”

She saw Sherring put in a deck-chair by her brother. David had carried out two cushions, and she wondered. Why this thoughtfulness, this care—?—and yet—after all—it was very natural. She supposed that there was such a thing as love between men, and she could not criticize her brother for loving Sherring. David was so much stronger than this other man, but to-day her brother’s strength was not brusque and striding; it possessed a quality of strange gentleness.

She went to her room.

She sat at the window and brooded. It was somehow a man’s day and not hers, and the spirit of her withdrew itself. If a woman was supposed to treasure a tender chastity, which she sometimes did, might not men—or particular man—cling to the chastity of his self-regard. It might be difficult for her Sherring to do and say certain things, and perhaps that was why she loved him. He was

not the sensual cynic, the animal that can gorge itself and then go to sleep. He was too sensitive about certain intangible prejudices, too fine. But could she quarrel with such fineness.

She thought—“O, my dear, you are so afraid of taking more than you can give. Because I can give all, you will ask for nothing.”

At four o’clock she went down to carry the tea out into the garden. Her brother was there, and though both men helped her, she felt alone with herself. She seemed to know that she would not be alone again with Sherring on this September day. Almost, she was afraid of being alone with him.

“I’ll drive Sherry to the station.”

She consented. She did not foresee—could not foresee—what that drive would entail. Even afterwards she carried in her heart a picture of her brother, brown and big in the September dark, pushing that small blue car out into the lane.

“Now, no tricks, my lad.”

She stood and watched the car disappear into the grey green glooms. The little engine seemed to spit a valediction at her. She went in to her dog. She felt strangely and poignantly depressed.

She remembered saying to herself—“David will be back by nine.”

XXVI

WHEN SHERRING arrived for duty next morning one of the night-porters met him on the staff stairs.

"Someone's been ringing you up, Hats."

"Who?"

"Sounded like a lady. Wouldn't give a name. Said she would ring again."

Sherring changed into his green and gold, and made his way up to the cloak-room, and as he reached it one of the hotel pages ran after him.

"Mr. Hats."

"Hallo."

"Wanted on the phone. Box 3."

The telephone boxes were in the corridor opposite the Inquiry Bureau, and as Sherring entered No. 3, and closed the glass door he was not conscious of any curiosity. As a matter of fact he was expecting a message from Penrose Pitt with regard to the hour at which he was to report at St. Martha's Hospital, and the woman's voice would be the voice of Pitt's secretary.

He picked up the receiver.

"Hallo——?"

"Is that you, Sherry?"

Una's voice, a small voice but vibrant with tragedy!

"Yes——"

"Una speaking.—David's dead."

"Good God—what do you mean, dear?"

"It happened last night when he was driving back from the station. He had a collision with a motor-coach. They took him to Midworth Hospital, but he died in the night. He was never conscious."

"Good God!—It doesn't seem credible. My dear, where are you?"

"At the hospital. I am going back now to the farm."

“By yourself?”

“Yes.—It’s so dreadful. David, of all people! Could you come to me, Sherry?”

“My dear, I’ll come at once. I’ll take the first train I can catch. I’m coming now.”

He hung up the receiver, and leaving the box he closed the glass door gently as though he were closing the door of a room in which someone dear lay dead. Crabbie—of all people, Crabbie who only yesterday——! He found Cragg in the foyer, and Sherring’s face was so stark, such a zero-hour face, that Cragg stared at it. What was the matter with Mr. Sherring?

“Cragg—I’ve got to go down into the country at once. You’ll have to manage somehow.”

“Just for the day?”

“I don’t know. I may be away a week. My best friend’s been killed.”

Cragg’s blue eyes were on stalks.

“But what about—the hospital, sir?”

“Hospital?—I had forgotten all about it. That will have to wait.—I’m just going, and that’s all. If they sack me—they can.”

“See Mr. Giraldi, sir.”

“I’m not seeing anybody. Haven’t the time. I’m going now.”

He went. In five minutes he was in mufti and hailing a taxi. He drove to Benskin’s Buildings and rushing up those sixty steps on legs that dared not complain, he bundled some necessaries into a suit-case. Money? Yes, he had better take some spare cash with him. He had told the taxi-man to wait, and he was driven to his bank, but he had to stand on the doorstep for ten minutes till the doors opened. He wrote a cheque to self for twenty pounds and cashed it, and hurried out to the taxi.

“Victoria. Quick as you can.”

He was fortunate in catching the 10.34 train from Victoria, but as he sat in a third-class corner seat he thought of yesterday and the friend who had been so alive. Sherring’s mood was self-accusing. Was he not indeed the child of misfortune in that he brought death to people, Mira, and now old Crabbie. If Crabbie had not driven him back to Midworth station, this ghastly thing would not have happened. Or it might have happened to Una.—Poor Una—all alone at the farm, and David lying in the hospital mortuary. Yesterday, could any life

have seemed more secure than the life at Darrels? And old Crabbie's kindness to him, and all those plans for the future.—"Sherry, have some more tart —"—"Sherry, another bottle of beer?" Bronzed, brave David, the man who had helped him more than any other man in the war! Nor might Una know anything of that of which he and her brother had discussed, for Crabtree would have kept his promise. Well, it didn't matter. But what would happen to Una? —Would the farm be hers?

At Midworth he found a taxi waiting in the station yard, and he chartered it.

"Darrel's Farm. Know it?"

"Mr. Crabtree's place."

"That's it."

