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THE DARK HOUSE

by

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PART I

I

1

The cigar was a large one and Robert Stonehouse was small. At the precise moment, in fact, when he leant out of the upstairs bedroom window, instinctively seeking fresh air, he became eight years old. He did not know this, though he did know that it was his birthday and that a birthday was a great and presumably auspicious occasion. His conception of what a birthday ought to be was based primarily on one particular event when he had danced on his mother's bed, shouting, "I'm five—I'm five!" in unreasonable triumph. His mother had greeted him gravely, one might say respectfully, and his father, who when he did anything at all did it in style, had given him a toy fort fully garrisoned with resplendent Highland soldiers. And there had been a party of children whom, as a single child, he disliked and despised and whom he had ordered about unreproved. From start to finish the day had

been his very own.

Soon afterwards his mother disappeared. They said she was dead. He knew that people died, but death conveyed nothing to him, and when his father and Christine went down to Kensal Green to choose the grave, he picked flowers from the other graves and sent them to his mother with Robert's love. Christine had turned away her face, crying, and James Stonehouse, whose sense of drama never quite failed him, had smiled tragically; but Robert never even missed her. His only manifestation of feeling was a savage hatred of Christine, who tried to take her place. For a time indeed his mother went completely out of his consciousness. But after a little she came back to him by a secret path. In the interval she had ceased to be connected with his evening prayer and his morning bath and all the other tiresome realities and become a creature of dreams. She grew tall and beautiful. He liked to be alone—best of all at night when Christine had put the light out—so that he could make up stories about her and himself and their new mystical intimacy. He knew that she was dead but he did not believe it. It was just one of those mysterious tricks which grown-up people played on children to pretend that death was so enormously conclusive. Though he had buried the black kitten with his own hands in the back garden, and had felt the stiffness of its pitiful body and the dank chill of its once glossy fur, he was calmly sure that somewhere or other, out of sight, it still pursued its own tail with all the solemnity of kittenhood.

One of these nights the door would open and his mother would be there. In this dream of her she appeared to him much as she had done once in Kensington High Street when he had wilfully strayed from her side and lost himself, and, being overwhelmed with the sense of his smallness and forlornness, had burst into a howl of grief. Then suddenly she had stood out from the midst of the sympathetic crowd—remote, stern and wonderful—and he had flung himself on her, knowing that whatever she might do to him, she loved him and that they belonged to one another, inextricably and for all time.

So she stood on the threshold of his darkened room, and at that vision his adoration became an agony and he lay with his face hidden in his arms, waiting for the touch of her hand that never came, until he slept.

Christine became his mother. Every morning at nine o'clock she turned the key of the pretentious mansion where James Stonehouse had set up practice for the twentieth time in his career, and called out, "Hallo, Robert!" in her clear, cool voice, and Robert, standing at the top of the stairs in his night-shirt, called back, "Hallo, Christine!" very joyously because he knew it annoyed Edith, his father's new wife, listening jealously from behind her bedroom door.

And then Christine scrubbed his ears, and sometimes, when there were no servants, a circumstance which coincided exactly with a periodical financial crisis, she scrubbed the floors. Robert's first hatred had changed rapidly to the love he would have given his mother had she lived. There was no romance about it. Christine was not omnipotent as his mother had become. He knew that she, too, was often terribly unhappy, and their helplessness in the face of a common danger gave them a sort of equality. But she was good to him, and her faithfulness was the one sure thing in his convulsed and rocking world. He clung to her as a drowning man clings to a floating spar, and his father's, "I wish to God, Christine, you'd get out and leave us alone," or, "I won't have you in my house. You're poisoning my son's mind against me," reiterated regularly at the climax of one of the hideous rows which devastated the household, was like a blow in the pit of the stomach, turning him sick and faint with fear.

But Christine never went. Or if she went she came back again. As James Stonehouse said in a burst of savage humour, "Kick Christine out of the front door and she'll come in at the back." Every morning, no matter what had happened the night before, there was the quiet, resolute scratch of her latch-key in the lock, and when James Stonehouse, sullen and menacing, brushed rudely against her in the hall, she went on steadily up the stairs to where Robert waited for her, and they fell into each other's arms like two sorrowful comrades. Ever afterwards he could conjure her up at will as he saw her then. She was like a porcelain marquise over whom an intangible permanent shadow had been thrown.

He knew dimly that she had "people" who disapproved of her devotion, and that over and over again, by some new mysterious sacrifice, she had staved off disaster. He knew that she had been his father's friend all her life and that his mother and she had loved one another. There was some bond between these three that could not be broken, and he, too, was involved—fastened on as an afterthought, as it were, but so firmly that there could be no escape. Because of it Christine loved him. He knew that he was not always a very lovable little boy. Even with her he could be obstinate and cruel—cruel because she was so much less than his mother had become—and there were times when, with a queer unchildish power of self-visualization, he saw himself as a small fair-haired monster growing black and blacker with the dark and evil spirit that was in him. But Christine never seemed to see him like that. There was some borrowed halo about his head that blinded her. It did not matter how bad he was, she had always love and excuses ready for him. And she was literally all he had in the world.

But even she had not been able to make his birthday a success. Indeed, ever since that one outstanding day all the celebrations had been failures, though he had never ceased to look forward to them. For days before his last birthday he had suspected everyone of secret delicious plottings on his behalf. He had come down to breakfast shaking with anticipation. All through the morning he had waited for the surprise that was to be sprung on him, hanging at everyone's heel in turn, and it was only towards dusk that he knew with bitter certainty that he had been forgotten. A crisis had wiped him and his birthday out altogether. And then he had cried, and James Stonehouse, moved to generous remorse, had rushed out and bought a ridiculously expensive toy having first borrowed money from Christine and scolded her at the top of his booming voice for her heartless neglect of his son's happiness.

Christine had argued with him in her quiet obstinate way.

"But, Jim dear, you can't afford it——"

There had been one of those awful rows.

And Robert had crept that night, unwashed, into bed, crying more bitterly than ever.

But this time he had really had no hope at all. Yesterday had seen a crisis and a super-crisis. In the afternoon the butcher had stood at the back door and shouted and threatened, and he had been followed almost immediately by a stout shabby man with a bald head and good-natured face, who announced that he had come to put a distraint on the furniture which, incidentally, had never been paid for. Edith Stonehouse, with an air of outraged dignity, had lodged him in the library and regaled him on a bottle of stout and the remnants of a cold joint, and it was understood that there he would remain until such time as Christine raised 40 pounds from somewhere.

These were mere incidents—entirely commonplace—but at six o'clock James Stonehouse himself had driven up in a taxi, to the driver of which he had appeared to hand the contents of all his pockets, and a moment later stormed into the house in a mood which was, if anything, more devastating than his ungovernable rages. He had been exuberant—exultant—his good-humour white-hot and dangerous. Looking into his brilliant blue eyes with their two sharp points of light, it would have been hard to tell whether he was laughing or mad with anger. His moods were like that—too close to be distinguished from one another with any safety. Christine, who had just come from interviewing the bailiff, had looked grave and disapproving. She knew probably, that her disapproval was useless and even disastrous, but there was an obstinate rectitude in her character that made it impossible for her to humour him. But Edith Stonehouse and Robert had played up out of sheer terror.

"You do seem jolly, Jim," Edith had said in her hard, common voice.
"It's a nice change, you bad-tempered fellow——"

She had never really recovered from the illusion that she had captured him by her charms rather than by her poor little fortune, and when she dared she was arch with an undertone of grievance. Robert had capered about him and held his hand and made faces at Christine so that she should pretend too. Otherwise there would be another row. But Christine held her ground.

"The butcher came this afternoon," she said. "He says he is going to get out a summons. And the bailiff is in again. It's about the furniture. You said it was paid for. I can't think how you could be so mad. I rang up Melton's about it, and they say the firm wants to prosecute. If they do, it might mean two years'——"

Robert had stopped capering. His knees had shaken under him with a new, inexplicable fear. But James Stonehouse had taken no notice. He had gone on spreading and warming himself before the fire. He had looked handsome and extraordinarily, almost aggressively, prosperous.

"I shall write a sharp note to Melton's. Damned impertinence. An old customer like myself. Get the fellow down into the kitchen. The whole thing will be settled tomorrow. I've had an amazing piece of luck. Amazing. Met Griffiths—you remember my telling you about Alec Griffiths, don't you, Christine? Student with me at the University. Got sent down together. Wonderful fellow—wonderful. Now he's in business in South Africa. Made his pile in diamonds. Simply rolling. He's going to let me in. Remarkable chap. Asked him to dinner. Oh, I've arranged all that on my way up. Gunther's are sending round a cook and a couple of waiters and all that's necessary. For God's sake, Christine, try and look as though you were pleased. Get into a pretty dress and join us. Must do him well, you know. Never do for a man like that to get a wrong impression. And I want him to see Robert. He knew Constance before we were married. Put him into his best clothes——"

"He hasn't got any," Christine had interrupted bitterly.

For a moment it had seemed as though the fatal boundary line would be crossed. Stonehouse had stared at his son, his eyes brightening to an electric glare as they picked out the patches of the shabby sailor-suit and the frantic, mollifying smile on Robert's face had grown stiff as he had turned himself obediently about.

"Disgraceful. I wonder you women are not ashamed, the way you neglect the child—I shall take him to Shoolbred's first thing to-morrow and have him fitted out from top to toe——" The gathering storm receded miraculously. "However, he can't appear like that. For God's sake, get the house tidy, at any rate——"

So Robert had been bustled up stairs and the bailiff lured into the kitchen, where fortunately he had become so drunk that he had had no opportunity to explain to the French chef and the two waiters the real reason for his presence and his whole-hearted participation in the feast.

From the top of the stairs Robert had watched Christine go into dinner on his father's arm, and Edith Stonehouse follow with a black-coated stranger who had known his mother. He had listened to the talk and his father's laughter—jovial and threatening—and once he had dived downstairs and, peering through the banisters like a small blond monkey, had snatched a cream meringue from a passing tray. Then for a moment he had almost believed that they were all going to be happy together.

That had been last night. Now there was nothing left but the bailiff, still slightly befuddled, an incredible pile of unwashed dishes and an atmosphere of stale tobacco. James Stonehouse had gone off early in a black and awful temper. It seemed that at the last moment the multi-millionaire had explained that owing to a hitch in his affairs he was short of ready cash and would be glad of a small loan. Only temporary, of course. Wouldn't have dreamed of asking, but meeting such an old friend in such affluent circumstances——

So the eighth birthday had been forgotten. Robert himself could not have explained why grief should have driven him to his father's cigars-box. Perhaps it was just a *beau geste* of defiance, or a reminder that one day he too would be grown up and free. At any rate, it was still a very large cigar. Though he puffed at it painstakingly, blowing the smoke far out of the window so as to escape detection, the result was not encouraging. The exquisite mauve-grey ash was indeed less than a quarter of an inch long when his sense of wrong and injustice deepened to an overwhelming despair. It was not only that even Christine had failed him—everything was failing him. The shabby plot of rising ground opposite, which justified Dr. Stonehouse's contention that he looked out over open country, had become immersed in a loathsome mist, greenish in hue, in which it heaved and rolled and undulated like an uneasy reptile. The house likewise heaved, and Robert had to lean hard against the lintel of the window to prevent himself from falling out. A strange sensation of uncertainty—of internal disintegration—obsessed him, and there was a cold moisture gathering on his face. He felt that at any moment anything might happen. He didn't care. He wanted to die, anyhow. They had forgotten him, but when he was dead they would be sorry. His father would give him a beautiful funeral, and Christine would say, "We can't afford it, Jim," and there would be another awful scene.

In the next room Edith and Christine were talking as they rolled up the Axminster carpet which, since the bailiff had no claim on it, was to go to the pawnbroker's to appease the butcher. The door stood open, and he could hear Edith's bitter, resentful voice raised in denunciation.

"I don't know why I stand it. If my poor dear father, Sir Godfrey, knew what I was enduring, he would rise from the grave. Never did I think I should have to go through such humiliation. My sisters say I ought to leave him—that I am wanting in right feeling, but I can't help it. I am faithful by nature. I remember my promises at the altar—even if Jim forgets his——"

"He didn't promise to keep his temper or out of debt," Christine said.

Edith sniffed loudly.

"Or away from other women. Oh, it's no good, Christine, I know what I know. There's always some other woman in the background. Only yesterday I found a letter from Mrs. Saxburn—that red-haired vixen he brought home to tea when there wasn't money in the house to buy bread. I tell you he doesn't know what faithfulness means."

Robert, rising for a moment above his own personal anguish, clenched his fist. It was all very well—he might hate his father, Christine might hate him, though he knew she didn't, but Edith had no right. She was an outsider—a bounder——

"He is faithful to his ideal," Christine answered. "He is always looking for it and thinking he has found it. And except for Constance he has always been mistaken."

"Thank you."

"I wasn't thinking of you," Christine explained. "There have been so many of them—and all so terribly expensive—never cheap or common——"

They were dragging the carpet out into the landing. Their voices sounded louder and more distinct.

"I could bear almost everything but his temper," Edith persisted breathlessly. "He's like a madman ——"

"He's ill—sometimes I think he's very ill——"

"Oh, you've always got an excuse for him, Christine. You never see him as he really is. I can't think why you didn't marry him yourself. I'm sure he asked you. Jim couldn't be alone with a woman ten minutes without proposing. And everyone knows how fond you are of him and of that tiresome child ——"

Robert Stonehouse gasped. The earth reeled under his feet. The stump of the cigar rolled off the windowsill, and he himself tumbled from his chair and was sick—convulsively, hideously sick. For a moment he remained huddled on the floor, half unconscious, and then very slowly the green, soul-destroying mist receded and he found Christine bending over him, wiping his face, with her pocket-Handkerchief.

"Robert, darling, why didn't you call out?"

"He's been smoking," Edith's voice declared viciously from somewhere in the background. "I can smell it. The horrid little boy——"

"I didn't—I didn't——" He kept his feet with an enormous effort, scowling at her. He lied shamelessly, as a matter of course and without the faintest sense of guilt. Everyone lied. They had to. Christine knew that as well as anyone. Not that lying was of the slightest use. His father's temper fed on itself and was independent alike of fact or fiction. But you could no more help lying to him than you could help flinching from a red-hot poker. "I didn't," he repeated stubbornly, and all the while repeating to himself, "It's my birthday—and they've forgotten. They don't care." But he would rather have died then and there than have reminded them. He would not even let them see how miserable he was, and to stop himself from crying he kept his eyes fixed on Edith Stonehouse, who in turn measured him with that exaggerated and artificial horror which she considered appropriate to naughty children.

"Oh, how can you, Robert? Don't you know what happens to wicked little boys who tell lies?"

He hated her. He hated the red, coarse-skinned face, the tight mouth and opaque brown eyes and the low, stupid forehead with its old-fashioned narrow fringe of dingy hair. He knew that in spite of Sir Godfrey and the family estate of which she was always talking, she was common to the heart—not a lady like Christine and his mother—and her occasionally adopted pose of authority convulsed him with a blind, ungovernable fury. He was too young to understand that she meant well—was indeed good-natured and kindly enough in her natural environment—and as she advanced upon him now, in reality to smooth his disordered hair, he drew back, an absurd miniature replica of James Stonehouse in his worst rages, his fists clenched, his teeth set on a horrible recurring nausea.

"If you touch me, Edith—I'll—I'll bite you——"

"Hush, darling—you mustn't speak like that——"

"Oh, don't mind me, Christine. I'm not accustomed to respect in this house. I don't expect it. 'Edith,' indeed! Did you ever hear such a thing! I can't think what Jim was thinking about to allow it. He ought to call me 'Mother'——"

Robert tore himself free from Christine's soothing embrace. He had a moment's blinding, heart-breaking vision of his real mother. She stood close to him, looking at him with her grave eyes, demanding of him that he should avenge this insult. And in a moment he would be sick again.

"I wouldn't—wouldn't call you mother—not if you killed me. I wouldn't if you put me in the fire——"

"Robert, dear."

"You see, Christine—but of course you won't see. You're blind where he's concerned. What a wicked temper. Deceitful, too. I'm sure I'm glad he's not my child. He's going to be like his father."

"I want to be like my father. I wouldn't be like you for anything."

"Robert, be quiet at once or I shall punish you."

She was angry now. She had been greatly tried during the last twenty-four hours, and to her he was just an alien, hateful little boy who made her feel like an interloper in her own house, bought with her own money. She seized him by the arm, shaking him viciously, and he flew at her, biting and kicking with all his strength.

It was an ugly, wretched scene. It ended abruptly on the landing, where she let go her hold with a cry of pain and Robert Stonehouse rolled down the stairs, bumping his head and catching his arm cruelly in the banisters. He was on his feet instantly. He heard Christine coming and he ran on, down into the hall, where he caught up his little boots, which she had been cleaning for him, and after a desperate struggle with the latch, out into the road—sobbing and blood-stained, heart-broken with shame and loneliness and despair.

2

His relationship with the Brothers Banditti across the hill was peculiar. It was one of Dr. Stonehouse's many theories of life that children should be independent, untrammelled alike by parental restrictions and education, and except on the very frequent occasions when this particular theory collided with his comfort and his conviction that his son was being disgracefully neglected, Robert lived the life of a lonely and illiterate guttersnipe. He did not know he was lonely. He did not want to play with the other children in the Terrace. But he did know that for some mysterious reason or other they did not want to play with him. The trim nursemaids drew their starched and shining darlings to one side when he passed, and he in turn scowled at them with a fierce contempt to which, all unknown, was added two drops of shame and bitterness. But even among the real guttersnipes of the neighbourhood he was an outcast. He did not know how to play with other children. He was ignorant alike of their ways and their games, and, stiff with an agonizing shyness, he bore himself before them arrogantly. It was natural that they in turn hated him. Like young wolves they flaired a member of a strange and alien pack—a creature who broke their unwritten laws—and at first they had hunted him pitilessly, throwing mud and stones at him, pushing him from the pavement, jeering at him. But they had not reckoned with the Stonehouse rages. He had flung himself on them. He had fought them singly, by twos and threes—the whole pack. In single combat he had thrashed the grocer's boy who was several inches taller and two years older than himself. But even against a dozen his white-hot fury, which ignored alike pain and discretion, made him dangerous and utterly unbeatable. From all encounters he had come out battered, blood-stained, literally in shreds, but clothed in lonely victory.

Now they only jeered at him from a safe distance. They made cruel and biting references to the Stonehouse *menage*, flying with mock shrieks of terror when he was unwise enough to attempt pursuit. Usually he went his way, his head up, swallowing his tears.

But the Brothers Banditti belonged to him.

On the other side of the hill was a large waste plot of ground. A builder with more enterprise than capital had begun the erection of up-to-date villas but had gone bankrupt in the process, and now nothing remained of his ambition but a heap of somewhat squalid ruins. Here, after school hours, the Brothers met and played and plotted.

They had not always been Banditti. Before Robert's advent they had been the nice children of the nicest people of the neighbourhood. Their games had been harmless, if apathetic, and they had always gone home punctually and clean. The parents considered the waste land as a great blessing. Robert had come upon them in the course of his lonely prowlings, and from a distance had watched them play hide and seek. He had despised them and their silly game, but, on the other hand, they did not know who he was and would not make fun of him and taunt him with unpaid bills, and it had been rather nice to listen to their cheerful voices. The ruins, too, had fired his imagination. He had viewed them much as a general views the scene of a prospective battle. And then—strangest attraction of all—there had been Frances Wilmot. She was different from any other little girl he had ever seen. She was clean and had worn a neat green serge dress with neat brown shoes and stockings which toned with her short curly brown hair, but she did not shine or look superior or disdainful. Nor had she been playing with her companions, though they ran back to her from time to time as though in some secret way she had led their game. When Robert had come upon her she was sitting on the foundations of what was to have been a magnificent portico, her arms clasped about her knees, and a curious intent look on her pointed delicate face. That intent look, as he was to discover, was very constant with her. It was as though she were always watching something of absorbing interest which no one else could see. Sometimes it amused her, and and then a flicker of laughter ran up from her mouth to her grey eyes and danced there. At other times she was sorry. Her face was like still water, ruffled by invisible winds and

mirroring distant clouds and sunshine.

Robert had watched her, motionless and unobserved, for several minutes. It had been a very unhappy day. Christine had gone off in a great hurry on some dark errand in the city connected with "raising money" on a reversion and had forgotten to wash him, and though he did not like being washed, the process did at least make him feel that someone cared about him. Now at sight of this strange little girl an almost overpowering desire to cry had come over him—to fling himself into someone's arms and cry his heart out.

She had not sat there for long. She had got up and moved about—flitted rather—so that Robert, who had never heard of a metaphor, thought of a brown leaf dancing in little gusts of wind. And then suddenly she had seen him and stood still. His heart had begun to pound against his ribs. For it was just like that that in his dreams his mother stood, looking at him. She, too, had grey eyes, serene and grave, penetrating into one's very heart.

And after a moment she had smiled.

"Hallo!"

Robert's voice, half choked with tears had croaked back "Hallo!" and she had come a little nearer to him.

"What's your name?"

"Robert—Robert Stonehouse."

"Where do you come from?"

He had jerked his head vaguely in the direction of the hill, for he did not want her to know.

"Over there."

"Why are you crying?"

"I—I don't know."

"Would you like to play with us?"

"Yes—I—I think I would."

She had called the other children and they had come at once and stood round her, gazing wide-eyed at him, not critically or unkindly, but like puppies considering a new companion. The girl in the green serge frock had taken him by the hand.

"This is a friend of mine, Robert Stonehouse. He's going to play with us. Tag—Robert!"

And she had tapped him on the arm and was off like a young deer.

All his awkwardness and shyness had dropped from him like a disguise. No one knew that he was a strange little boy or that his father owed money to all the tradespeople. He was just like anyone else. And he had run faster than the fastest of them. He had wanted to show her that he was not just a cry baby. And whenever he had come near her he had been all warm with happiness.

In three days the nice children had become the Brothers Banditti with Robert Stonehouse as their chief. Having admitted the stranger into their midst he had gone straight to their heads like wine. He was a rebel and an outlaw who had suddenly come into power. At heart he was older than any of them. He knew things about reversions and bailiffs and life generally that none of them had ever heard of in their well-ordered homes. He was strong and knew how to fight. The nice children had never fought but they found they liked it. Once, like an avenging Attila, he had led them across the hill and fallen upon his ancient enemies with such awful effect that they never raised their heads again. And the Banditti had returned home whooping and drunk with victory and the newly discovered joy of battle. His hand was naturally against all authority. He led them in dark plottings against their governesses and nursemaids, and even against the Law itself as personified by an elderly, somewhat pompous policeman whose beat included their territory. On foggy afternoons they pealed the doorbells of such as had complaint against them, and from concealment gloated over the indignant maids who had been lured down several flights of stairs to answer their summons. And no longer were they nice children who returned home clean and punctual to the bosom of their families.

Very rarely had the Banditti showed signs of revolt against Robert's despotism, and each time he had won them back with ease which sowed the first seeds of cynicism in his mind. It happened to be

another of the elder Stonehouse's theories—which he had been known to expound eloquently to his creditors—that children should be taught the use of money, and at such times as the Stonehouse family prospered Robert's pocket bulged with sums that staggered the very imagination of his followers. He appeared among them like a prince—lavish, reckless, distributing chocolates of superior lineage with a haughty magnificence that brought the disaffected cringing to his feet.

But even with them he was not really happy. At heart he was still a strange little boy, different from the rest. There was a shadow over him. He knew that apart from him they were nice, ordinary children, and that he was a man full of sorrows and mystery and bitter experience. He despised them. They could be bought and bribed and bullied. But if he could have been ordinary as they were, with quiet, ordinary homes and people who loved one another and paid their bills, he would have cried with joy.

When he did anything particularly bold and reckless he looked out of the corners of his eyes at Frances Wilmot to see if at last he had impressed her. For she eluded him. She never defied his authority, and very rarely took part in his escapades. But she was always there, sometimes in the midst, sometimes just on the fringe, like a bird, intent on business of its own, coming and going in the heart of human affairs. Sometimes she seemed hardly to be aware of him, and sometimes she treated him as though there were an unspoken intimacy between them which made him glow with pride for days afterwards. She would put her arm about him and walk with him in the long happy silence of comradeship. And once, quite unexpectedly, she had seemed gravely troubled. "Are you a good little boy, Robert?" she had asked, as though she really expected him to know, and relieve her mind about it.

And afterwards he had cried to himself, for he was sure that he was not a good little boy at all. He was sure that if she knew about his father and the bailiffs she would turn away in sorrow and disgust.

He knew that she too was different from the others, but with a greater difference than his own. He knew that the Banditti looked up to her for the something in her that he lacked, that if she lifted a finger against him, his authority would be gone. And the knowledge darkened everything. It was not that he cried about his leadership. He would have thrown it at her feet gladly. But he longed to prove to her that if he was not a good little boy he was, at any rate, a terribly fine fellow. He had to make her look up to him and admire him like the rest of the Banditti, otherwise he would never hold her fast. And everything served to that end. Before her he swaggered monstrously. He did things which turned him sick with fear. Once he had climbed to the top of a dizzy wall in the ruins, and had postured on the narrow edge, the bricks crumbling under him, the dust rising in clouds, so that he looked like a small devil dancing in mid-air. And when he had reached ground again he had found her reading a book. Then, the plaudits of the awestruck Banditti sounded like jeers. Nothing had ever hurt so much.

About the time that the Banditti first came into his life the vision of his mother began to grow not less wonderful, but less distinct. She seemed to stand a little farther off, as though very gradually she were drawing away into the other world, where she belonged. And often it was Frances who played with him in his secret stories.

3

He threw his indoor shoes into the area. In the next street, beyond pursuit, he sat down on a doorstep and, put on his boots, lacing them with difficulty, for he was half blind with tears and anger. He could not make up his mind how to kill Edith. Nothing seemed quite bad enough. He thought of boiling her in oil or rolling her down hill in a cask full of spikes, after the manner of some fairy story that Christine had told him. It was not the pain, though his arm felt as though it had been wrenched out of its socket, and the blood trickled in a steady stream from his bumped forehead. It was the indignity, the outrage, the physical humiliation that had to be paid back. It made him tremble with fury and a kind of helpless terror to realize that, because he was little, any common woman could shake and beat him and treat him as though he belonged to her. He would tell his father. Even his father, who had so far forgotten himself as to marry such a creature, would see that there were things one couldn't endure. Or he would call up the Banditti and plot a devastating retaliation.

In the meantime he was glad he had bitten her.

He walked on unsteadily. The earth still undulated and threatened every now and then to rise up like a wave in front of him and cast him down. He was growing cold and stiff, too, in the reaction. He had stopped crying, but his teeth chattered and his sobs had degenerated into monotonous, soul-shattering hiccoughs. Passers-by looked at him disapprovingly. Evidently that nasty little boy from No. 10 had been fighting again.

He had counted on the Banditti, but the Banditti were not on their usual hunting-ground. An ominous silence answered the accustomed war-cry, uttered in an unsteady falsetto, and the ruins had a more

than usually dejected look, as though they had suddenly lost all hope of themselves. He called again, and this time, like an earth-sprite, Frances Wilmot rose up from a sheltered corner and waved to him. She had a book in her hand, and she rubbed her eyes and rumpled up her short hair as though rousing herself from a dream.

"I did hear you," she said, "but I was working something out. I'll tell you all about it in a minute. But what's happened? Why is your face all bleeding?"

She seemed so concerned about him that he was glad of his wounds. And yet she had the queer effect of making him want to cry again. That wouldn't do. She wouldn't respect him if he cried. He thrust his hands deep into his pockets and knitted his fair brows into a fearful Stonehouse scowl.

"Oh, it's nothing. I've had a row—at home. That's all. My father's new wife h-hit me—and I b-bit her. Jolly hard. And then I fell downstairs."

"Why did she hit you?"

"Oh, I don't know. She's just a beast——"

"Of course you know. Don't be silly."

"Well, she said I'd been smoking, and I said I hadn't——"

"Had you? You look awfully green."

"Yes, I had."

"What's the good of telling lies?"

"It's no good telling the truth," Robert answered stolidly. "They only get crosser than ever. She hadn't any right to hit me. She's not even a relation."

"She's your step-mother."

He began to tremble again uncontrollably.

"She's n-not. Not any sort of a mother. My mother's dead."

It was the first time he had ever said it, even to himself. It threw a chill over him, so that for a moment he stopped thinking of Edith and his coming black revenge. He had done something that could never be undone. He had closed and locked a great iron door in his mother's face. "She's just a beast," he repeated stubbornly. "I'd like to kill her."

Frances considered him with her head a little on one side. It was like her not to enter into any argument. One couldn't tell what she was thinking. And yet one knew that she was feeling things.

"I'd wipe that blood off," she said. "It's trickling on to your collar. No, not with your hand. Where's your hanky?"

He tried to look contemptuous. He did, in fact, despise handkerchiefs. The nice little girls in the Terrace had handkerchiefs, ostentatiously clean. He had seen them, and they filled his soul with loathing. Now he was ashamed. It seemed that even Frances expected him to have a handkerchief.

"I haven't got one," he said.

"How do you blow your nose, then?"

"I don't," he explained truculently.

She executed one of her queer little dances, very solemnly and intently and disconcertingly. It seemed to be her way of withdrawing into herself at critical moments. When she stopped he was sure she had been laughing. Laughter still twinkled at the corners of her mouth and in her eyes.

"Well, I'm going to tidy you up, anyhow. Come sit down here."

He obeyed at once. It comforted him just to be near her. It was like sitting by a fire on a cold day when you were half frozen. Something in you melted and came to life and stretched itself, something that was itself gentle and compassionate. It was difficult to remember that he meant to kill Edith frightfully, though his mind was quite made up on the subject. Meantime Frances had produced her own handkerchief—a large clean one—and methodically rubbed away the blood and some of the tear stains, and as much of the dirt as could be managed without soap and water. This done, she refolded

the handkerchief with its soiled side innermost, and tied it neatly round the wounded head, leaving two long ends which stood up like rabbit's ears. A gust of April wind wagged them comically, and made mock of the sorrowful, grubby face underneath. Even Frances, who was only nine herself, must have seen that the sorrow was not the ordinary childish thing that came and went, leaving no trace. In a way it was always there. When he was not laughing and shouting you saw it—a careworn, anxious look, as though he were always afraid something might pounce out on him. It ought to have been pathetic, but somehow or other it was not. For one thing, he was not an angel-child, bearing oppression meekly. He was much more like a yellow-haired imp waiting sullenly for a chance to pounce back, and the whole effect of him was at once furtive and obstinate. Indeed, anyone who knew nothing of the Stonehouse temper and duns and forgotten birthdays would have dismissed him as an ugly, disagreeable little boy.

But Frances Wilmot, who knew nothing of these things either, crouched down beside him, her arm about his shoulder.

"Poor Robert!"

He began to hiccough again. He had to clench his teeth and his fists not to betray the fact that the hiccoughs were really convulsively swallowed sobs asserting themselves. He wanted to confide in her, but if she knew the truth about his home and his people she wouldn't play with him any more. She would know then that he wasn't nice. And besides, he had some dim notion of protecting her from the things he knew.

"You t-t-tied me up jolly well," he said. "It's comfy now. It was aching hard."

"I like tying up things," she explained easily, "You see, I'm going to be a doctor."

The rabbit's ears stopped waving for a minute in sheer astonishment.

"Girls aren't doctors."

"Yes, they are. Heaps of them. I'm reading up already, in that book. It's all about first-aid. There's the bandage I did for you. You can read how it's done."

He couldn't. And he was ashamed again. In his shame he began to swagger.

"My father's a doctor—awfully clever——"

"Is he? How jolly! Why didn't you tell me? Has he lots of patients?"

"Lots. All over the world. But he doesn't think much of other doctors. L-licensed h-humbugs, he calls them."

She drew away a little, her face between her hands, and he felt that somehow he had failed again—that she had slipped through his fingers. If only for a moment she had looked up to him and believed in him the evil spirit that was climbing up on to his shoulders would have fled away. There was a stout piece of stick lying amidst the rubble at his feet, and he took it up and felt it as a swordsman tests his blade.

"I'm going to be a doctor too," he said truculently. "A big doctor. I shall make piles of money, and have three ass-assistants. P'r'aps, if you're any good you shall be one of them."

She did not answer. The intent, observing look had come into her eyes. The cool wind lifted the brown hair so that it was like a live thing floating about her head. She seemed as lovely to him as his mother. He wanted terribly to say to her, "It's my birthday, Francey, and they haven't even wished me many happy returns;" but that would have shown her how little he was, and how unhappy. Instead, he began to lunge and parry with an invisible opponent, talking in a loud, fierce voice.