"Well, if you're wanting to see Mr. Crabtree, sir, he was——"

"Yes—I know. That's why I'm here."

They traversed the same fatal road, and half-way up Stonestile Hill a breakdown car stood close to the grass verge. A garage gang were extracting a crushed and tattered car from the ditch, a little blue wreck. Half a dozen people were looking on. The taxi man slowed up, and looking over his shoulder at Sherring, pointed, and shouted through the glass partition.

"That's where it happened, sir. Want to look?"

Sherring flinched. His gesture expressed impatience, disgust.

"No; get on."

The twisted wreckage of Peter Pan had suggested anguish to him. Had Una seen it? He hoped not. One buckled front wheel stuck up in the air as though warding off some horror!—And then the taxi was swinging slowly into the green mouth of the lane just where Crabtree had met him yesterday with a smile on his face.

To Sherring the green walls of the lane were blurred. He seemed to hear himself saying—"Pull yourself together. Don't be an ass.—It's so much worse for her." The white slats of the fence flickered in the sunlight. He got out of the taxi, grabbed his suit-case, and hurriedly paid the man.

As he pushed back the gate he saw the green door under the white porch open. Una?—No; it was Jane who met him there—a Jane with red eyelids.

"I'm glad you've come, sir. Miss Una's in the sitting-room. No, I know the blinds aren't down; she wouldn't have them down. She's taken it terrible hard,

sir; she seems to have lost her voice.—I'm glad you've come."

2

His impression was one of strange stillness. She was sitting there by the window with a flowered curtain half drawn across it, and her hands in her lap. A green strip of the garden showed with autumn asters and dahlias in flower, and upon the branch of an apple tree hung apples of gold. She sat there with a gentle and mute stillness as though she had been waiting for him to come. She did not rise or make any movement when he entered.

Sherring closed the door. Her back was to the light, and her eyes were two shadowy circles. He walked towards her, paused, and stood looking down at her hands.

"My dear—I feel it was my fault."

She seemed to give a little shiver.

"Don't, Sherry. How could it be?—I wish that I had—— O, sit down, dear."

He drew a rush-bottomed chair away from the oak table and sat down. He did not look at her, for his feeling was that she did not wish to be looked at too closely. And suddenly in the silence he heard the whimpering of a dog. A sigh seemed to come from her.

"It's poor Bob. Let him in, Sherry."

He rose, crossed the room, and opened the door. The dog went straight to his mistress, and resting his muzzle in the hollow between her knees, gazed up at her. She caressed his head. Her calmness was profound, as though all the self in her had been stilled by shock. She continued to caress the dog's head, and Sherring, moving as though he feared to wake her from some sleep, sat down again in the chair.

"Poor old Bob. Dogs don't ask one how things happened."

Sherring's gaze was fixed on the dog's head and her slowly moving hand.

"No, they just happen.—Do you really want me here, Una?—I came—because——"

For the first time she looked into his eyes.

"Yes—I want you here, Sherry.—Is that selfish of me?—I suppose it is."

"Not if I want to be here, dear——"

Her glance lowered itself to the dog's head.

"How did you manage? About your work—I mean?"

"I just came.—As a matter of fact—I'm due for a—holiday. There's nothing for you—to ask me questions about.—Think of me as being rather like Bob."

A little, poignant smile flickered round her lips.

"Yes, you are.—You can be still.—This—thing—has stunned me, Sherry. It's so wrong, so utterly wrong, so cruel. I can't think.—I feel—I just want to sit—and feel ashamed."

"My dear!"

"Yes, ashamed.—You see, David mattered; he was big; he did good things. And I—matter so little."

"My dear!"

She made a little gesture with her hand above the dog's head.

"Don't contradict me, Sherry. I have been a very selfish woman all my life. If I have done things—I have done them grudgingly. O, yes—I have, my dear. —And now—that there are last things to be done—I feel—helpless, shocked by what I might have done and didn't."

His face was in the light, hers in the shadow. He sat leaning forward and looking at the dog.

"Bob doesn't think that; nor do I.—But, may I do these things for you, Una? I have a kind of right to do them. If any man knew David—I did."

She sighed, and there was relief in that sigh.

"Would you?"

"Everything—I can.—I'll take over all the—details. I'll try and save you from having to see people."

She looked at him steadfastly for a moment, and then, putting the dog from her gently, she rose and walked to a bureau that stood in a corner. The flap was closed, and an old brass key protruded from the scutcheon plate.

"David kept everything here.—I don't want to touch that key, somehow. He had it with him. They gave it to me.—I would like you, Sherry, to look through all that was his. I think a man should do it."

"I'll do it, Una.—But there are one or two questions I can't helping asking

you. Had he a lawyer?”

“Yes, Mr. Mead of Midworth.”

“And so far as you know—all his private papers are here?”

“Yes, Sherry.”

He rose.

“Then—leave it to me.—When I have looked through things I can go up and see the lawyer for you. I can put up at Midworth.”

She bent down and picked up the dog.

“Won’t you stay here, Sherry?”

“I’ll do whatever you wish.”

“Stay here.—I think I will go up to the wood with Bob. It’s quiet there.”

He opened the door for her, but she passed out without looking at him.

3

His dead friend’s desk. The photograph of a girl. A bundle of letters tied up with a piece of blue ribbon, ledgers, bills, a cheque book, a pass book, stationery, a half-used stick of sealing-wax, a pipe, a diary, documents in a pigeon-hole. David had been an orderly person, and in the lower drawers of the bureau Sherring found old bills and cheque counterfoils neatly fastened with rubber bands, estate diaries, old stock-books and ledgers, a reserve supply of notepaper, business envelopes, two balls of string.

Sherring did not examine the letters tied up with ribbon. They had belonged to the live Crabtree, and they would remain the secret property of the man who was dead. He knew that old Crabbie had been in love with some girl during the war, and that the girl had not treated him well. He examined poor David’s pass-book. It showed a credit balance of £324 3s. 7d., and the book had been made up less than a week ago. Among the documents in a pigeon-hole he found a typed copy of Crabtree’s will. He read it through, and he read it with his consciousness including Una, as though she were sitting beside him.

Crabtree had left everything to his sister, the farm, stock, implements, house, furniture, in fact he had left her Darrels as it stood. He had money in gilt edged securities, and that and a legacy of £200 in cash he bequeathed to Una. There were no restrictions in the will, no shadow of the dead hand. It was the simple testament of a man who did simple things and did them well.

Sherring folded up the two typed sheets and slipped them into the inner pocket of his coat. He sat and looked for a few seconds at the photograph of the girl. He thought—“Well, if you turned him down, you missed something big, my dear.” Closing the flap of the bureau he stood at the window and looked up towards the Great Wood. He would find Una there, Una to whom all these fields and trees and beasts would belong, this old house and garden with all their sweet savour of the soil. What would she do with the farm? Would she step into David’s shoes and carry on, or would she sell everything and let strangers into the place? He rather hoped that she would stay. He did not see Una in a city; she did not seem to belong to cities.

He went out into the garden.

Yes, he could save Una some of those too public formalities. There would be an inquest, a funeral, things to be arranged, people to be interviewed. Yes, he could stay here and help her.—And suddenly he remembered his own small crisis. O, well, that would have to wait. His legs could carry him through Una Crabtree’s crisis. He would write to Penrose Pitt and get him to postpone his visit to St. Martha’s.

He passed out of the gate into the field and walked up the long green slope to the wood. Was it only yesterday that he and old David had sat on that pile of larch poles and talked together, and David had offered him another life here? Coming to the big beech tree, which stood by the field gate leading into the wood, he saw Una sitting where he and her brother had sat. The dog, lying at her feet, jumped up and barked at him.

“Quiet, Bob. It’s only Sherry.”

The day was as still and as windless as yesterday, and so deep was the silence that when he spoke to her his voice was hushed. They might have been together in a church.

“I have been through most of his papers, dear. There were letters that I left alone. I found what mattered.”

She held the dog against her knees.

“Thank you, Sherry.”

“Everything is yours.”

“Everything?—But I wasn’t thinking of that, Sherry.”

“David thought of it. He has left you the place as it stands—farm, house, stock, and his savings.”

Almost she looked frightened.

“Does the will—say—anything——?”

“There are no restrictions, Una. He has left you free to do as you please.”

She was silent for a moment.

“Do you think I ought to stay here, Sherry?”

He looked beyond her into the wood.

“That—is for your own secret soul.”

“What would you do, Sherry, if you——?”

He seemed to hesitate.

“I think—I should stay here, and try and do what David did.—It’s a good life. It’s—real.”

XXVII

She sat at her brother's desk, her elbows resting on the flap, and the chin in her cupped hands. She was in black; she had been in black now for a week. She looked out of the window. She was realizing that Sherring was leaving her in an hour.

She had said to him—"Must you go, Sherry?"

"Man must work, my dear. I shall be there, if you want me."

O, this disinterestedness of his! Because she was a woman of property, the mistress of "Darrels," and some three thousand pounds in cash, he would not speak to her as her lover. How absurd it was, how utterly old fashioned! He was going back to his hats and coats, and his worker's flat at the top of sixty stone steps. He looked thin and ill, like a man short of sunlight and good food.

On the desk before her lay certain ledgers of her brother's, also a chart neatly drawn in black and red ink. She had known David to be thorough, but not until she had inherited his affairs had she realized the thoroughness of her brother. She had before her in these ledgers and on this chart a complete record of the interior economy of the farm. Everything was tabulated and graded, the stock, the feeding arrangements, the rearing and marketing, the men's work and wages. Each sow had her place in the record; when she had been put to the boar, how she had littered, when she should litter again. Each field was dealt with. The chart showed how the stock should be distributed or changed over. There was a monthly record of the foodstuffs required in bulk. Future marketing commitments were tabulated, with dates and details. A costing book showed all the weekly outgoings.

In these records of her brother's she had the farm like a completed jig-saw puzzle under her hand. She had but to preserve the plan, and the pieces could be rearranged at any time—on paper. Yes, upon paper. She was in the position of a bureaucrat who had all the information he required nicely pigeonholed, and who could provide a political chief with a policy and a sheaf of statistics, but who—in the world of reality—would be unable to distinguish young wheat from young oats or to say when a particular sow was ripe for the boar. She had not the trained eye. For years her brother had looked intently and patiently at this pattern of life until all its intricacies had become familiar to him. He had loved this world of beasts and of green growth and had struggled and laboured

with it until he had made it his. He had known the men. No one had been quicker than David in detecting a slinker. How would she know when a man was slinking? Moreover, would men work for a woman as they worked for a man?

The door opened and Jane's head appeared.

"Can Carter speak to you, Miss?"

"Yes, Jane?"

"He's at the front door."