"I wish the others would come. I've got a topping plan. Edith goes shopping 'bout six o'clock when it's almost dark. We'll wait at the corner of John Street and jump out at her and shriek like Red Indians. And then she'll drop dead with fright. She's such a silly beast——"

Then to his amazement he saw that Francey had grown quite white. Her mouth quivered. It was as though she were going to cry. And he had never seen her cry.

"They—they aren't coming, Robert."

"N-not coming? W-why not?"

"There's been a row. Someone complained. Their people won't let them come any more. Not to play with you. They say—they say——"

He went on fighting, swinging his sword, over his head, faster and faster. Someone was pressing his heart so that he could hardly breathe. It was all over. They knew. Everything was going. Finished.

"What do they say?"

"They say you're not a nice little boy——"

There were some tall weeds growing out of the tumbled bricks. He slashed at them through the mist that was blinding him. He would cut their heads off, one after another—just to show her.

"I don't care—I don't care——"

"That's why I waited this afternoon. I wanted to tell you. And that
I'd come—if you liked—sometimes—as often as I could——"

"I don't care—I don't care," he chanted.

One weed had fallen, cut in two as by a razor. Now another. You had to be jolly strong to break them clean off like that. He wasn't missing once.

"Don't!"

"I shall. Why shouldn't I? You couldn't do it like that."

Another. No one to play with any more. Never to be able to pretend again that one was just like everyone else. People drawing away and saying to each other, "He's not a nice little boy!"

"Please—please, don't, Robert!"

"Why not? They're only weeds—beastly, ugly things."

"They've not done you any harm. It's a shame to hurt them. I like them."

"They're no good. It's practice. I'm a soldier. I'm cutting the enemy to pieces."

A red rage was mounting in him. He hardly knew that she had stood up until he saw her face gleaming at him through the mist. She was whiter than ever, and her eyes had lost their distant look and blazed with an anger profounder, more deadly, than his own.

"You shan't!"

"Shan't I?"

She caught the descending stick. He tried to tear it from her, and they fought each other almost in silence, except for the sound of their quick, painful breath. He grew frantic, twisting and writhing. He began to curse her as his father cursed Christine. But her slim brown wrists were like steel. And suddenly, looking into her eyes he saw that she wasn't angry now. She knew that she was stronger than he. She was just sorry for him, for everything.

He dropped the stick. He turned on his heel, gulping hard.

"I don't fight with girls," he said.

He walked away steadily with his head up. He did not once look back at her. But as he climbed the hill he seemed to himself to grow smaller and smaller, more and more tired and lonely. He had lost her. He would never play with her again. The Brothers Banditti had gone each to his home. They sat by the fireside with their people, and were nice children. To-morrow they would play just as though nothing had happened. And Francey would be there, dancing in and out——

He stumbled a little. The hiccoughs were definitely sobs, hard-drawn, shaking him from head to foot. It was his birthday. And at the bottom of the hill, hidden in evening mist, the big dark house waited for him.

4

There was light showing in the dining-room window, so that he knew his father had come home. At that all his sorrow and sense of a grievous wrong done to him was swallowed up in abject physical terror. Even later in life, when things had shrunk into reasonable proportions, it was difficult for him to see his father as others had seen him, as an unhappy not unlovable man, gifted with an erratic genius

which had been perverted into an amazing facility for living on other people's money, and cursed with the temper of a maniac. To Robert Stonehouse his father was from first to last the personification of nightmare.

He stood now in the deep shadow of the porch, trying to make up his mind to ring the bell. His legs and arms had become ice-cold and refused to move. There did not seem to be anything alive in him except his heart, which was beating all over him, in his throat and head and body, with a hundred terrible little hammers. He thought of the Prince in the story which Christine had read aloud to him. The Prince, who was a fine and dashing fellow, had gone straight to the black enchanted cave where the dragon lived, and had thumped on the door with the hilt of his gold sword and shouted: "Open, Sesame!" And when the door opened, he had gone straight in, without turning a hair, and slain the dragon and rescued the Princess.

Somehow the story did not make him braver. He had no sword, and his clothes were not of the finest silk threaded with gold. He was a small boy in a patched sailor-suit, with a bandage round his head and a dirty face—cold, hungry and buffeted by a day of storms. He wished he could stay there in the shadow until he died, and never have to fight anyone again, or screw himself to face his father, or live through any more rows. But it seemed you didn't die just because you wanted to. All that happened was that you grew colder and more miserable, knowing that the row would be a great deal worse when it came. Goaded by this reasoning, he crept down the area steps to the back door which, by a merciful chance, had been left unlocked, and made his way on tiptoe along the dark stone passage to the kitchen.

It was a servantless period. But there was a light in the servants' living-room, and the red comforting glow of a fire. The bailiff lived there. Robert could hear him shuffling his feet in the fender, and sniffing and clearing his throat as though the silence bothered him, and he were trying to make himself at home. For a moment Robert longed to go in and sit beside him, not saying anything, but just basking in the quiet warmth, protected by the presence of the Law which seemed so astonishingly tolerant in the matter of the Stonehouse shortcomings. For the bailiff was a good-natured man. He had endeavoured to make it clear to Robert from the beginning, by means of sundry winks and smiles, that he understood the whole situation, which was one in which any gentleman might find himself, and that he meant to act like a friend. But Robert had only scowled at him. And even now, frightened as he was, he disdained all parley. The bailiff was an enemy, and when it came to a fight the Stonehouse family stood shoulder to shoulder. So he crept past the cheerful light like a hunted mouse, and up the stairs to the green-baize door, which shut off the kitchen from the library and dining-room.

It was an important door. Dr. Stonehouse had had it made specially to muffle sounds from the servants' quarters whilst he was working. He had never worked, and there had been very rarely any servants to disturb him, but the door remained invested with a kind of solemnity. Among other virtues it opened at a touch, itself noiseless.

To Robert it was the veritable entrance to the dragon's cave. On one side of it everything was dim and quiet. And then it swung back, and you fell through into the dragon's clutches. You heard the awful roar, and your heart fainted within you,

He fell over the top step. He felt he was going to be sick again. It was the old, familiar sound. He had heard it so often, it was so much part of his daily life that it ought not to have frightened him. But it was always new, always more terrifying. Each time it had new notes of incalculable menace. It was like a brutal hammer, crashing down on bruised flesh and shrinking, quivering nerves, never quite killing you, but with each blow leaving you less capable of endurance.

His father, Christine and Edith were in the dining-room. Robert knew they were all there, though he could not see them. The dining-room door at the end of the unlit passage stood half open, showing the handsome mahogany sideboard and the two Chippendale chairs on either side guarding it like lions. They had a curious tense, still look, as though what they saw in the hidden side of the room struck them stiff with astonishment and horror.

Dr. Stonehouse was speaking. His voice was so low-pitched that Robert could not hear what he said. It was like the murderous, meaningless growling of a mad dog; every now and then it seemed to break free—to explode into a shattering roar—and then with a frightful effort to be dragged back, held down, in order that it might leap out again with a redoubled violence. It was punctuated by the sharp, spiteful smack of a fist brought down into the open hand.

Edith whined and once Christine spoke, her clear still voice patient and resolute.

Robert crouched where he had fallen. The baize door swung back, and touched him very softly like a hand out of the dark. It comforted him. It reminded him that he had only to choose, and it would stand between him and this threatening terror—that it would give him time to rush back down the stone

stairs—out into the street—further and further till they would never find him again. But he could not move. He couldn't leave Christine like that. His heart was sick with pity for her. Why did his father speak to her like that? Didn't he see how good and faithful she was? Didn't he know that he, Robert, his son, had no one else in the whole world?

His father was speaking more clearly—shouting each word by itself.

"You understand what I say, Christine. Either you do what I tell you, or you get out of here; and, by God, this time you shan't come back. You'll never set eyes on him again."

"I shall always take care of Robert. I promised Constance when she was dying. She begged of me——"

"It's a lie—a damned lie! You're not fit to have control over my son.
You can't be trusted. You're a bad friend——"

"I have done all I can. I have told you there is only one thing left—to sell this house—-start afresh."

"Very well, then. That's your last word—and mine."

Suddenly it was still. The stillness was more terrible than anything Robert had ever heard. He gulped and turned like a small, panic-stricken animal. At the bottom of the stairs against the light from the kitchen he could see the bailiff's bulky, honest shadow.

"Look 'ere, little mister, what's wrong up there? Anything I can do——"

The silence was gone. It was broken by the overturning of a chair, by a quiet, sinister scuffling—Edith's voice whining, terrified, thrilled by a silly triumph.

"Don't—don't, Jim. Remember yourself——"

The door was dashed open, and something fell across the light, and there was Christine huddled beneath the sideboard, her head resting against its cruel corner. Her face was towards Robert. He was not to forget it so long as he lived. It was so white and still, so angerless.

His paralysing terror was gone. He leapt to his feet. He raced down the passage, flinging himself on his father, beating him with his fists, shrieking:

"You devil—you devil!"

After that ho did not know what happened. He seemed to be enveloped in a cloud of struggling figures. He heard the bailiff's voice booming, "Come now, sir, this won't do; I am surprised at a gentleman like you!" and his father's answer, incoherent, shaken with rage and shame. Then he must have found his way upstairs. He never remembered how he got there, but he was lying in his bed, in all his clothes, his head hidden beneath the blankets, twitching from head to foot as though his body had gone mad.

Downstairs the lock of the front door clicked. There was something steadfast and reassuring in the sound, as though it were trying to send a message. "Don't worry, I shall come back." But Robert could not feel or care any more. He was struggling with his body as a helpless rider struggles with a frantic runaway horse. He found out for the first time that his body wasn't himself at all. It was something else. It did what it wanted to. He could only cling on to it for dear life. But gradually it seemed to weaken, to yield to his exhausted efforts at control, and at last lay stretched out, relaxed, drenched with an icy sweat. The real himself sank into seas of darkness from which convulsive, tearing shudders, less and less frequent, dragged him, with throbbing heart and starting eyes, back to the surface.

His bandage had slipped off. He held it tight between his hands. He was too numb and stupefied even to think of Francey, but there was magic in that dirty, blood-stained handkerchief. It might have been a saint's relic, or a Red Indian's totem, preserving him from evil. He knew nothing about saints or totems, but he knew that Francey was good and stronger than any of them.

Downstairs the silence remained unbroken. It was an aghast silence, heavy with remorse and shame and self-loathing. It was like the thick dregs lying at the bottom of the cup. But to Robert it was just silence. He sank into it, deeper and deeper, until he slept.

He began to dream. The dreams walked about inside his brain, and were red-coloured as though they were lit up by the glow of a hidden furnace. All the people who took part in them came and went in great haste. Or they made up hurried tableaux—Francey holding the stick and looking at him in white anger, Christine huddled on the floor, his father black and monstrous towering over her. Finally, they all disappeared together, and Robert knew that it was because the Dragon had woken up and was

coming to devour them. He was climbing up from the dining-room. Robert heard his tread on the stairs —heavy, stumbling footsteps such as one would expect from a dragon on a narrow, twisting staircase. They came nearer and nearer, and with every thud Robert seemed to be lifted with a jerk from the depths in which he was lying, and to be aware of his body stiffening in terror.

Then at the last step the Dragon fell, and Robert was awake. He sat bolt upright. There had been no mistaking that dull thump. It lingered in his ears like the echo of a thunder-clap. The Dragon had fallen and killed himself, for he did not move. It was pitch dark in the room, but very slowly and quietly, under the pressure of an invisible hand, the door opposite his bed began to open. The light outside made a widening slit in the darkness. It was like sitting in a theatre watching the curtain go up on a nightmare. He could see the banisters, the glow from the hall beneath, and something black with a white smudge at the end of it lying stretched out from the head of the stairs. His body crawled out of bed. He himself wanted to hide under the clothes, but his body would not let him. It carried him on against his will. When he was near enough he saw that the long black thing was a man's arm and the white smudge a hand, clenched and inert, on the red carpet. His body tottered out on the landing. It was his father lying stretched on the stairs, face downwards.

He tried to scream, but his throat and tongue were dry and swollen. Nor could he touch that still thing, in its passivity more terrible than in its violence. He was afraid that every moment it would lift its face, and show him some new unthinkable horror. He skirted it as though it might leap upon him and devour him, and rushed downstairs, faster and faster, with a thousand devils hunting at his heels.

And then he seemed again to be dreaming. The bailiff ran up from the kitchen in his shirt-sleeves, and he and Edith went up the stairs together, leaving him alone in the library. The fire had gone out, but he cowered up against the grate, hiding his face in his arms.

They were moving the Dragon. Bump—bump—bump—bump. He thought he heard Edith cry out, "Oh, God!" and then silence again. Presently Edith stood in the doorway, looking at him. Her eyes were red-rimmed, and yet there was an air of importance, of solemn triumph about her.

"Your father is—is very ill. The man downstairs has gone for the doctor, and I am going to ask Christine to come round. You must be a good boy, Robert. You must do as I tell you and go to bed."

So they meant to leave him alone in the house with that dreadful still thing lying somewhere upstairs. Or perhaps it wasn't really still. It might have strange powers now. You might come upon it anywhere. You couldn't be sure. It might even be in your bed. He did not want to disobey Edith. Just then he could have clung to her. But he could not go up those stairs. He could not pass those open doors, gaping with unspeakable things. He felt that if he kept very still, hiding his face, They would not touch him. There seemed to be a thin—frightfully thin—partition between him and the world in which they lived, and that by a sudden movement he might break through. He had to hold fast to his body. It was beginning to run away again, to start into long agonized shudderings.

At last a key turned in the latch. Invisible people went up the stairs in silence. But he knew that Christine was among them. He knew because of the sense of sweet security and rest that came over him. He tumbled on to the hearthrug and fell asleep.

He was cold and stiff when the opening of the library door wakened him. He did not know who had opened the door. All he saw was Christine coming down the stairs. Her face was old and almost silver grey. She was not crying like Edith, whose sniffs came assertively and at regular intervals from somewhere in the hall. There was a still, withdrawn look about her, as though she were contemplating something unbreakable that had at last been broken, as though a light had gone out in her for ever. So that Robert could not run to her as he had meant to do.

It was Edith speaking.

"You won't leave me, will you, Christine? Poor Jim! And then that man—I should die of fright. Besides, it wouldn't be right—not proper—to-morrow one of my sisters——"

"Very well. I will spend the night here. But Robert must go to my people. They won't mind now. I shall be back in half an hour."

She helped him into his reefer coat, which she had brought down with her. And still he could not speak to her. She was a long way off from him. As they went into the hall he hid his face against her arm for fear of the things that he might see. But once they were outside, and the good night wind rushed against his face, a great intoxicating joy came over him. He wanted to dance and shout. The Dragon was dead. No one could frighten them again.

"Aren't we ever coming back, Christine?"

"No, dear, I don't think so."

He looked back at the grim, high house. For a moment a sorrow as deep as joy rushed over him. It was as though he knew that something besides the Dragon had died up there in that dimly lit room—as though he were saying good-bye to something he would never find, though he hunted the world over.

He had been a little boy. He would never be quite a little boy again.

Or perhaps the Dragon wasn't dead at all—perhaps Dragons never died, but lived on and on, hiding in secret places, waiting to pounce out on you and drag you back.

He seized Christine's hand.

"Let's run," he whispered. "Let's run fast."

II

1

He discovered that there were people in the world who could make scenes without noise. They were like the crocodiles he had met on his visit to the Zoo, lying malignantly inert in their oily water. But one twitch of the tail, one blink of a lightless eye, was more terrifying than the roar of a lion.

No one made a noise in Christine's home. The two sisters looked at Robert as though he were a small but disagreeable smell that they tried politely to ignore. They asked him if he wanted a second helping in voices of glacial courtesy. They said things to each other and at Christine which were quiet and deadly as the rustle of a snake in the grass. Robert had never fled from his father as he fled from their restrained disgust. He had never been more aware of storm than in the smother of the heavily carpeted, decorously silent rooms. It broke, three days later, not with thunder and lightning, but with the brief malicious rattle of a machine-gun.