She went to speak with Carter who—in an unofficial fashion had held the position of her brother's foreman. David had always spoken well of Carter. He was a lean, laconic man of forty-five, with blue eyes that looked straight at you, a blond moustache, and a fresh colour. She herself had always felt that there was a clean integrity about Carter. He had not a great deal to say. He had felt her brother's death much more deeply than she knew.

"Yes, Carter?"

"Sorry to worry you, Miss—but I've twenty porkers for the lorry to-morrow. It's part of our contract."

"Well, send them, Carter."

"I just wanted to know, Miss."

"Carry on as usual, Carter."

"I will—Miss. And we're getting short of middlings."

"I'll send in an order.—I know from Mr. David's ledgers——"

She looked into the man's blue eyes.

"You'll help me, Carter?"

"I will, Miss."

But, though she had some faith in this man, she had so little faith in herself. Was she to be dependent upon an employee, and become a mere signer of cheques, a creature who had to be prompted? She knew that modern woman can run a show efficiently when her subordinates are women, but Una doubted a woman's ability to lead and convince men. She had heard her brother say that women could be too autocratic and too fussily efficient, and perhaps too hard in cutting a price. They did not understand the give and take that exists between man and man. She returned to the sitting-room, and sat down at the bureau. She could hear Sherring moving in the room above. He had gone up to

pack. A taxi was calling for him in half an hour.

She looked out of the window. The solution could be so simple. Sherring might know less about farming than she did, but he had managed men. Had not David told her that in the war Sherring had been a natural manager of men. Here was all the intimate information that he needed, his charts and sailing orders; in a year or two a man like Sherring could learn much. They could learn things together.

She heard him on the stairs, and closing the bureau, she moved quickly to an armchair. Was her love growing cunning? If so, it was not for herself alone. She heard him deposit his suit-case in the passage, and the faint click of the door latch.

He had his hat in his hand. That was symbolical? Also she noticed his black tie; she had seen it before, but it seemed to have for her a personal significance. He appeared a little constrained and self conscious, and he went and stood at the window as though his leaving of her needed a note of formalism.

He said—“I had a talk with Carter.—I like the man. I think he’ll be straight to you.”

She sat brooding.

“I’m sorry you are going, Sherry.”

“So—am I. A man must work, you know.—May I come down some Sunday?”

She looked up at him under drooping lids.

“O—do.—I feel—rather—lost, Sherry. Old Mr. Mead is very kind—but I count on your advice.”

He smiled faintly.

“I don’t know that my advice is worth much.—What does old Mead suggest about death duty?”

“I shall have to sell some securities.”

“Will that leave you enough capital?”

“Oh—I think so.—Our buyers pay regularly.—That was David’s shrewdness. So many farmers get the bulk of their money only once a year, and they have to sell—whenever everybody else is selling.”

“David was tremendously sound. And you are his sister, my dear.”

She was silent for a moment, observing him trying to penetrate the inwardness of him.

“I don’t know, Sherry.—I’m alone. It is different, doing things alone.”

He appeared to hesitate. He looked at her for a moment, and then turned his face again to the window as though he were listening for the taxi.

“O, yes, you’ll do it, Una. If you want to do it. You do, don’t you?”

Her voice was toneless.

“I don’t know yet.—I shouldn’t like to feel that David’s work had gone to pieces—but I know so little.”

“You’ll learn.—I like Carter. Why not give Carter an interest in the show?”

Her mouth was poignant.

“Yes—I might.”

“Hallo—there’s the car.”

She rose, and he moved to her suddenly, and with a kind of restrained deliberateness kissed her on the forehead.

“Good-bye, my dear—I’m always at your service—for the little I am worth.”

2

Sherring did not go to the Hyde Hotel until the following morning when he walked from Benskin’s Buildings along Oxford Street and across the Park. He had been far less conscious of his legs during that week in Sussex, perhaps because he had been both walking and resting, and been absorbed in the Crabtree tragedy. Above the trees of the park he could see the Hyde Hotel majestically flying the Union Jack even at this early hour. Mr. Giraldi was a man of punctilio. When looking in an English mirror he may have seen about his head the halo of a lesser Mussolini.

Sherring entered the hotel by the staff door at the back of the big building. This basement door opened into a corridor painted white, and the first person he met in the corridor was Mr. Cragg. The head porter had just changed into green and gold, for, knowing his Giraldi he was careful to be five minutes ahead of the clock.

He stared at Sherring. His face expressed the glumness of a good natured fellow who had bad news to impart.

“Hallo—you back, Mr. Sherring.”

Sherring smiled at him.

“Am I—for the orderly room, Cragg?”

“No, sir. Come into my room, will you?”

Cragg had a small room of his own in the basement. Sherring followed him into it, and Cragg closed the door.

“Sorry—but they’ve filled your place, Mr. Sherring.”

He drew a finger and thumb down his broad nose.

“Fact is—Mr. Giraldi’s a stickler—for etiquette.”

“He’s sacked me, Cragg?”

“That’s the long and short of it.—And in a way—it’s my fault. I wasn’t fly—like I should have been. I thought my word would go.—I said I’d given you permission——”

“And Mr. Giraldi wasn’t feeling—like that?”

“No.—He’s the kind that makes a hell of a row about nothing—now and again.—I ought to have bluffed, and said you’d gone into hospital.”

Sherring’s smile was wistful.

“What did he say—exactly?”

“That he’d interested himself in you—and that—you’d been discourteous, casual; you hadn’t taken the trouble to see him and ask.—I tried to make him understand that you were a bit upset—but when Giraldi becomes the Baron, it’s no use trying to gag.”

Sherring stood looking at the small window.

“Quite right.—I mean—Giraldi was right. I shouldn’t have crashed off like that.—I always do the wrong thing, Cragg. Well—that’s that. Is it any use—my——?”

“None at all, sir. Giraldi’s a regular little Mussolini when he’s on his dignity. Part of the pose. No arguing with him. There’s another man in your clothes.”

Sherring looked whimsically at Cragg.

“Well—obviously.—I can’t get into them. That’s final.—I’m sorry, Cragg, if you got some of the telling off on my account.”

“O, that’s all right, sir—but between you and me—I’m damned fed up about it.”

“You couldn’t have done more.—Well, I must go around on my flat feet and look for something else.”

“Aren’t you going into hospital, sir?”

“I had almost forgotten about the hospital. An enforced rest cure, Cragg! But I rather let them down too.—Well, you are due on duty, and I’ll go and sit in the park.”

Cragg went with him to the staff-door.

“Drop round and see me, sir—if nothing turns up.—I’ll keep my ears open.”

“Thanks, Cragg. I know you will. And thanks—for everything.”

He shook hands with the head porter, and ran quite lightly up the basement steps.

“Cheerio.”

And that was the last Cragg saw of him.

Sherring sat on a green seat under a plane tree, and behind him on the grass hundreds of regimented green chairs all tilted at the same angle appeared to be supporting each other after a night’s debauch. He had the seat to himself. The September sun shone, and a little breeze moved in the branches of the plane tree. The traffic had resumed its daily restlessness. Beyond the park railings a firm of contractors were erecting a wonderful new hotel, and a placard attached to one of the girders warned the world that the building would be finished, furnished, and ready for patronage on April 1st.

Some hustle—this! And here would be created yet another cloak-room in which man might minister to other men’s hats and coats. Sherring watched a crane dangling a steel girder at the end of a chain. Other things beside himself were suspended in the air. But the girder had a place in the social scheme, and so had those other men who were at work on the new building, while he was a seedy gentleman of leisure, aged five-and-forty, whom no one wished to employ. He had no cunning in his hands, no essential knowledge that was marketable. He was—in brief—a shabby failure sitting on a free seat.

What was to be done about it? He supposed that the average opportunist would appeal to Lord Burgage and desire the great man to use his influence to have him reinstated. Or Lord Burgage might still need a secretary. But Lord

Burgage was abroad, and something in Sherring shrank from the part of suppliant. He was not conscious of any bitterness against Mr. Giraldi. In the haste and heat of an emotional crisis he had not behaved very courteously to Mr. Giraldi. It was as though he—Sherring—sat with his fate beside him on that seat, and looking into the tired face of his poor companion, accepted with whimsical resignation his alter ego.

Remembering that he had his penny “daily” in his pocket, he extracted it, unfolded it, and like any other leisurely derelict he read the news. Agitation in India, another Gangster Outrage in New York. He came to the financial page. How were Kennington Stadiums standing? They had been on the upgrade for a month, and very steeply so. He found that Kennington Stadium Ordinaries stood at 15s. 6d. If he sold out he would make a profit of some £200.

He laid the paper on the seat.

He was not quite resourceless. He could command capital to the extent of £800. Should he so choose he could live on that money for five years or more, and when he had exhausted his resources he could put his head in the gas oven. Better men than he had come to that compromise with fate, persuaded towards oblivion by disillusionment, ennui, lack of recognition, or the dreariness of defeat.

As he rose to go another man took the opposite end of the seat, a rusty person with a ruddy mug. He looked covetously at Sherring’s daily paper.

“Want your paper, guv’nor?”

Sherring smiled at him.

“No—I’ve finished with it. You can have it.”

“Much obliged.”

The situation seemed to clarify itself as he walked back to Benskin’s Buildings.

None of his friends should know of this last disaster. No, most certainly not.

Why should he not go into hospital and let the doctors perform upon his legs? It might prove a useful interlude.

Yes, he would go and see Penrose Pitt that evening, and ask him to persuade the hospital to pardon his digression into Sussex, and arrange for his admittance.

He climbed the sixty stone steps to his flat. He closed the door. Six verbena

plants in his window-box showed to him little glowing coronets of violet, white and red. He remembered that he had not watered the plants, and he fetched his waterbottle from the bedroom and gave them drink.

He put his face close to the foliage.

Green things—garden scents, open country.

What was Una doing?

O, most certainly he must not let Una know that his week in Sussex had lost him his job.

3

Sherring's sojourn in hospital lasted ten days. An eminent surgeon dealt with Sherring's varicose veins, and during those ten days he received neither a visitor nor a letter. People were kind to him in the hospital, but he was not happy there. He was becoming a little too old to appreciate the loud cheerfulness of full blooded democracy; its temper was admirable if crude, and perhaps the highly strung and the sensitive have no real survival value. The hospital routine irritated him, though he tried not to feel irritated; everything was done by the clock and at most uncivilized hours. He did not like his neighbours or their habits, though these habits were very natural to them, and would not have offended the world to which they belonged.

In brief, Sherring did not belong to this world. He was not designed to belong to it, and his presence in it was necessitated by his failure. He was glad to leave, even while feeling grateful to the nurses for their kindness. The top floor of Benskin's Buildings would be more peaceful and aloof.