"You ought not to have brought him here. You have no pride. But, then, you never had. At least some consideration for our feelings might have been expected. We have suffered enough. If you knew what people said—— Mrs. Stonehouse has been talking. She offered to take the child. As his natural guardian she had the right. An unpardonable, undignified interference——"

Christine hardly answered. Her fragile face wore the look of quiet obstinacy which had braved James Stonehouse and the worst disasters. Robert had seen it too often not to understand. But now his father was dead, and instead; inexplicably, he had become the source of trouble. He disgraced Christine. Her people hated her because she was good to him. He felt the shame of it all over him like a horrible kind of uncleanliness, and beneath the shame a burning sense of wrong. He hid in dark places. He refused to answer even when Christine called him. He skulked miserably past Christine's sisters when he met them in the passage. He scowled at them, his head down, like a hobbled, angry little bull. And Christine's sisters drew in their nostrils in a last genteel effort at self-control.

Christine packed his trunk with ragged odds and ends of clothing, and they made a long journey to No. 14, Acacia Grove, where Christine had taken two furnished rooms and a scullery, which served also as kitchen and bath-room. Acacia Grove was the deformed extremity of a misbegotten suburb. There were five acacia trees planted on either side of the unfinished roadway, but they had been blighted in their youth, and their branches were spinsterish and threadbare. Behind the houses were a few dingy fields, and then a biscuit factory, an obscene, congested-looking building with belching chimneys.

Every morning at nine o'clock Robert walked with Christine to the corner of the road, and a jolly, red-faced 'bus, rollicking through the neighbourhood like a slightly intoxicated reveller who has landed by mistake in a gathering of Decayed Gentlefolk, carried her off citywards, and at dusk returned her again, grey and worn, with wisps of tired brown hair hanging about her face and bundles of solemn letters and folded parchment documents bulging from her dispatch-case. Then she and Robert shopped together at the Stores, and afterwards she cooked over a gas-jet in the scullery, and they had supper together, almost in the dark, but very peacefully.

It was too peaceful. One couldn't believe in it. When supper was over Robert washed up and Christine uncovered the decrepit, second-hand typewriter which she had bought, and began to copy from the letters, bending lower and lower over the crabbed writing and sighing deeply and impatiently as her

fingers blundered at the keys. On odd nights, when there was no copying to be done, she tried to teach Robert his letters and words of one syllable, but they were both too tired, and he yawned and kicked the table and was cross and stupid with sleepiness. At nine o'clock he washed himself cautiously and crept into the little bed beside her big one and lay curled up, listening to the reassuring click-click of the typewriter, until suddenly it was broad daylight again, and there was Christine getting breakfast.

In the day-time Robert played ball in the quiet street or sat with his elbows on the window-sill and watched the people go in and out of the houses opposite. The people were grey and furtive-looking, as though they were afraid of attracting the notice of some dangerous monster and had tried to take on the colour of their surroundings in self-protection. They seemed to ask nothing more for themselves than that they should be forgotten. Robert knew how they felt. He felt like that himself. He was never sure that he was really safe. He dared not ask questions lest he should find out that his father wasn't dead after all, or that they were on the brink of some new convulsion. He did not even ask where Christine went in the day-time, or what had become of Edith, or where their money came from. He clung desperately to an ignorance which allowed him to believe that he and Christine would always live like this, quietly and happily. When the landlady's shadow came heavy-footed up the stairs, he hid himself and stuffed his fingers in his ears lest he should hear her threaten them with instant expulsion. (It was incredible that she and Christine should be talking amicably about the weather.) Or when they went to the butcher's, he hung behind in dread anticipation of the red-faced man's insolent "And what about that there little account of ours, Ma'am?" But the red-faced man smiled ingratiatingly and patted him on the back and called him a fine young fellow. Christine counted out her money at the desk. It made Robert dizzy with joy and pride to see her pay her bill, and tears came into his throat and nearly choked him. On the way home he behaved abominably, chased cats or threw stones with a reckless disregard for their neighbours' windows, and Christine, looking into his flushed, excited face, had a movement that was like the shadow of his own secret fear.

"Robert, Robert, don't be so wild. You might hurt yourself—or someone else. It frightens me."

And then at once he walked quietly beside her, chilled and dispirited. At any moment the new-found commonplaces might drop from him, and everyone would find out—the neighbours who nodded kindly and the tradespeople who bowed them out of their shops—just as Francey and the Banditti had found out—and turn away from him, ashamed and sorry.

He did not think of Francey very often. For when he did it was almost always in those last moments together that he remembered her—the Francey who was too strong for him, the Francey who knew that he was a nasty little boy who couldn't even beat a girl—who told lies—the Francey who despised him. And then it was as though his body had been bruised afresh from head to foot. But he still had her handkerchief. He even kept it hidden from Christine lest she should insist on washing it. For by now it was incredibly dirty.

In the day-time he never thought of his father at all. But in his sleep one nightmare returned repeatedly. It never varied; it was definite and horrible. In it his father, grown to demonic proportions, towered over Christine's huddled body, his eyes terrible, his fists clenched and raised to strike. Then in that moment, at the very height of his awful fear and helpless hatred, the wonderful truth burst upon Robert, and he danced gleefully, full of cruel triumph, about the black, suddenly impotent figure, shouting:

"You can't—you're dead—you're dead—you can't——"

And then he would wake up with a hideous start, sweating, his eyes hot with unshed tears, and Christine's hand would come to him out of the darkness and clasp his in reassuring firmness.

There was another dream. Or, rather, it was half a dream and half one of these stories that he told himself just before he fell asleep. It came to him at dusk when he stood at the gate and waited for Christine to come home. In the long day of silent games he had lost touch, little by little, with reality. Hunger had made him faint and drowsy. Things changed, became unfamiliar, fantastic. Between the stunted trees he could see the afterglow of the sunset like the reflection of a blazing city. The road then was full of silence and shadow. The drab outlines grew faint and the mean houses were merged into the vaster shapes of night. Robert waited, motionless, breathless. He was sure that something was coming to him down the path of fading light. He did not know what it was. Once, indeed, it had been Francey, with her queer dancing step, her hair flying about her head like a flock of little red-brown birds. She had hovered before him, on tiptoe, as though the next gust of wind would blow her on her way down the street, and looked at him. They had not spoken, but he had seen in her eyes how sorry she was that she had not understood. And a warm content had flowed over him. All the sore, aching places were healed and comforted.

But that had been only once. And then he wasn't sure that he hadn't made it up. At all other times the

thing was outside himself too strange to have been imagined. It shook him from head to foot with dread and longing. He wanted to run to meet it, to plunge into it, reckless and shouting, as into a warm, dancing, summer sea. And yet it menaced him. It was of fire and colour, of the rumble and thud of armies, of laughter and singing and distant broken music. It was all just round the comer. If he hurried he would see it, lose himself in it, march to the tune he could never quite catch. But he was afraid, and whilst he tried to make up his mind the light faded. The sounds died. After all, it was only Christine, trudging wearily through the dusk.

2

The six forms were marshalled in squares down the centre of the drill-hall, Form I, with Robert Stonehouse at the bottom, holding the place of dishonour under the shadow of the Headmaster's rostrum. Robert did not know that he was at the bottom of Form I, or that such a thing as Form I existed. He did not know that he was older than the eldest of his class-mates, but he was aware of being unusually and uncomfortably large. Under the curious stare that had greeted him on his first appearance and which now pressed on him from the rear and sides, he felt himself shoot up, inch by inch, into a horrible conspicuousness, whilst his feet grew flat and leaden, and his hands were too swollen to squeeze into his trousers pockets.

". . . we have left undone those things which we ought to have done and we have done those things which we ought not to have done . . ."

He wondered what they were saying. It sounded rather like one of those tongue-twisters which his father had taught him in a playful moment—"round the rugged rock the ragged robber ran"—but it was evidently no joking matter. And it was something which everyone knew except himself. The urchin on his left piped it out in an assured, self-satisfied treble. The clergyman kneeling behind the raised desk came in with a bang at the beginning of each sentence, and then subsided into an indistinguishable murmur. Evidently he knew what he was saying so well that he did not need even to think about it, for his eyes wandered over his folded hands as though in methodical search for somebody. They reached Form I, and Robert, who saw them coming, broke instinctively into a panic-stricken gabble. Of all the poems which Christine had read aloud to him, Casablanca was the only one he could remember, and he had got as far as "whence all but he had fled" before he saw that it was of no good. The subterfuge had been recognized. The clergyman had stopped praying and was gazing at him earnestly. Robert gazed back, fascinated and open-mouthed.

". . . and there is no health in us . . ."

But the strain of that encounter was too much for him. He tried to escape, first to the ceiling and finally to his boots. The stare pursued him, pointed at him. In a moment the whole school would be on his track. His eyes, rolling desperately to their corners, encountered a little dark man who had led in Form I and now stood sideways on, so as to keep his charge under constant survey. Even in that moment of acute despair he arrested Robert's attention. There was something odd about him—something distressful and indignant. Whilst he prayed he made jerky, irritable movements which fluttered out the wings of his gown, so that with his sleek black hair and pointed face he looked like a large angry blackbird, trapped and tied by the foot.

"But Thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us . . ."

And then, suddenly, an amazing conviction broke upon Robert. The little man wasn't praying at all. His lips moved, but the movement was all wrong. He was repeating two words, over and over again, at great speed and with a suppressed violence. They looked familiar—painfully, elusively familiar. Robert felt that in another moment he would recognize them:

". . . spare Thou them that are penitent . . ."

Now Robert knew for certain. It was his father's favourite answer to all expostulations. Of course that was it. "Damned rot—damned rot—damned rot." The little man was swearing passionately to himself. It was incredible, but there was no mistake possible. And in the full blast of the discovery his dark eyes, hunted and angry-looking behind their round glasses, met Robert's, widened, passed on, and came back again. It was an extraordinary moment. Robert could not have looked away to save his life. He knew that he had betrayed himself. The little man knew that he knew. He grew very red, coughed, and blew his nose violently, his eyes meantime returning repeatedly to Robert's flushed and frightened face with an expression utterly unfathomable. It was almost as though he were trying to signal——

"Amen!" declared the whole school with infinite relief and satisfaction.

The clergyman sighed deeply and raised himself painfully from his knees.

"Hymn number 503."

A boy came out from the class next to Robert's and walked to the piano, and Robert forgot everything else, even his own imminent disgrace. He had never seen such red hair before—deep red with a touch of purple, like the leaves of a beech tree in autumn—or such a freckled face. The freckles lay thick on the small unimportant nose and clashed painfully against the roots of the amazing hair. They crowded out the flaxen eyebrows altogether. And yet he was pretty in a wistful, whimsical sort of way. He made Robert want to laugh. Someone close to Robert did titter, and muttered, "Go it, Carrots!" and Robert saw that the boy had heard and was horribly frightened. He winced and faltered, and Robert poked out viciously with his elbow.

"Shut up!" he whispered,

His victim was too astonished even to retaliate.

The red-haired boy had reached the piano. And at once a change came over him. He wasn't frightened any more. He played the first verse over without a stumble, calmly, confidently, as though he knew that now no one had the right to laugh. The light from an upper window made a halo of his blazing head and lit up his small round face, faintly and absurdly grave, but with something elfish and eager lurking behind the gravity. Robert stared at him as an Ancient Briton might have stared at the first lordly Roman who crossed his ken. He felt uncouth and cumbersome and stupid. And yet he could have knocked the red-headed boy down easily with one hand.

The clergyman led the singing. The urchin on Robert's right had produced a hymn-book from his pocket and opened it and found his place with the same air of smug efficiency. Robert had no book. He longed for one. He knew that the clergyman was watching him again. His companion nudged him, and by a stab of a stumpy, inky forefinger indicated the verse which he himself was singing in an aggressive treble. But Robert only stared helplessly. At another time he might have recognized "God—love—dove—" and other words of one syllable, and he liked the tune. But now he could see nothing but the clergyman and think of nothing but the little dark man. He wondered madly what the latter was singing now and whether he had managed to fit in "damned rot—damned rot" to the music. But he did not dare to look.

A second prod roused him with a ghastly self-betraying start.

"You gotter sing," the small boy whispered fiercely; "gotter sing, idjit."

"Wh-a-a-t?"

Robert made a loud, unexpected noise in his throat. His companion choked, spluttered and buried his impertinent face in a grubby handkerchief. The dark man left his post hastily and stationed himself immediately at Robert's side in anticipation of a further outbreak. Someone in the rear giggled hysterically. Robert dropped his head and riveted his swimming eyes on the clergyman's boots. He made no further attempt to save himself. He was caught by his mysterious, relentless destiny. He had been found out.

3

Mr. Morton, the headmaster, believed in Hygiene and the Educational Value of Beauty. The classroom smelt vividly of carbolic. There was a large lithograph of "Love and Life" on the pure white wall and a pot of flowers on the high window-sill. Maps, blackboards and all other paraphernalia of learning were kept in merciful concealment.

Robert took possession of the desk nearest him and was at once ejected. Its rightful owner scowled darkly at him. At the next desk he tried to anchor himself, and there was a scuffle and a smothered exchange of blows, from which he escaped with a scraped shin and a strange, unfamiliar sense of being afraid. There was no fight in him. He didn't want to fight. He wanted to belong—to be one of the herd—and he knew dimly that he would first have to learn its laws and submit to its tortures. He tried to grin back when the titter, which seemed endemic, broke out afresh as he stumbled on his ignominious pilgrimage, but the unasked-for partition in their amusement seemed to exasperate them. They whispered things to one another. They commented on his clothes. He realized suddenly how poorly dressed he was. There was a patch on the knee of his trousers and a mended tear on his shiny jacket. His finger-nails weren't very clean. Christine had gone off too early to be sure that he had done them, and he had never thought much of that sort of thing. Now he was paralysed with shame. He could feel

the tears strangling him.

Fortunately the desk in the far corner belonged to nobody. It was old and battered and covered with the undecipherable carvings of his predecessors, but at once he loved it. It was his. Its retired position seemed to offer him protection. He hid behind it, drawing a long, shuddering sigh of thankfulness.

The little dark man stood on the raised platform and surveyed them all. His expression was nearly a grimace; as though he had just swallowed a disagreeable medicine. He pursed his lips and held tight to the lapels of his coat, his piercing yet distressful eyes blinking rapidly behind their glasses with a kind of nervous malice.

"Well, my delightful and learned young friends——"

The class wilted in anticipation. But before he spoke again the door opened and they rose thankfully with a shuffle of feet and surreptitious clatter of desks. The clergyman waved to them. If the little dark man was like a blackbird, captive and resentful, the newcomer was like a meagre and somewhat fluttered hen. His hands and wrists were long and yellow and sinewy. He wore no cuffs, but one could see the beginnings of his Jaeger undervest under the black sleeve. He rubbed his chin or smoothed the back of his small head almost ceaselessly.

"You can sit down, boys. One moment, Mr. Ricardo, one moment only——"

He spoke in an undertone. Robert knew it was about him. They both looked in his direction. The little man jerked his head.

"Robert Stonehouse."

He sat motionless, trying to hide from them. But it was of no good. The clergyman made an elevating gesture, and he rose automatically as though he were tied to that gentleman's hand by an invisible string. The desk was much too small for him and he had to wiggle to get free from it. The lid banged. Instantly every boy had turned in his seat to gaze at him, and he saw that this was the worst place that could have fallen to his lot. In his corner he was trapped, a sea of mocking, curious faces between him and his tormentors.

The clergyman smiled palely at him.

"I understand that you are a new boy, Stonehouse, and I don't wish to be too severe with you. At the same time we must begin as we are to go on. And you were not behaving very well at prayers this morning, were you?"

Robert moved his lips soundlessly. But no answer was expected of him.
The question was rhetorical. "You weren't," the enemy said,
"attending. You were trying to make your companions laugh——"
This, at least, was unbearably unjust.

"I wasn't," Robert interrupted loudly.

Someone moved to compassion hissed, "Say 'sir'—say sir,'" but he was beyond help. From that moment on he was beyond fear. He dug himself in, dogged and defiant.

"Come now, Stonehouse, I saw you myself. You were only pretending to join in, now weren't you? How was it? Didn't you know the prayer?"

"No."

"Don't be so abrupt, my boy. Say 'sir' when you answer me. How is it that you don't know it? You go to church, don't you?"

"No."

"Say 'sir.'"

"Sir."

"Well, chapel, then. You go to chapel, no doubt?"

Robert stared blankly.

"You don't? But surely your mother takes you——"

"I haven't got a mother." His voice sounded in his own ears like a shout. He scowled down at the

faces nearest him. He was ready to fight them now. If they were going to say anything about his mother, good or bad, he would fly at them, just as he had flown at his old aggressors in the Terrace, regardless of size and numbers.