That was another illusion, for when he returned to his small flat he found the flowers in his window-box dead, and a change in his immediate environment. The wife of the police constable, having suddenly arrived at one of those periods of restlessness that afflict women whose crude sex is not sufficiently fed, had adopted both a child and a wireless set. A curious combination, but both the child and the mechanism were often in action together. The good lady, full for the moment of an ostentatious motherliness, played games with the child, and Sherring discovered the interesting fact that few children can play active games without screaming.

When the policeman came off duty he, good fellow, also played with the child. His wife was being difficult, and he was doing his best to humour her.

Sherring, sitting at his open window, asked himself why he should be

irritated by these domestic sounds. What was wrong with his humanity? A good fellow playing bear was chasing the small girl round the kitchen table, and the small girl was emitting shrill screams. Why was he irritated? Why had the various noises in Savage Street become to him a discordant offence? Was he growing old-maidish, a thin and fractious creature whose egoism could not tolerate the lustier egotisms of a too crowded world?

He thought—“Am I growing old and fussy?”

He thought, too, of Una and her farm, a house set among peaceful fields, the woods, the little stream, the deep and satisfying silence of the nights. How real all that world was, and this city world was like a restless woman who—to fill the emptiness of her soul—created artificial noises. Cities had become factories of dreadful noise. Even their pleasures were noisy. There was no escape.

He supposed that if one was a rich man it might be possible to buy silence in this madmen’s market, this pandemonium of progress.

He saw chimney-pots and a strip of blue sky.

He thought—“I want to go down into Sussex on Sunday. Can I?—If old Crabtree had lived—— If one’s in love with a woman—one’s so dreadfully sensitive about certain things. Perhaps I am growing a little too sensitive to live. It is nearly time for the gas oven.”

XXVIII

THEIR letters crossed, but Una Crabtree's was more momentous than Sherring's.

"Sherry—do come down and help me. I'm worried."

To the ordinary and peaceful citizen who is not concerned either with medical text-books or legal manuals life may appear a fairly simple affair. We, who live by good sense, infringe byelaws and regulations once a week and may continue in happy innocence provided that some cross-grained member of the community does not drag us before Cæsar. The official Thou Shalt Nots have become so crowded and so complex that the plain man pays no heed to them, neither does he care how often and how flagrantly he sins. He may not have reported such and such a matter, or he may have failed to obtain a licence for some particular activity, and the earth still revolves about the sun. Our rules and regulations are like the stars or the sands on the sea-shore. One must not blow a motor-horn while the car is stationary; one must report wart disease and silver leaf to the proper authorities; one must keep a fire extinguisher in one's garage; one must not move cattle across a road when certain restrictions are in force; one must attach particular stamps to a particular card; one must not dispose of game save to a licensed dealer. Life is set with innumerable official traps and pitfalls, and yet the business of living goes on.

But a death in the family, a change of ownership, appears to stimulate the official world, and the official world took notice of Una Crabtree. The U.D.C. of Midworth ordered her to lop certain trees whose branches overhung a road. She was made aware of the existence of a certain person entitled the County Agricultural Officer. Someone had complained about certain of the Crabtree ditches that debouched into the small stream, and Una was served with a peremptory letter and a nice little map. The ditches marked on the map were to be cleaned immediately.

When Carter was shown the order he scratched his head and assured her that the ditches had been dug out two years ago. He knew who the complainant was. Besides, there were hundreds of ditches within five miles of Darrels that had not been touched for years. Why did not the official world get busy about those other ditches?

Carter scratched his head.

“We’ll have to do it, Miss. I’ll make a start next week, and put Smart on it.”

But that was the beginning of further trouble. Smart was the farm’s odd hand, and rather odd at that, crude labour at its surliest. His name expressed a physical disharmony rather than eager activity. Smart proved sulky about that ditching. He did as little as he could in the longest possible time, and when Carter reproved him he was insolent.

He was insolent to Una.

Carter said to her—“A chap like that’s no use to us, Miss,” and Una, agreeing, and taking her courage in her hands, gave Smart his congé.

“I’m afraid I shall want your cottage, Smart.”

“Well, you won’t get it. You can’t turn me out. I’ve got the law on my side,” and he refused to budge.

The cottage was one of the farm cottages, service or tied, and Una, taking her case to Mr. Mead, was told that Smart had no tenant right, but that she might have to take the case to court and get an order. Did she welcome these harassments? It is possible that she did. She could say to Sherring—“I’m so ignorant. These things worry me; I can’t cope with them. If I have to leave everything to Carter—I shall feel so much at his mercy—decent man though he is.—I don’t think one ought to own a place like this unless one knows when and how to give an order.”

Sherring chose a Sunday, because he could be out of town on a Sunday without betraying the fact that London did not need him on a week day. He had been warned to treat his legs with consideration, and he took a taxi to Darrels. It was one of those October days when summer wears her last yellow gown. The beech trees and the bracken were beginning to change colour; worms were working, and at eleven o’clock the dew still lay upon the grass. The savour of autumn was in the air, pungent and fresh. No frost had cutback the dahlias. Robins sang.

She heard the car in the lane, and she went down the garden path to meet him. Her mood was tuned to the occasion. Did she look a little forlorn and appealing, and if he loved her, could not his love prove itself disinterestedly prejudiced in her favour?

“O—Sherry—I’m so glad you’ve come.”

There were chairs on the grass, and a table with milk and cake. She had felt his eyes upon her, the pressure of his hand.

“Worried—Una?”

“O—terribly.”