"Your father, then?"

"I haven't got a father."

His questioner smiled faintly, not without asperity.

"Come, come, you are not yet a gentleman in independent circumstances.
Who takes care of you?"

"Christine."

"And who, pray, is Christine?"

Who was Christine? It was as though suddenly the corner of a curtain had been raised for a moment, letting him look through into a strange new country.

"I don't know."

The clergyman waved his hand, damping down the titters that spluttered up nervously, threatening to explode outright. He himself had an air of slight dishevelment, as though his ideas had been blown about by a rude wind.

"I remember—Mr. Morton spoke to me—your guardian, of course. You should answer properly. But still, surely you have been taught—some religious instruction. You say your prayers, don't you?"

"No." He added after a moment of sudden, vivid recollection: "Not now."

It was nothing short of a debacle. He had pulled out the keystone of an invisible edifice which had come tumbling about their ears, leaving him in safety. Without knowing how or why, he knew he had got the better of them all. The grins died out of the upturned faces. They looked at him with amazement, with horror, yes—with respect.

"But you have been taught your catechism—to—to believe in God?"

"No."

"But the hymn—at least you could have sung the hymn, my poor boy. You can read, can't you?"

"No."

The awe passed before a storm of unchecked laughter. For one spectacular moment he had held them all helpless, every one of them, by the sheer audacity of his admissions. Now with one word he had fallen—an ignominious, comic outcast. The clergyman turned away, shaken but satisfied.

"You have a great deal to learn. I doubt if Mr. Morton quite realized—— A heavy task in front of you, too, Mr. Ricardo. One word, please——"

They spoke in undertones. Robert slid back into his seat. He could feel exultant glances sting and pierce him on every side. And yet when the door closed he had to look up. He was driven by a relentless curiosity to meet the worst. Mr. Ricardo had resumed his place. He did not so much as glance at Robert. He clung on to the lapels of his coat and blinked up at the window as though nothing had happened. But there was something impish twitching at the corners of his nervous mouth.

"My delightful young friends," he said, "you will be kind enough to leave Stonehouse in peace both now and hereafter. I know your amiable propensities, and my own conviction is that he is probably worth the pack of you. Get out your history books——"

So he was a friend. A powerful friend. But not powerful enough. No one looked at Robert again. And yet he knew, with all the certainty of inherited instinct, that they were waiting for him.

4

He went out into the school-yard like an early Christian into the arena. He knew exactly what to expect. It was just the Terrace over again. He would have to fight them all until they learnt to leave him alone. Somehow he knew for certain that to be left alone was the best he could expect. They would

never really forgive him for being different from themselves. It was very mysterious. It couldn't be his father or the unpaid bills any more. It seemed that if you were born different you remained different, however hard you tried. He had wanted so much to go to school, to run with a band again, to play games with them and have them call out, "Hallo, Stonehouse!" as he heard other boys call to each other across the street. He had meant to be exactly like them at all costs. It had seemed so easy, since his father was dead and Christine paid the butcher. But at once he had been found out, a marked man. He hadn't got a father and mother like ordinary people, he didn't go to church, he didn't say his prayers, he couldn't read, and he didn't know who God was—or even Christine——

There was a moment of suspense before the attack opened. Like an old, experienced general he made his way with apparent indifference towards the wall. But he was not quite quick enough. Someone prodded him sharply in the back. Someone hissed in mocking imitation:

"I don't know—I don't know!"

He was too cunning to retaliate. He waited till he had reached his chosen ground, then he turned with his fists clenched. The storm had already gathered. It was only a little school, and the story of the new boy's "break" with old Jaegers had reached even the big louts who lingered on in Form VI. They made a rough half-circle round their intended victim, only partially malevolent in their intentions. The fact that he had bearded a contemptible old beast like Jaegers was rather in his favour than otherwise, but his assertion that he did not say his prayers and knew nothing about God smacked of superiority. He had to be taken down. And, anyhow, a new boy was an object of curiosity and his preliminary persecution a time-honoured custom. A fight was not in their calculations—the very idea of a new boy venturing to fight beyond their imaginations. And Robert did not want to fight. He felt oddly weary and disinclined. But to him there was no other outcome possible. It was his only tradition. It blinded him to what was kindly or only mischievous in the faces round him. He had a momentary glimpse of the red-headed boy who stood just outside the circle, munching an apple and staring at him with astonished blue eyes, and then his attention fixed itself on his enemy-in-chief. There was no mistaking him. He was a big, lumpy fellow, fifteen years of age, with an untidy mouth, the spots of a premature adolescence and an air of heavy self-importance. When he spoke, the rest fell into awed attention.

"Hallo, new kid, what's your name?"

"Robert Stonehouse."

"Don't be so abrupt, my boy,"—a delighted titter from the small fry—"say 'sir' when you answer me."

"I shan't."

The little colourless eyes widened in sheer incredulity. For a moment the role of humorist was forgotten.

"Look here—no cheek, or I'll smack your head."

"He hasn't been properly brought up," one of the spotty youth's companions remarked, not ill-naturedly. "Can't expect him to have manners. He never had a father or a mother, poor darling——"

"Then where did he come from?"

"God made him."

"He told old Jaegers he'd never even heard of God."

"Dear, dear, what a naughty boy. He doesn't even say his prayers."

"But he lives with a lady called Christine——"

"How nice for him. Is she a pretty lady, Stonehouse?" Up till now nothing had stirred in him. He hadn't cared. He had indeed felt something of the superiority which they suspected in him. If that was all they could do—— Now, suddenly, the blood rushed to the roots of his fair hair.

"Shut up. You leave Christine alone."

The big boy was too delighted to be angry.

"Hoity-toity. She must be a high-stepper. No trespassers allowed—eh, what? young cockalorum. Come on, what's she like? Who is she?

"He doesn't know."

"She isn't his mother."

"He says she isn't."

"P'r'aps he doesn't know that either. P'r'aps that's what she says——"

The full extent of the innuendo, like the majority of the audience, he did not understand, but he saw the wink which passed between the two elder boys. Ever since that day when he had gathered flowers for his mother in Kensal Green Cemetery he had known of dark things, just beyond his understanding. He had wandered in the midst of them too long not to be aware of them on the instant. And it was against Christine—who had suffered from them so terribly—they dared—— A great sigh tore itself free from him. He put his head down. He flew at the spotty youth like a stone from a catapult, and they went down together in a cloud of dust.

After that, as in most of his uneven, desperate encounters, he hardly knew what happened. He felt nothing. In reality it was an absurd spectacle. The spotty youth, bounding up from his momentary discomfiture, caught Robert by the collar and smacked him shamefully, severely, as the outrage merited. And when justice had been satisfied, he released the culprit, and Robert, without pause, returned, fighting with fists and feet and teeth, as he had learnt to do from dire necessity. It was unprecedented. The spotty youth gasped. His companions offered intervention.

"I'll hold the beggar."

But honour was at stake. The small fry, startled out of caution, were tittering in hysterical excitement.

"Th-thanks—you keep out of it—I'll manage him."'

The second beating was more drastic. The third was ineffectual. The spotty youth, besides being exhausted, was demoralized with sheer bewilderment. He was not clever, and when events ran out of their ruts he lost his head. He had made the same discovery that the Terrace boys had made long since, namely that short of killing Robert Stonehouse there was no way of beating him, and he drew back, panting, dishevelled, his manly collar limp and his eyes wild.

"There—that'll teach you——"

Robert laughed. He put his tongue out. He knew it was vulgar but it was the only retaliation he had breath for. His clothes were dusty and torn, his nose bloody. He was a frightful object. But he knew that he had won.

The spotty youth wiped his hands on his handkerchief with exaggerated disgust.

"Dirty little beast. I wouldn't touch him again—not with the end of a barge pole."

He never did. Nobody did. Though he did not know it, it was Robert's last fight. But he had won immunity at a high cost. The small fry skirted him as they went out through the school gates. It was more than fear. They distrusted him. He was not one of them. He did not keep their laws. His wickedness was not their wickedness, his courage not their courage. He ought not to have fought a boy in the sixth form. He ought to have taken his beating quietly. Even if he had "blubbed" they might afterwards have taken him to their bosoms in understanding and inarticulate sympathy. As it was, he was a devil—a foreign devil, outside the caste for ever.

Only the small red-haired boy, waiting cautiously till everyone else was out of sight, came after him as he trailed forlornly down the street. He was still chewing meditatively at the core of his apple, and his eyes, vividly blue amidst the freckles, considered Robert out of their corners with solemn astonishment.

"I say, Stonehouse, you can fight."

Robert nodded. He was still breathless.

"I—I'm used to it."

"I'm glad you kicked that beast Saunders. You hurt him, too. I saw him make a face. I wish I could fight like that. But I'm no good at it. I'm not 'fraid—not really—but I just hate it. You like it, don't you?"

Robert swaggered a little.

"Rather."

There was a moment's silence,

"I say—if you like it—would you mind licking Dickson Minor for me? He's always ragging me—you see, I've a rotten time—because of my hair, and about playing the piano. Dickson's the worst. I'd be awfully glad, if you wouldn't mind, of course."

Robert surreptitiously wiped the blood from his nose on to his sleeve. As usual he had no handkerchief. A warm, delicious solace flowed over his battered spirit. His heart swelled till it hurt him. It opened wide to the little red-haired boy. If only Francey could see him now—the defender of the oppressed. But he did not dare to think of that. After all, he might cry.

He nodded negligently.

"All right. I don't mind."

"P'r'aps, when he knows you're standing up for me, he'll leave me alone."

"He'd better."

"My name's Rufus—Rufus Cosgrave. You see, I was born like this, and my father thought it would be a good joke. I call it beastly."

"Mine's Robert."

The red-haired boy meditated a little longer. He rubbed his arm against Robert's softly like a young pony.

"I say, let's be friends—shall we?"

Robert gulped and turned his head away.

"All right. I don't mind."

They parted shyly at the corner of Cosgrave's road—a neat double file of vastly superior villas, as Robert realized with a faint sinking of the heart; but Robert did not go home. He made his way out to the dingy fields behind the biscuit factory, and watched the local rag and bobtail play football, lying hidden in the long grass under the wall so that they should not see him and fall upon him. Even when it grew dusk and he knew that Christine must be almost home, he still wandered about the streets. He was hungry and footsore, his head and body ached, but he put off the moment when he would have to face her to the very last. He loved her, and he was not really afraid, though he knew that the sight of his torn, blood-stained clothes would rouse her to a queer unreasonable despair; but he had talked so much, so proudly and so confidently of going to school. And now, how should he tell the tale of his disgrace, how make clear to her the misery which the unfathomable gulf between himself and his companions caused in him, or that because a red-haired, freckled small boy had asked him to fight Dickson Minor he had lain in the grass with his face hidden in his arms and wept tears of sacred happiness? There were things you could never tell, least of all to people whom you loved. They were locked up in you, and the key had been lost long since.

The street lamps came to life one by one. He strolled down Acacia Grove, whistling and swinging his legs with an exaggerated carelessness. He could see their light in the upper window of No. 14. He was sure that Christine would watch for him, and when the hall door opened suddenly, he stopped short, shrinking from their encounter. But it was a man who came out of the gate towards him. For one moment an awful, reasonless terror made him half turn to run, to run headlong, never to come back; the next, he recognized the slight, jerky limp which made his form master so comically bird-like, and stood still, knowing that now Christine had heard everything, the very worst. Probably Mr. Ricardo had come to tell her that she must take him away, that he was too bad and too stupid to be with other boys, and a lump gathered in his throat because he would never see Rufus Cosgrave again: never fight for him.

Mr. Ricardo halted, peering through the dusk.

"That you, Stonehouse?"

"Yes"—he added painfully, because the little man had been kind to him—"sir."

"Your—Miss Forsyth is getting anxious about you. Why are you so late?"

Robert muttered "Football," knowing it was a lie, and that somehow or other his companion knew it too. He heard Mr. Ricardo sigh deeply and wearily.

"Well, I'm very late myself. I don't know this neighbourhood. Is there a station or a 'bus near here?"

"There's a 'bus." Robert pointed eagerly. "I'll show you if you like."

"Thanks—if it doesn't take you too long."

They walked side by side in silence, Mr. Ricardo's stick tapping smartly on the pavement, he himself apparently deep in thought. It seemed to Robert that he had escaped, until suddenly a thin hand took him by the shoulder and shook him with a friendly impatience.

"Football. Nonsense. A boy like you doesn't play football. He hasn't had the chance. Besides, it's not his line. He plays a lone game. No. You've been moping round—crying possibly. Well, I do that myself sometimes. It's a crying business, unless you've got nerves and guts. But you've got that all right. I saw you fight that stupid bully Saunders from my window, and you beat him, too. I was fighting with you, though you didn't know it. It was I who kicked him that time you caught him on the shin."

Robert would have laughed had he been less miserable, and had he not caught beneath Mr. Ricardo's brief amusement a real and angry satisfaction. In the dark, too, he had an uneasy feeling that after all he was going to be found out.

"And then after you'd stood up to and beaten a fellow twice your size you went away by yourself and howled. Shall I tell you why? You'll be astonished. Probably you won't understand in the least. You cried because you're a young idiot. You find yourself in a herd of half-baked living creatures, and you see that they are wearing chains round their ankles and rings through their noses so that they can't move or breathe properly, and you think to yourself that that's the proper thing, and you come crying home for someone to tie you up like the rest. It's natural. It's the race instinct and has had its uses. But it's dangerous. It kills most of us. We start out with brains to use and eyes to see with and hands to make with and we end up by thinking nothing and seeing nothing and making nothing that hasn't been thought and seen and made for the last two thousand years. Most of us, even when we know what is happening to us, are cowed and blackmailed into surrender. We have to compromise—there are circumstances—always circumstances—unless we are very strong—we give in—beaten out of shape ——"

His sentences, that had become painful and disjointed, broke off, and there was another silence. Robert could say nothing. He was dazed with the many words, half of which, it was true, he had not understood at all. And yet they excited him. They seemed to pierce through and touch some sleeping thing in himself which stirred and answered: "Yes, yes, that's true—that's true."

The pressure on his shoulders increased a little.

"But you're not afraid of anything, are you, Stonehouse?"

"No—no, sir. I don't think so—not really——"

"I don't think you are, either. I liked the way you stood up to that poor faggot of hereditary superstitions and prejudices who was trying to frighten you into being as big a humbug as himself. He'll never get over it. I daresay he'll make things very unpleasant for you in his charming Christian way. How old are you, Stonehouse?"

"Ten—nearly, sir."

"You're big and precocious for your age. You'll get the better of him. But if you'd been brought up with other children you'd have whined and cringed—'Yes, sir,' 'No, sir'—and been a beastly canting hypocrite all your life. You're wonderfully lucky if you only knew it, Stonehouse. You're nearly ten, and you can't read and you don't say your prayers and your catechism and you know nothing about God Almighty. You've a sporting chance of becoming a man——"

Robert stumbled over his own feet. A deeper, almost overpowering, tiredness had come over him. And yet he was fascinated. He had to try to understand.

"Isn't there—I mean—isn't there anyone like God?"

Mr. Ricardo stopped short. He made a strange, wild gesture. Standing there in the half-darkness he was more than ever like some poor hobbled bird trying desperately, furiously to beat its way back to freedom.

"Superstition—superstition, Stonehouse—the most crushing, damnable chain of all, the symbol of cowardice, of greed and vanity, the enemy of truth and knowledge, the hot-bed on which we breed the miserable half-men who cumber this earth, a pitiable myth——"

He had almost shouted. It was as though he had been addressing a vast audience. His voice dropped now, and he walked on, peering about him anxiously.

"Well—well, you are too young. There are things you can't understand.
But I shall teach you. No, there is no God, Stonehouse."

Robert was vaguely sorry. It was true that he had no clear idea of God, and yet in some way He had been mixed up with the bands and music and marching crowds that were always just round the corner. In his expansive, genial moments, so rare towards the end. Dr. Stonehouse had been known to say, "God bless you, Christine," and that had always meant a few hours' peace. It seemed very sad.

"What are you going to be, Stonehouse?"

"A doctor, sir."

"Why?"

It was impossible to tell the whole truth—namely, that because Francey had said she was to be a doctor he had said he would be one too, and a better one at that. He gave half-measure.

"I want to be."