Surely the wisdom of Mother Eve was still potent, and had not the Bible done scant justice to woman? Had she had no reason to say to Adam—“You are so strong, you are so clever. I cannot climb the tree.” And had not Adam desired the apples as passionately as Eve had desired them? But this was a disinterested Adam. He would not say “The woman tempted me.” Moreover, the temptation would have to assume the disguise of dear compassion.

She gave him milk and cake.

“You look rather tired, Sherry. I ought not to worry you.”

“My dear, that’s what I’m here for.”

“To be worried?”

He looked at her almost darkly.

“You know me better than that. I can’t promise you that my advice will be worth much. What is the trouble?”

She looked poignant.

“Oh—everything. A farm is a little world in itself—and I’m so utterly ignorant. Then—the men.”

He was frowning.

“Are they worrying you, damn them?”

“Not Carter. But I hate being so dependent upon Carter. I’m having terrible trouble with one man.”

“Tell me.”

She allowed herself one swift glance at him. Yes, his face had lost its whimsical expression; he could be very much in earnest about some other person’s affairs. Probably, she exaggerated her various difficulties, but the management of a farm and especially of its men is the business of an expert. As her brother had warned her—“Men can be awkward brutes.” She went on to tell him about Smart and the cottage; she wanted to justify herself.

“I had no wish to be hard on the man, Sherry, but I suppose he thought he could play tricks with a woman. Mead tells me that I shall have to take the case to court to recover the cottage.”

“Did you see the man yourself, Una?”

“Yes.”

“Was he rude to you?”

“Fairly so.”

“Is old Mead sure about the legal rights of the case?”

“Yes—I think so.”

Sherring lit a cigarette.

“Look here—let me have a few words with the fellow. Where’s his cottage?”

“Just up the lane. The second cottage. But why should you trouble, Sherry?”

“Why should I trouble? If the fellow had any decency at all he wouldn’t have worried you at a time when any decent man would have tried to help.”

“I don’t think you’ll do much good, Sherry.”

“Anyhow—I’ll try.”

He went off to see the labourer, and found him sitting in the cottage kitchen reading the Sunday paper. Smart was a little, undersized monkey of a man with insolent eyes and a rather brutal and formless mouth. His wife was cooking the Sunday dinner, and the husband continued to read the paper. Sherring stood in the doorway, and the recalcitrant cottager remained rudely in his chair. Sherring’s experience had led him to believe that most men are open to courtesy and reason, but Smart was not.

“You’re wasting your time, guv’nor. You go and tell Miss Crabtree from me that I ain’t taking ‘er toff or ‘er toffee.”

Ostentatiously he turned the pages of his paper and continued to sit, and when Sherring suggested to him that good manners were of some significance in the social scheme, he was snarled at.

“You get out o’ my cottage, mister. It be’nt no business of yours.”

Smart was in every sense an awkward little beast, and Sherring wished him an ironic and polite good morning. There was nothing to be done with such a fellow but to hoist him and his belongings legally into the lane. Yet the incident had irritated Sherring, and quite unduly so, partly because Smart had treated him as a person of no authority whom you left standing on the doorstep. Miss Crabtree’s toff! As he walked back down the very peaceful lane with its bracken and its blackberries and its glimmer of autumn gold he

realized that the soil could produce ugly and stunted things. Green trees, meadows, dew upon the grass, and a vulgar and insolent little curmudgeon like that labourer. It was not fair to Una that she should have to contend with nastiness of that kind.

He found her still in the garden. He returned to the chair at her side.

He said—“It is quite impossible for you to have a little beast like that about the place.”

So, Smart had flouted him!

“Sherry, what can I do?—I hate going up the lane and passing that cottage.”

“It’s quite impossible. Old Mead must do something at once, get an order for the man to be slung out. You ought not to be subjected to such—things.”

She lay back in her chair and looked at the sky.

“Don’t let’s spoil such a day, Sherry, for a thing like Smart. Life’s so tantalizing.”

“But, my dear, you can’t be left alone here——”

She closed her eyes. She felt that her crisis was coming and she willed it to come. Secretly she exulted.

“Don’t, Sherry. One isn’t happy very often.”

He was leaning forward looking at her face. There was something strange about it, a kind of poignant radiance. Its closed eyes suggested mystery.

“Una—are you unhappy?”

For a moment she was mute.

“O, my dear, so very unhappy.”

“You miss David so much?”

“Not only that, Sherry. As you get older don’t you feel more lonely?”

He looked stricken.

“O, that’s true, so very true. One matters less—and one wants to matter—more.—Well, what’s to be done about it, Una? If you find it lonely down here—I can assure you that one can feel ten times more lonely in a city.”

She said—“Yes; I would like to stay on here. In the country things are real.—When it’s raining you can’t say—‘It’s too wet—I won’t farm to-day.’ You

are up against nature. But to live with Nature you have to know things, Sherry. David knew them—the thousand and one tricks that nature plays on you. And I'm so helpless. I get flouted by a man like Smart. I have to believe all that Carter tells me. I—don't—know. And, even if I knew, would the men—believe in me."

"Of course they would."

Her eyes were open now.

"No, Sherry, they wouldn't—because I can't quite believe in myself. I'm one of those people—who—— O, well, aren't we both up against Nature, my dear? And are you sitting there and pretending—and making me say things—which no woman wants to say. O, my dear—it makes me so ashamed."

She rose suddenly, passionately, and walking to the gate that led from the orchard to the field, she stood looking towards the Great Wood. Sherring's face was white and distressed. His eyes had an inward look. He seemed to hesitate before he left his chair and followed her to the gate. He approached her almost humbly. And then he realized that she was weeping.