"Well, that's a good reason. It might be a great profession, but it has its liars and tricksters like the rest. It is eaten up by little men who wrap themselves in priestly garments and hide their ignorance behind oracular silences. They play up to the superstitious weakness of the mob, and replace one religion by another. They don't care what beastly misery and evil they keep alive so long as they can pull off their particular little stunts. You mustn't be like that, Stonehouse. To be free—to be free—and strong enough to go one's way and trample down the people who try to turn you aside; that is the only thing worth while. Don't let them catch you, Stonehouse. You don't know how cunning they can be—cunning and cruel."

He sighed again, and Robert did not try to answer. He had given up all hope of understanding, and his tiredness was now such that he had to set his teeth to keep the tears back. At the corner they waited in silence watching the jolly, yellow-eyed 'bus rumble towards them down the High Street.

"Your guardian will tell you what we have arranged," Mr. Ricardo said abruptly and with a complete change of tone. "In a month you will read better than any of them. As to the rest, you will have to compromise. So long as you know what you are doing and don't humbug yourself, there's no harm done. With the necessity you will shake yourself free. You can say, 'I believe in God the Father Almighty' with your lips and in your heart, as I do, damned rot—damned rot.'"

He laughed, and in the lamplight Robert saw his face, puckered with an impish, malicious merriment. Robert laughed too. So he had guessed right. He felt proud and pleased.

"Good night, Stonehouse."

"Good night, sir."

Robert took off his battered cap politely as did other boys. Mr. Ricardo scrambled into the 'bus with an unexpected agility, and from the bright interior in which he sat a huddled, faceless shadow, he waved. Robert waved back. A fresh rush of elation had lifted him out of his sorrowful weariness. His disgrace had been miraculously turned to a kind of secret triumph. He was different; but then, how different! He didn't wear chains or a ring through his nose. He was going to know things that no one else knew. And one day he would be big and free.

5

It did not last. By the time he had dragged himself up to the top of their stairs there was nothing left but hunger, the consciousness of tattered, blood-stained clothes, and a sore, tired body. After all, he was only a small boy who had wanted to play with other boys, and had been cast out. Even Mr. Ricardo could never make them play with him.

It was dark in the sitting-room. Against the grey, ghostly light of the window he could see Christine bowed over her typewriter. She was so still that she frightened him. All the terrors of night which lay in wait for him ever since his fathers dead hand had touched his door and opened it, rushed down upon him with a sweep of black, smothering wings. He called out "Christine! Christine!" in a choked voice, and she moved at once, and he saw her profile, sharp-drawn and unfamiliar.

"Is that you, Robert? What is it, dear?"

So she had not been worrying about him at all. She did not know that it was long past their usual supper-time. She had been thinking of something else. It made her seem a terrifyingly long way off, and he shuffled across the room to her, and touched her to make sure of her. And it was strange that her hand glided over him anxiously, questioningly, as though in the darkness she too had been afraid and uncertain.

"Your form-master, Mr. Ricardo, has been here. We've been talking about you. Is your coat very, very torn?"

"Not—not very."

"Never mind. I'll mend it afterwards—when you've gone to bed."

Because he was so tired himself the unutterable weariness in her voice smote him on the heart unbearably. He had never heard it before. It made him think of her, for the first time, not just as Christine, who looked after him and loved him, but as someone apart whom, perhaps, he did not know at all. Hadn't they asked him, "Who is Christine?" And he hadn't answered. He hadn't known.

"Mr. Ricardo says you will need a lot of help to pick up with the other boys. Poor little Robert! But he takes an interest in you, and you are to go to his house in the afternoon to be coached, and in a few weeks you will know as much as any of them."

He did not know what "coaching" meant, but all of a sudden he had become afraid of Mr. Ricardo. He did not want to go to him. He knew that Mr. Ricardo would not like him to play with other boys, even if he got a chance. He would want him to be alone and different always.

"He doesn't believe in God," Robert asserted accusingly. "He said he didn't."

"Perhaps not, dear."

"Doesn't that matter?"

"I don't suppose God minds—if He exists."

"Don't you believe in Him, Christine?"

"I don't know. People say they believe too easily. I expect I believe as much as the others. With most of us it's just—just a hope."

They had never talked together in that way before. It made her more than ever someone apart from him, who had her own thoughts, and perhaps her own secret way of being unhappy. He was frightened again, not of the darkness now, but of something nearer—something so real and deadly that the old spectres became almost comic, like ghosts made up of dust-sheets and broom-handles. Supposing Christine went still further from him—supposing she left him altogether alone? She wouldn't do it of her free will, but there were things people couldn't help. People died. The thought was a cruel hand twining itself into the strings of his heart. He tried to see her face. Was she young? He didn't know. He had never thought about it. She had been grown-up. That covered everything. Now in the pale, unreal light her face and hair were a strange dead gray, and she was old—old.

"Christine, how—how long do people live?"

"It depends. Sometimes to a hundred—sometimes just a minute.

"But if one is careful, Christine—I mean, really careful?"

"It doesn't always help, Robert. And even if it did, the people who need to live most have to take risks ——" She broke off, following her thought further till it was far beyond his reach. "In fifteen years you will be grown up. You will be able to take care of yourself. What will you be then?"

"A doctor," he said firmly; "and I'll look after you, Christine, and you'll live for ever and ever."

"A doctor—a doctor!" She seemed startled, almost frightened. "Yes, of course. Your father would want it. He was always proud of his profession, though he made fun. But it will mean more—waiting a little longer."

She brooded, her hand covering her eyes, and he crept nearer to her, pressing himself against her arm, trying to draw her back.

"Christine, who—who are you?"

"I don't know, Robert, I don't know——"

"I mean—why do you look after me? You're not my mother."

"Why, I love you."

"But you didn't at the beginning. You couldn't have done."

"Your father and I were friends. Yes, always—always—right through everything—to the very end. When your mother came into our lives, I loved her almost more. That will seem very strange to you one of these days, but it was true. When she was dying she asked me to take care of you both." She drew herself up, and pushed the untidy wisps of hair out of her face, and with that gesture she seemed suddenly to grow vigorous and young. "Why, Robert, it's better than if you were my own son; it's as though in you I had a little of those two always with me."

"Christine, you won't ever leave me, will you?"

For now his fear had him by the throat. She didn't—she never had belonged to him. It was his father and his mother, who were dead.

"Of course not—not so long as you need me. You mustn't worry. It's because we're both tired and hungry. We'll get supper."

Her voice was its old self. But whilst she laid the cloth he stood pressed against the window and looked out with blind eyes into the darkness, so that she should not see his slow, hot tears. He was aware of great and bitter loss. But he loved Christine more than he had ever done. His love had ceased to be instinctive. It had become conscious of itself and of her separateness. And it would never be quite free again from pain.

III

1

Long before he could read words of three syllables, Robert had learnt the Origin of Man, and had made a vivid, somewhat fanciful picture of that personage's pathetic beginnings as a miasm floating on the earth's surface, and of his accidental, no less pathetic progression as a Survival of the Fittest. He gathered that even more than old Jaegers, Mr. Ricardo hated God Almighty and Jesus Christ, the latter of whom was intimately connected with something called a Sun Myth—chiefly, Robert supposed, because He was the Son of God. Mr. Ricardo could not leave these two alone. He hunted them down, he badgered and worried them, he covered them with gibes and insults. It seemed to Robert sometimes that even the multiplication table was really a disguised missile hurled in their unsuspecting and non-existent faces.

Mr. Ricardo appeared to have no friends. As far as Robert could make out, when he was not at school he sat at his desk in the untidy, stuffy attic in the still more untidy, stuffy boarding-house where he lived, and wrote feverishly. What he wrote Robert did not know. There was an air of mystery about the whole business, as though he were concocting a deadly explosive which might go off at any moment. Sometimes he seemed dated, sometimes cast down by the results, but always doggedly resolved.

"It is a long, hard struggle, Stonehouse," he would say. "There are more fools in this world than you could conceive possible. Thank your stars your friend isn't one of them. A fine, intelligent woman—a unique woman."

He talked a good deal about Christine and women in general.

"When once we can get them on our side," was one of his dark sayings, "the last trench will be in our hands."

Then, one evening, to Robert's astonished displeasure, he walked home with him, and somehow drifted up their dark stairs to the little sitting-room where Christine was laying supper. It appeared that he had come to give an account of his pupil's progress, but he was oddly excited, and when Christine invited him to share their meal—surely he could have seen there wasn't enough to go round, Robert

thought—he accepted with a transparent, childlike eagerness that made Robert stare at him as at a stranger. And after supper, with the self-conscious air of a man who has waited for this moment, be produced from his coat pocket a crumpled newspaper with the title *Unshackled* printed in aggressive letters on its pale-green cover.

"In my leisure time I write a good deal on a subject very dear to me, Miss Forsyth," he said and screwed up his sharp nose in a kind of nervous anguish. "I have here an article published last week—you are a broad-minded, intelligent woman—I thought perhaps it might interest you—if you would care to glance over it."

Christine lay back in her chair, her face in shadow. But the lamplight fell on her two hands. Red and misshapen as they were now, they were still noble hands, and their repose had dignity and beauty.

"Won't you read it to us, Mr. Ricardo? My eyes are tired at night."

He cleared his throat.

"It is an answer to Bishop Crawford's recent letter to *The Times*, which you may have seen. I have called it 'Unmasking the Oracle.'"

Robert leant out of the window and watched the sun sink into mist and smoke. He wished Mr. Ricardo hadn't come; and that he would go away soon. In a few minutes the light would begin to die, and the sharp black lines of the roofs and spires, which on the ruins of their dull selves seemed to be built anew into a witchlike fantastic city, would be lost to him for another night. Robert did not want to hear about God and the origin of man now. He kicked impatiently. Christine would sit up later than ever. And, besides with Mr. Ricardo's voice rising and falling, growing shriller and more passionate, one could not listen to that low, mysterious hum that was so like a far-off music.

Mr. Ricardo made a sweeping, crushing gesture. "That, surely, settles the controversy. He will hardly be able to answer that, I think."

Christine stirred, and opened her eyes, and smiled a little.

"I could not answer it, at any rate. It sounds very clever." She took the paper from him and held it to the light, and Robert turned, hoping that now he would really go. "But—but I didn't quite understand—have I lost the place?—this is by E. T. Richards."

Then Robert saw an astonishing thing. Suddenly Mr. Ricardo seemed to shrivel—to cower back into himself. His fierce, triumphant energy had gone as at a blasting touch of magic. He looked ashamed and broken.

"A *nom de plume—a nom de guerre*, rather, Miss Forsyth—you understand—in my opinion—the scholastic profession—the stronghold of the worst bigotry and prejudice—for myself I should not care—I have always wanted to come out into the open—but I have a sister—poor girl!—a long, sad illness—for her sake—I can't afford——"

Christine folded the paper gently as though she were afraid of hurting it.

"Of course. It would be unwise—unnecessary. Why should one sacrifice oneself to fight something that doesn't exist?"

He clenched his fists.

"One must fight error, Miss Forsyth."

"At any rate it's brave of you to try—to do what you think is right." And now it seemed she was trying to find something that would comfort him—just as she had once given Robert peppermint balls when he had hurt himself. "If ever you feel inclined, won't you come again—and read to us?"

He looked at her with dark, tragic eyes.

"Thank you, thank you."

Robert went with him to the door, and for a moment he wavered on the steps, blinking, and squeezing his soft hat between his bony hands.

"A great woman—a kind woman—you must be worth her while, Stonehouse."

And then, without so much as a "good night," he limped down the steps and along the street, flitting in and out of the lamplight like a hunted bat.

It was the first of many tiresome evening visits. But the next day he was always himself again, and the class wilted under his merciless, contemptuous sarcasms. Only Robert was not afraid. He knew that the lash would never come his way, and he could feel the little man's unspoken pride, when he showed himself quicker than his companions, like a secret Masonic pressure of the hand. And there was something else. It was a discovery that made him at first almost dizzy with astonishment. He wasn't stupid. Just as he was stronger, so he was cleverer than boys older than himself. He could do things at once over which they botched and bungled. He outstripped them when he chose. Even his ignorance did not handicap him for long. For Mr. Ricardo had kept his promise. He taught well, and in those long afternoons in the hot boarding-house attic Robert had raced over the lost ground. He did not always want to work. He gazed out of the window, half his mind busy planning what he and Rufus Cosgrave would do when they met at the corner of the street, but he could not help understanding what was so obvious, and there were moments when sheer interest swept him off his feet, and even Rufus was forgotten. He took an audacious pleasure, too, in leaping suddenly over the heads of the whole class to the first place. He did not always bother. He liked to wait for some really teasing question, and then, when silence had become hopeless, hold up his hand. Mr. Ricardo would look towards him, apparently incredulous and satirical, but Robert could read the message which the narrowed eyes twinkled at him.

"Of course you understand, Stonehouse."

And then he would answer and sweep the sullen class with a cool, exasperating indifference as he sat down. For he did not want them any more. He returned instinctive enmity with the scorn of a growing confidence. It was rather fine to stand by yourself, especially when you had one friend who thought you splendid whatever you did, who clung to you, and whom you had to protect. When he walked arm in arm with Rufus Cosgrave in the playground he trailed his coat insolently, and the challenge was not once accepted. From the biggest boys to Dickson Minor, no one cared to risk the limitless possibilities of an encounter, and the word "carrots" was not so much as whispered in his hearing.

Then in the late afternoon the real day seemed to begin. Then the hardness and distrust with which he had unconsciously armed himself fell away, and he and Rufus Cosgrave sat side by side in the sooty grass behind the biscuit factory, and with arms clasped about their scarred and grubby knees planned out the vague but glorious time that waited for them. Rufus was to be a Civil Servant. He did not seem to care much for the prospect or even to be very clear as to what would be expected of him. He felt, with Robert, that a Civil Servant sounded servile and romanceless, but unfortunately the profession, whatever it was, ran in the family.

"My father's one, you know. So I've got to. I'd rather play the piano. But, of course, I wouldn't say so to anyone but you. It sounds too beastly silly——"

"I'd say whatever I wanted to," Robert retorted grandly, "I'll always say what I want to and do what I jolly well like when I'm grown up anyhow. You can if you're strong enough."

"But then people hate you," Rufus said sadly.

"That doesn't matter a bit."

"Don't you mind people not liking you?"

"Rather not."

Rufus fumbled anxiously.

"Wouldn't you be pleased if—if you were asked to play in the eleven—and the chaps cheered you like they do Christopher when he kicks a goal?"

"I shouldn't care—not a button." But he knew even then that it was not true. His heart had leapt at the very thought. He drew his fair brows together in the portentous Stonehouse scowl. "It's silly to mind what silly people think. And kicking goals is no good. I'm going to be a doctor—not just the ordinary sort—a big doctor—and I'll discover things—and people like Christopher'll come and beg me to keep them alive."

Rufus sighed deeply.

"I wish I was like that. I mind awfully—being ragged, and all that. I was awfully miserable until you came. If you went away—or didn't care any more—I don't know what I'd do. But if I went away you wouldn't mind——"

"Yes, I would."

"But you're so much stronger."

"I like being strongest."

And then and there he expounded the doctrine of the Survival, and Rufus began to shiver all over like a frightened pony.

"I think it's perfectly beastly. What'll happen to me? Anyone can lick me. I wouldn't have a chance."

The tears came into his round, blue eyes and trickled down his freckled cheeks, and a sudden choking tenderness, a dim perception of all that this one friend meant to him, made Robert fling his arms about him and hug him close.

"Yes—you would. Because I'll look after you—always—honest injun."

2

There was one secret that he never told to anyone—not even to Cosgrave. He was ashamed of it. He knew it was silly—sillier than in believing in God—and he had almost succeeded in forgetting it when it came true. It happened. Just when he was least expecting it it came round the corner. First the music, a long way off, but growing louder and fiercer so that it seemed as though his fancy had suddenly jumped out of his brain and was running about by itself, doing just what it liked; then lights, torches with streaming flags of fire that put out the street lamps altogether, and the shadows of people marching—running—leaping—capering.

Robert ran too. He did not stop to think what it was. He was wild with excitement, and as he ran he bounded into the air and waved his arms in a pent-up joy of living and moving. He never had much chance to run. You couldn't run by yourself for nothing. People stared or were annoyed when you bumped against them. But now there was something to run for. There was no one to see or hear him in the deserted Grove, and with each bound he let out an unearthly, exultant whoop.

At the corner where Acacia Grove met the High Street Rufus Cosgrave squirmed out of the pushing, jostling crowd and caught hold of him. He was capless, panting. His red hair stood on end. In the flickering torch light he looked like a small, delirious Loga.

"I say—Stonehouse—I was coming for you—it's a circus—they're going all the way down to the Green—they've got their tent there—if we could only climb up somewhere—I can't see a thing—not even the elephant's legs."

"If we cut round by Griffith's Road we'll get there first," Robert shouted. "Only we've got to run like mad."

He seized Rufus by the hand and they shot free of the procession, up and down dim and decorous streets, swerving round corners and past astonished policemen whose "Now then, you young devils" was lost in the clatter of their feet. Cosgrave gasped, but Robert's hold was relentless, compelling. He could have run faster by himself, but somehow he could not let Cosgrave go. "You've got to stick it," he hissed fiercely. "It's only a minute."

Cosgrave had no choice but to "stick it." It did not even occur to him to resist though his eyes seemed to be bulging out of his head and his lungs on the point of bursting. But the reward was near at hand. There, at the bottom of Griffith's Road, they could see it—the Green, unfamiliar with its garish lights and the ghostly, gleaming tents.

"We've done it!" Robert shouted. "Hurrah—hurrah!"

They had, in fact, time to spare. The procession was still only half-way down the High Street, a dull red glow, like the mouth of a fiery cave, widening with every minute as though to swallow them. There was, indeed, a disconcerting crowd gathered round the chief entrance, but Robert was like a general, cool and vigorous, strung up to the finest pitch of cunning. He wormed his way under the ropes, he edged and insinuated himself between the idle and good-natured onlookers, with Cosgrave, tossed and buffeted, but still in tow, struggling in the backwash. At last they were through, next to the entrance, and in the very front row of all.

"Now you'll see the elephant," Robert laughed triumphantly, "every bit of him,"

"Oh, my word!" Cosgrave gasped. "Oh, my word!"

It was coming. It made itself felt even before it came into sight by the sudden tensity of the crowd, the anxious pressure from behind, the determined pushing back by the righteously indignant in front, the craning of necks, and indistinguishable, thrilling murmur. A small boy, whom Robert recognized as

the butcher's son, evidently torn between the dignity and excitement of his new post, stalked ahead and thrust printed notices into the outstretched hands. Robert seized hold of one, but he was too excited to read. He felt Rufus poke him insistently.

"What's it say—what's it say?"

"Shut up—I don't know—look for yourself."

There they were. The six torch-bearers were dressed like mediaeval pages, or near enough. Their tight-fitting cotton hose, sagging a little at the knees, were sky-blue, and their tunics green and slashed with yellow. They wore jaunty velvet caps and fascinating daggers, ready to hand. As they reached the entrance to the tent they halted, and with some uneasy shuffling formed up on either side, making a splendid passage of fire for the ten Moorish horsemen who rode next, fierce fellows these, armed to the teeth, with black, shining faces and rolling eyes. A band struck up inside the tent to welcome them, and they rode through, scarcely bending their proud heads—much to the relief of the more timorous members of the crowd who had eyed the rear end of their noble steeds with a natural anxiety. Unfortunately the torches smoked a good deal, and there was some grumbling.

"'Ere, take the stinking thing out of me eyes, can't yer?"

"Right down dangerous, I calls it. If one of them there sparks gets into me 'at I'll be all ablaze in half a jiffy. And oo'll pay for the feathers, I'd like to know?"

"Oh, shut up—shut up!" Robert whispered bitterly. "Why can't everyone shut up?"

"The Biggest and Best Show in Europe," Rufus was reading aloud in a squeaky treble; "un-pre-ce-dented spectacles—performing sea-lions—great chariot-race—the Legless Wonder from Iceland—Warogha, the Missing Link—the greatest living Lady Equestrian, Madame Gloria Marotti, Mad-rad—oh, I can't read that—Gyp Labelle, the darling of the Folies Bergeres—what's Folies Bergeres, Robert—–? Oh, my word—my word!"

It was the Shetland ponies that had saved Robert the trouble of replying that he didn't know. After the ferocious magnificence of the Moorish gentlemen, they came as a sort of comic relief. Everyone laughed, and even the lady with the feather hat recovered her good temper.

"Why, you could keep one of them in the back yard—not an inch bigger than our collie, is he, 'Enry? And Jim's not full grown—not by 'alf."

"As though anyone cared about her beastly collie!" Robert thought.

The elephants, a small one and a big one together to show their absurd proportions, came next. The earth shook under them. They waved their trunks hopefully from side to side, and their little brown eyes, which seemed to have no relation to their bodies, peered out like prisoners out of the peep-holes of a monstrous moving prison. When the man next to Robert offered the smallest of them an empty paper-bag it curled its trunk over his head and opened its pointed mouth and let out a piercing squeal of protest which alarmed its tormentor, and caused his neighbours to regard him with nervous disapproval. But the big elephant seemed to exercise a soothing influence over its companion. It waved its trunk negligently as though in contemptuous dismissal of a commonplace incident.

"My dear," it said, "that's all you can expect of such people."

There were men seated on the big elephants' necks, their legs tucked comfortably behind the enormous flapping ears. They looked mysterious and proud in their position. They wore turbans and carried sticks with pointed iron spikes at the head, and when they came to the low entrance of the tent they prodded their huge beasts, which went down on their knees, painfully yet with a kind of sorrowful pride, and blundered through amidst the admiring murmur of the crowd.

"The way they manage them big brutes!" declared the lady with the feathered hat disconsolately. "And there's our George, a proper 'uman being, and can't be got to do a thing—nohow."

The band inside had stopped, beaten in the hard-fought contest with its rival at the far end of the procession, which thereupon broke out into throaty triumphant trumpet blasts and exultant roll of drums. Rufus clutched wildly at Robert's sleeve.

"Oh, my word, just look at her! Oh, my word!"

Robert craned forward, peering round the embonpoint of the man next him. The procession now scarcely moved, and there was a space between the last elephant and the great coal-black horse that followed—a wide, solemn space, that invited you to realize that this was the finest sight you had ever

seen in your life. He was indeed a splendid, terrifying creature. As Rufus Cosgrave said loudly, he was not like a human horse at all. One could imagine him having just burst out of hell, still breathing fire and smoke and rolling his eyes in the anguish of his bridled wickedness. In the glare from the tent-door he gleamed darkly, a wild thing of black flames, and those in the front row of the crowd trod nervously on the toes of those behind, edging out of reach of his restless, dancing hoofs. For it seemed impossible that the woman in the saddle should be really his master. And yet she sat upright and unconcerned. In its black, close-fitting habit, her supple body looked a living, vital part of the splendid beast. She was his brain, stronger than his savage instinct, and every threatening move of his great limbs was dictated to him without a sound, almost without a gesture. A touch of a slender, patent-leather boot set him prancing, an imperceptible twist of the wrist and he stood stock still, foam-necked and helpless. It was a proud—an awe-inspiring spectacle. And it was not only her fearless strength. She was fair and beautiful. So Robert saw her. He saw nothing else. He gazed and gazed, heart-stricken. He did not hear Rufus speak to him, or the band which was blaring out a Viennese waltz, an old thing, whistled and danced half to death long since, but which, having perhaps a spark of immortal youth left among the embers, had not lost its power to make the pulses quicken. Indeed it even played a humble part in this great moment in Robert's life. Though he did not hear it, it poured emotion into the heated, dusty air. It painted the tawdry show with richer colours. It was the rider's invisible retinue. At a touch from her heel the horse danced to it, in perfect time, arching his great neck, and rolling his wild eyes.

She was proud, too. Robert saw how she disdained the gaping multitude. She rode with haughtily lifted head and only once her glance, under the white, arrogant lids, dropped for an instant. Was it chance, was it the agonized intensity of his own gaze which drew it to the small boy almost under her horse's hoofs? (For he had held his ground. He was not afraid. Unlike the rest, his trust in her was limitless and unquestioning. And if she chose to ride him down, he would not care, no more than a fanatic worshipper beneath the wheels of a Juggernaut.) Now under her eyes his heart stood still, his knees shook. She did not smile; she did not recognize his naked, shameless adoration. And that too was well. A smile would have lowered her, brought her down from her superb distance. His happiness choked him. She was the embodiment of everything that he had heard pass in the distance from the silent dusks of Acacia Grove—splendour and power, laughter and music, the beat of a secret pulse answering the tread of invisible processions. She came riding out of the mists of his fancy into light, a living reality that he could take hold of, and set up in his empty temple. She was not his mother, nor Francey, nor God, but she was everything that in their vague and different ways these three had been to him before he lost them. She was something to be worshipped, to be died for, if necessary, with joy and pride.

But in a moment it was over. She looked away from him and rode forward, like a monarch into a grandly illuminated castle, amidst the whispered plaudits of her people.

A little girl on a Shetland pony rode at her heels, Robert saw her without wanting to see her. She obtruded herself vulgarly. She was dressed as a page, her painfully thin legs looking like sticks of peppermint in their parti-coloured tights, and either was, or pretended to be, terrified of her minute and tubbily good-natured mount. At its first move forward she fell upon its neck with shrill screams and clung on grotesquely, righting herself at last to make mock faces at the grinning crowd.

"Oh, la, la—la-la!"

She was a plain child with a large nose, slightly Jewish in line, a wide mouth, and a mass of crinkly fair hair that stood out in a pert halo about her head. Robert hated her for the brief moment in which she invaded his consciousness. It was quite evident that she was trying to draw attention from the splendid creature who had preceded her to her own puny and outrageous self, and that by some means or other she succeeded. She gesticulated, she drew herself up in horrible imitation of a proud and noble bearing, she pretended that the rotund pony was prancing to the music, and, finally, burst into fits of laughter. The crowd laughed with her, helplessly as though at a huge joke which she shared with each one of them in secret.

"Oh, la la, la la."

The man at Robert's side wiped his eyes.

"Well, did you see that? Upon my word——"

"A baggage—that's what I call 'er," the feathered lady retorted severely.
"Mark my words—a baggage."

Rufus jogged Robert in the side.

"Wasn't she a joke? Didn't she make you scream?"

Robert hated them all. Beastly, despicable people who liked beastly, despicable things.

More horsemen, camels, clowns on foot and clowns on donkeys. Finally the band, slightly winded by this time, and playing raggedly. The torch-bearers formed up, and a large gentleman in riding boots stood for a moment in the light.

"To-morrow evening at eight o'clock—the first performance of the Greatest Show in Europe—a unique opportunity—better book your seats early, ladies and gentlemen——"

Then the flaps of the tent fell and all the lights and sounds seemed to go out at once. The crowd melted away, and only Robert and his companion remained gazing spellbound at the closed and silent cave which had swallowed all the enchantment.

Rufus put his hands into his hair and tugged it desperately.

"Oh, if only I could go—if only I could—— Don't you want to go, Robert?"

Robert woke partially from his dream.

"I'm going." He turned, and with his hands thrust into his pockets began to walk homewards. Rufus trotted feverishly at his side.

"I say, are you really? But then you've got no people; jolly for you. I wish I hadn't. My pater's so beastly strict; I'm scared of him. I say, when will you go?"

"To-morrow night, of course."

"Have you got the money?"

"No, but I'll get it."

"Oh, I say, I wish I could. P'r'aps I could too. I've got money—yes, I have, even if it is in a beastly tin box. What's the good of saving till you're grown up? I shan't want it then like I do now. It's silly. All grown-up people are silly. When I'm grown up I'll be different. I say, Robert, I can come with you, can't I?"

"Oh, yes—if you want to." He was indifferent. It puzzled him slightly that Rufus should be so eager. What did he know of the true inwardness of what he had seen? What had it got to do with him, anyway?

Rufus brooded, his freckled face puckered with anxious contriving.

"I say, I've got an idea! I'll tell the pater you've asked me to come over and spend the evening with you at your place. It'll be sort of true, won't it? And then he'll never think about the money. You won't mind, will you? It'll never come out—and if it does, I'll say I made it up."

"I don't care. All right."

Rufus drew a great sigh of relief.

"Isn't it ripping? Oh, I say, I wish it was to-morrow night. I hope I don't die first. What did you like best, Robert? Who are you keenest on?"

Robert did not answer. It would have been sacrilege to talk her over—to drag her down into a silly controversy. He longed for the moment when Rufus would have to leave him. He wanted to be alone and silent. Even the thought of Christine and of her inevitable questions hurt him like the touch of a rough, unfeeling hand.

"I liked that kid best—that girl on the funny pony. She must have been at the Folies Bergeres, don't you think? Folies Bergeres sounds French, and she was making sort of French noises. She made me laugh." Something wistful and hungry came into his shrill voice. He pressed close to Robert's side. "I like people who make me laugh. I like them better than anything in the world, don't you? It's jolly to be able to laugh like that—right from one's inside——"

But Robert only smiled scornfully, hugging his secret closer to himself.

3

She came on for the last time in the Final, when the whole circus, including the Legless Wonder,

paraded round the ring to the competitive efforts of both bands. Robert's eyes followed her with anguish. It wasn't happiness any more. He might have been a condemned man counting the last minutes of his life. He was almost glad when it was over and her upright figure had vanished under the arch. People began to fidget and reach for their hats and coats. A grubby youth with a hot, red face and a tray slung round his neck pushed his way between the benches shouting: "Signed photographs of the c'lebrities, twopence each!" in a raucous indifferent voice. Robert waved to him, and he took no notice.

"Hi—hi!" Robert called faintly.

The youth stopped. He was terribly bored at first, but his boredom became a cynical amusement. There were twenty different photographs of Madame Gloria Moretti:

Madame Moretti full face, side face, three-quarter face, on her famous horse Arabesque, with her beautiful foot on Arabesque's prostrate form, in evening dress, stepping into her car—a car, at any rate—and so on, with "Gloria Moretti" scrawled nobly across every one of them. Robert bought them all. He stuffed them into his coat pockets, into his trouser pockets. He dropped them. He dropped the pennies and sixpences which he tried to count into the tray with shaking fingers. He was drunk and reckless with his despairing love. The sales-boy winked at everyone in general.

"Takin' it 'ard, ain't 'e, the young dawg?"

People smiled tolerantly. Their smiles said as plainly as possible: "We remember being just as silly as that," and Robert hated them. It wasn't true. They didn't remember. They had forgotten. Or, if they remembered at all, it was only the things they had done, not what they had felt—the frightful pain that was an undreamed-of happiness, and the joy that tore the heart out of you, and the wonder of a new discovery. You lost yourself, You gave everything that you were and had. You asked nothing, hoped for nothing. And suddenly you became strong so that you were not afraid any more of anything in the world—not of punishment nor disgrace, nor even laughter.

But they pretended to understand. Their pretence made you despise and pity them. It was a horrid thing, as though a skeleton came to life and jiggled its bones and mouthed at you, "You see, I used to do that too." That was why you told lies to them—even to Christine.

He had forgotten his cap. The sales-boy ran after him with it and stuck it on his thick fair hair back to front.

"There—you'll be losing your 'ead next!"

It was dusk outside. The evening performance began at once, and already a thick black stream of people was pouring up the roped gangways and frothing and seething at the box offices. As they came out of the darkness they had a mystical air of suddenly returned life. They were pilgrims' souls surging at the entrance of Paradise. In a little while they would see her. Not that they would know what they saw. They would not be able to understand how great, how brave and splendid she was. In their blindness of heart they would prefer the ugly little French girl with her shrill voice and absurd caperings; their clapping would be half-hearted, polite, and there would be no passionate, insistent pair of hands to beat up their flagging enthusiasm and bring her back once more into the arena, bowing in regal scorn of them.

For he, Robert, had brought her back twice, just because he wouldn't stop—had beaten his hands till even now they were hot and swollen. She had not known, and he would not have had her know for the whole world. That was part of the mystery. You yourself were as nothing.

But it did hurt intolerably to think that perhaps because he was not there she would not be called back so often. It was as though he betrayed her—broke his allegiance. That afternoon, when it had seemed that the evening could never really come, he had told himself that this was the last time; but now, standing on the dim outskirts of the crowd, the photographs that he hadn't been able to fit into his pockets held fast in his burning hands, he saw how impossible, how even wrong and faithless that decision had been. So long as a shilling remained to him he had to go, he had to take his place among her loyal people. It meant being "found out" hopelessly and violently. They—the mysterious "they" of authority—might destroy him utterly. That would be the most splendid thing of all. He would have done all that he could do. He would have laid his last tribute at her unconscious feet and gone out in fire and thunder.