"My dear, you mustn't——"

"Sherry, why won't you help me?"

"My God—I'd give you all I have—if I had anything to give."

She looked at him suddenly with wet eyes.

"And haven't you?—O, my dear, be real. I'm real. Be real with me."

"Una—I'm a wretched failure."

"And so am I."

"You! Don't be——"

She felt his arm slip round her.

"Sherry, let's go up to the wood. O, my dear, don't take your arm away. Oh—I'm shameless. And it's your fault, Sherry."

"My dear."

2

They wandered together through the tall fern, and with her head on his shoulder she said to him—

“Don’t leave me to-night—Sherry.”

“But I haven’t any things with me.”

“I can give you some of poor old David’s. Would that hurt you?”

He hesitated.

“No.”

She sighed.

“What comes next, Sherry?—Am I still to be shameless?”

He drew her aside towards a beech tree and they leaned against the grey trunk.

“I don’t want to go back—Una—ever. I want to stay here. I’m being shameless now. I don’t know anything; no one wants me; I’m a crock. I have a little money, but not much. I’d like to be here for ever and ever. O, my dear, what a rotter I am!”

And suddenly she laughed and kissed him.

“A shameless pair, my beloved. But my man will farm. He——”

“What sort of farmer shall I make, Una?”

“Sherry, do you mean to tell me that you can’t learn? My dear, you can manage men. David used to say that you could manage men better than anybody he had ever met.”

“I hadn’t such success with Smart, Una.”

“But don’t you see?—there won’t be any Smarts here. You—know—men. O, my dear—I believe we could make a success of this place, David’s place.”

He looked at her whimsically.

“Una, you’re taking terrible risks.”

Her glance was upward into the heart of the tree.

“I don’t think so.”

“But I’ll try. By God—how I’ll try. Call me your manager, my dear.”

“Why?”

“Because—well—I can do things for other people—that I can’t do for myself. Funny, isn’t it? I’m made that way—somehow.”

She understood him.

“So disinterested, Sherry, even to your—wife! But—I—shan’t trade on that. You don’t seem to realize how—unusual you are.”

“Well—I’ve always made a mess of my own affairs.”

“This one too?”

“This isn’t my own affair.”

3

When she said to Jane—“O, Jane, Mr. Sherring is staying,” Jane looked neither shocked nor surprised, but like a sympathetic and reasonable woman went upstairs to put sheets and blankets on the spare-room bed. Jane approved of Mr. Sherring. She liked his smile and his laugh, and the way he enjoyed his food and said so. So much of life—according to Jane—was just gobbling and grunting. Mr. Sherring was a nice gentleman. He always seemed to remember that there were other people in the world and that food is made to be praised as well as eaten.

Jane said to Bob the dog:

“My lad—if you’re not going to have a master—I’m not a virgin.”

Bob was a gentleman. He looked at Jane rather coyly. He had come upstairs to investigate this bed-making, and he did not enter into a discussion of Jane’s virginity.

Jane, looking out of the window, saw Miss Una placing the tea-tray on the green garden table. Apparently, Mr. Sherring had been asleep. And why shouldn’t Mr. Sherring take a nap on the afternoon of the Sabbath if he felt like it? It was a nice and comfortable thing to do. But Mr. Sherring was on his feet. Yes, and he had an arm round Miss Crabtree’s waist. Jane returned to the bed and gave the quilt a tweak, and Bob, following her, gazed up into Jane’s face.

“Yes, my lad—Mr. Sherring’s sleeping here—temporary like. But, if you ask me——”

Bob was not inquisitive. Or, possibly his doggish intuition had arrived at the truth. He trotted downstairs, and with curious and naïve perspicacity went and put his forepaws on Sherring’s knees.

His brown eyes looked into Sherring’s.

“Be kind to my mistress, o—man.”

Sherring caressed Bob’s head.

It was after tea that Una said to him—“O, Sherry, there are a lot of ledgers and time-tables of poor David’s in his bureau. I wonder if you would look at them. I haven’t much head for such things. But David was terribly thorough. He put everything down on paper.”

Thus, she led Sherring to her dead brother’s bureau, and with an air of innocence left him there, and took the dog for a walk. She was away for an hour, and when she returned Sherring was still sitting at the bureau. He had the air of a man who had discovered a chart that when deciphered, might lead to buried treasure.

She looked in through the window.

“Found anything interesting, Sherry?”

“Interesting? I should say so.”

“Do you mind if I help Jane for half an hour?”

“No; I’m in the thick of a discovery.”

Actually, he remained at his dead friend’s bureau till six o’clock, and Una did not disturb him. It was growing dusk, and she came in to light the lamp. He pushed his chair back, and she saw the outline of his head and face against the window.

“My dear, do you know what David has left us?”

She stood in the dusk, a match-box in her right hand.

“What, Sherry?”

“A complete book of the words, a kind of Bible. And God said unto Abraham—“On the first day thou shalt plough. On the second day”—My dear, it’s a complete guide to Darrels. If I can teach myself to know middlings from bran, and basic slag from superphosphate——!”

He left his chair. He held her close to him in the dusk.

“By God—I’m going to learn—everything.”

He kissed her on the forehead.

“Yes—Sherry, you’ll learn.”

And with an air of wise and mysterious deliberation she struck a match and lit the lamp.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover has been created for this project.

[The end of *Seven Men Came Back* by Warwick Deeping]