He had actually joined the box-office queue when Rufus Cosgrave found him. Rufus had been running hard and he was out of breath, and his blue eyes had a queer, strained look, as though they had wanted to cry and had not had the time. And on his dead-white face the freckles stood out, ludicrously vivid.

"Oh, I say, Robert, where have you been? I waited and waited for you. And then I went round to your

place—and Miss Forsyth said she didn't know and she seemed awfully worried—and—and—oh, I say—you're not going again, are you?"

Robert nodded calmly. But his heart had begun to beat thickly with the premonition of disaster.

"Yes, I am."

"You might have told me—oh, I say, do listen—do come out a minute—I'm in an awful hole—there's going to be an awful row—I'm—I'm so beastly scared——"

He was shivering. He did not seem to know that people were looking at him. His voice was squeaky and broken. He tugged at Robert's sleeve. "Oh, I say—do come——"

Robert looked ahead of him. It meant losing his place. Instead of being so close to her that he could smell the warm, sweet scent of her as she passed, he would have to peer between peopled heads, and she would be a far-off vision to him. And yet, oddly enough, it did not occur to him to refuse. He stood out, and they walked together towards the dark, huddled army of caravans beyond the tents.

"What is it? What's the row?"

"It's Father—he's got wind of something—Mother told me—he's going to open my money-box when he comes home to-night. I didn't know he'd kept count—just the sort of beastly thing he would do—and oh, Robert, when he finds out I've been cramming him he'll kill me—he will, really——"

At another time Robert might have consoled him with the assurance that even the beastliest sort of father might hesitate to risk his neck on such slight provocation, but he himself was overwrought with three days of peril, of desperate subterfuge and feverish alternations between joy and anguish. Now, in the mysterious twilight, the most terrible, as the most wonderful things seemed not merely possible but likely. It made it all the more terrible that Rufus should have to endure so much because he had taken a fancy to a silly kid who laughed like a hyena till you laughed yourself, however much you hated her.

He held Cosgrave's sticky hand tight, and at that loyal understanding pressure Cosgrave began to cry, shaking from head to foot, jerking out his words between his chattering teeth.

"It's s-stupid to cry—I do w-wish I w-wasn't always c-crying about everything—after all—he c-can't kill me more than once, can he? But he's such a beast. He h-hates anyone else to h-have a good time and tell lies. He's always so j-jolly glad to let into me or mother—and when he finds out we've been stuffing him he—he goes mad—and preaches for days and days. Mother's a brick. She gave me a shilling to put back—but he—he keeps her short, and she has to tell about every penny. She says she'll have to pretend she lost it. And it's not enough, anyway. Oh—Robert, you don't know what a row there'll be."

But Robert knew. He felt the cruel familiar ruffling of the nerves. He heard the thud of his father's step, the horrible boom of his father's voice, "You're a born liar, Christine—you're making my son into a liar." It was as though Dr. Stonehouse had pushed off the earth that covered him and stood up.

It was awful that Rufus should be frightened too. It wasn't fair. He wasn't strong enough.

"I say—we'll have to do something. How much did you take out?"

"'Bout three shillings—there was an extra penny or two—p'r'aps he wouldn't notice that, though—I thought p'r'aps—oh, I don't know what I thought—but I had to come to tell you—I hadn't anyone else ——"

Robert nodded. He stopped and looked back towards the big central tent. It had grown at once larger and vaguer. The lighted entrance had a sort of halo round it like the moon before it is going to rain. There was an empty, sinking feeling in his stomach, and he too had begun to tremble, in little, uncontrollable gusts. He let go his hold on Rufus's hand so that he should not know.

"I've got two bob—somewhere," he heard himself saying casually and rather grandly.

He knew now that he would never see her again. There was no struggle in his mind, because there did not seem to be any choice. It wasn't that little Cosgrave counted more—he hardly counted at all in that moment. But she, if she knew he existed, would expect him to do the right, the fine thing. Francey would have expected it. And she was only a mere girl. How much more this noble, wonderful woman? It was better than clapping. Somewhere at the back of his mind was the idea that he offered her a more gallant tribute, and that one day she would know that he had stuck up for Cosgrave for her sake, and, remote and godlike though she was, be just a little pleased. The comfort of it was a faint warm light showing through his darkness. It was all he had. As he dug those last, most precious shillings out of the chaos of his pockets he felt himself go sick and faint, just as he had done when, in a desperate fight, a

boy bigger than himself had kicked his shin.

"There—you can put them back, can't you? He'll never know——"

Rufus stopped crying instantly, after the miraculous fashion of his years. He cut an elfish caper. He rubbed himself against his saviour like some small grateful animal.

"I say, you are a brick. I knew you'd help somehow. Won't he be sold, though? I'll just love to see his beastly face! What luck—not having a father, like you. I say, though, is that all you've got? You won't be able to go to the show now—and you're so keen, aren't you?"

"It doesn't matter," Robert answered carelessly. "I don't mind much—not really."

He began to walk on, Rufus tagging valiantly at his heels.

"And—and if anyone asks—you'll say I was at your place—doing prep.—won't you?"

"Oh, rather——"

"It's awfully decent of you. You don't mind telling fibs, do you, Robert?"

"One has to," Robert answered austerely. "Everyone has to."

Now that it was all over and he turned his back on her for ever, the splendid glow of renunciation began to fade. Life stretched before him, a black limitless emptiness. He wished agonizedly that Arabesque had gone mad and bolted and that he had stopped him and saved his rider's life, dying gloriously and at once, instead of miserably and by inches, like this. He felt that in a moment the pain in his throat would get the better of him and he would begin to cry.

They stopped at the far end of the Green where it was dark and they could hardly see each other. He heard Cosgrave breathing heavily through his nose, almost snorting, and then a timid, shamefaced whisper:

"You are decent to me. I say—I do love you so, Robert."

It was an awful thing to have said. They both knew it. If anyone had overheard them the shame would have haunted them to their death. And yet it was wonderful too. Never to be forgotten.

"You oughtn't to say rotten, stupid things like that—like silly girls."
And then, as though it had been torn from him. "I love you too, Rufus."

After that he ran madly so that Rufus could not overtake him—above all so that he could not hear the band which had begun to play the opening march.

4

But before he had stopped running he had begun to plot again. Even though he had made the great renunciation he could not help hoping. It was the kind of hope that, when one is very young, follows on the heels of absolute despair, and is based on magical impossibilities. It was like his birthday hopes, which had been known to rise triumphant above the most obvious and discouraging facts. After all there was to-morrow. He would tell Christine everything—open his heart to her as to a good and understanding friend—and she would give him six-pence so that he could stand in the cheap places, or perhaps a shilling so that he could go twice. He would tell her how he had saved Cosgrave from a fearful row, and she would approve of him and sympathize with Cosgrave, who had such beastly, understanding people.

He would hug her and say;

"It's jolly to have someone like you, Christine!"

And she would be enormously pleased, and in the dusk they would sit close together and he would tell her of his superb being who changed the course of his life, who was like his mother and Francey and God rolled into one, and for whose sake he had emptied the housekeeping purse.

Perhaps it would all have happened just as he planned it, could it have happened then and there. But the front door was closed and he had to wait a long time for the landlady's heavy answering tread. When she came at last it was from upstairs—he could tell by her breathing and a familiar creak—and a cold dead hand laid itself on his heart and squeezed the hope out of it. They had been talking about him—those two grown-up people. He knew the kind of things they had said: "It's very tiresome of him to be

out so late, Mrs. Withers," and, "Boys is worritting, outrageous critters, M'am," and the cruel impossibility of reaching their far-off impervious understanding lamed him before the door had opened.

Mrs. Withers' lumpy figure loomed up grotesquely against the yellow murk.

"Is that you, Master Robert? You'd better run up quick. Your aunt is going to give you a jacketing, I can tell you."

"Aunt" was the term with which Mrs. Withers covered up what she considered privately to be an ambiguous relationship.

Robert slunk past her. He crawled upstairs with an aggressive deliberation. He would show how much he cared. He was not afraid of Christine. He had seen her unhappy too often. In a way he knew that he was stronger than she was. For she was old and had no one to love but himself.

All the same he was afraid. With every step he took he seemed to climb farther and farther into the midst of fear. It was all around him—in the close, airless dark and in the deathly quiet light that came from the open doorway overhead. What was waiting for him there? His father, risen unimaginably loathsome from the grave? For he could never be in the dark without thinking of his father. Or something else? At least he knew that the never-really-believed-in time of peace was over and that the monster which had lain hidden and quiescent so long was crouched somewhere close to him, ready to leap out.

Christine sat by the table under the light. There was a drawer beside her which she had evidently torn out of its place in panic-stricken haste, for the floor about her was littered with its contents—gloves and handkerchiefs and ribbons. She held a shabby, empty purse in her limp hand, and it was as though she had sat down because she had no longer the strength to stand. He had not known before how grey her hair was. Her face was grey, too, and withered like a dead leaf.

He stood hesitating in the doorway and they looked at one another. There was no question of punishment or reproof between them. It was the old days over again when they had clung together in the face of a common peril—helpless and horribly afraid. She tried to smile and push the empty purse out of sight as though it were of no account at all. And all at once he was ashamed and miserable with pity.

"I was beginning to get quite worried about you." He could hardly hear her. "Where have you been, Robert?"

He answered heavily, not moving from the doorway where he hung like a sullen shadow.

"At the Circus."

"Is there a Circus? Why didn't Mrs. Withers tell me? If I had known that I shouldn't have worried. I expect you were there yesterday too—and the day before, weren't you, dear?"

He nodded, and she began to bundle everything back into the drawer, as though at last a tiresome question had been satisfactorily settled.

"I knew it was all right. Mr. Ricardo was here this afternoon. He thought I was ill—he thought you had told him you couldn't come because I was ill. I said I had had to stay at home—it was easier—I knew there had been a mistake."

The old life again. They were confederates and she had lied to shield him even from herself. She was looking past him as though she saw someone standing behind him in the dark passage. He was so sure of it that he wanted to turn round. But he did not dare.

"I wish I'd known. We—we might have gone together. I used to be very fond of a good circus. Did they have elephants? Robert—Robert, dear, why didn't you tell me about it?"

He shook his head. He knew now that he could never have told her or made her understand. She would have thought him silly—or disloyal. She would never see that this new love had nothing to do with the Robert who would die if Christine left him. It had to do with another boy who longed for bands and processions and worshipped happy, splendid people who did not have to tell lies and who were so strong and fearless that even fierce animals had to obey them. They were different. They did not live in the same life. You could love them without pain or pity.

It was a secret thing, inside himself. If he tried to drag it out and show it her, no one could tell what would happen to it.

She sighed deeply.

"It's this being away all day. If I had been at home you would have asked me for the money, wouldn't you? And then you forgot to tell me. But I've been a little worried. You didn't take it all, did you, dear?"

"Yes, I did. I spent it at the Circus. And then I gave some to Cosgrave."

He saw the blood rush up wildly into her white face. The next minute she had laughed—a gay, unfamiliar laugh—and he winced and shivered as though she had struck him.

"Why, that's so like your father—that's just what your father would have done. He loved doing kind, generous things—giving money away."

And now he knew for certain who it was who stood behind him in the dark passage. He could not bear it. He slammed the door to, closing his eyes tight so that he should not see. He ran to her, pressing himself against her, stammering passionately.

"I'm not like my father—I'm not—I'm not. I won't be."

She petted him tenderly. She was grave now and sure of herself.

"You mustn't say that, Robert. Your father was a wonderful man, in many ways. People didn't understand him—only your mother and I. If your mother had lived it would all have been quite different. He was unfortunate and often very unhappy. The world thinks so much of money. But he despised it. It was nothing to him. You're like that too. You didn't realize, did you? It didn't seem a great deal. It was just a beginning. But I have had to do without food. I've been hungry sometimes—I think I ought to tell you this, so that you may understand—I've looked into shop-windows at lunch-time. You see, it was to pay for the time when you are preparing to be a doctor. It means hundreds of pounds, Robert. But I calculated that if I saved a little every week—I'd manage it—if I didn't die or lose my work."

"Don't, Christine—please don't! Oh, Christine!"

"If I lost my work—Mr. Percy is very kind. He is an old friend and knows the position. But he has his business to consider. I'm not quick—my eyes aren't strong. There are younger, cleverer people. We've got to look things in the face, Robert. If I lost my work there would be nothing between us and the workhouse—nothing—nothing—nothing."

He was shivering as if with bitter cold. His teeth chattered in his head. He caught a ghost-like glimpse of a boy in the glass opposite—a strange, unfamiliar figure with a white, tear-stained face and haggard eyes and fair hair all on end.

"Oh, Christine—I'm frightened!"

"You think money must come from somewhere. Something will turn up. That was what your father used to say. He was so hopeful. It wasn't possible that it shouldn't turn up. But I was younger and stronger then—I can't begin again.—I can't—I can't. If you're not good, Robert, I can't go on."

"I will be good. I won't tell lies. I won't spend money ever again. I won't love anyone but you. I won't be a doctor; I'll be something cheap—now."

He had forgotten the photographs. He still held them in one tight-clenched hand. But she had seen them. And all at once she braced herself although to meet an implacable enemy. She was not tender any more. She was the Christine who had faced bailiffs and his father's strange, gay friends—ice-cold and bitter and relentless. She took the pictures from him. With a terrible ironic calm she sorted them from his pockets, and spread them out on the table like a pack of cards. He dared not look at her. He was afraid to see what she was seeing. She had torn open the door of his secret chamber, and there in that blasting light was his treasure, naked, defenceless. He could have cried out in his dread, "Only don't say anything—don't say anything!"

"So that's what you liked so much, Robert—that's what you spent the money on. It's the old story—beginning again—only worse." She added, almost to herself:

"A vulgar, common woman."

She put her face between her hands. He could hear her quiet crying. It was awful. His love for her was a torture. Because she was not wonderful at all but human and pitiful like himself, he felt her grief like a knife turning and turning in his own heart. But he could not comfort her. He could only stare aghast at that row of faces—grinning, smirking, arrogant, insolent faces.

It was true. The jolly lights had been turned out. The band had stopped playing.

A vulgar, common woman!

* * * * *

He stood with his back to the Circus entrance where he could smell the sawdust and hear the hum of the audience crowding into their seats. The invisible band gave funny noises like a man clearing his throat. There was still a number of people coming in—some strolling idly, others pulled along by their excited charges. It was queer, Robert thought, that they should be excited. The smell of the sawdust made him feel rather sick.

He gave out his last handbill. Nobody noticed him. They took the slip of paper which he thrust into their hands without looking at him. He went and stood at the box-office where the big man in riding boots was counting out his money. It was a high box-office, so that Robert had to stand on tip-toe to be seen.

"I've finished," he said.

The man glanced at him and then remembered.

"Oh, yes, you're the young feller. Given 'em all out, eh? Not thrown 'em on the rubbish heap? Well, what is it?"

"I want my sixpence."

"Oh, sixpence I promised you, did I? Well, here's a shilling seat.
That'll do better, eh, what? You can go in now."

"I want my sixpence."

"You don't want—don't want to go to the Circus?"

"I don't like Circuses."

The big man stared down at the white set face gazing stolidly back at him over the wooded ledge. He tossed the coin indignantly across.

"Well, of all the unnatural, ungrateful young jackanapes——"

But he was so astonished that he had to lean out of his box and watch the blasphemer—a quaint figure, bowed as though under a heavy burden, its hands thrust hard into its trousers pockets—stalk away from the great tent and without so much as a backward glance lose itself among the crowd.

PART II

I

1

They came to an idle halt near Cleopatra's needle, and leaning against the Embankment wall, looked across the river to the warehouses opposite, which, in the evening mist, had the look of stark cliffs guarded by a solitary watchful lion. The smaller of the two young men took off his soft hat and set it beside him so that he could let the wind brush through his thick red hair. He held himself very straight, his slender body taut with solemn exultation.

"If only one could do something with it," he said; "eat it—hug it—get inside of it somehow—belong to it. It hurts—this gaping like an outsider. Look now—one shade of purple upon another. Isn't it unendurably beautiful? But if one could write a sonnet—or a sonata—or paint a picture—— That's where the real artist has the pull over us poor devils who can only feel things. He wouldn't just stand here. He'd get out his fountain pen or his paint-box and make it all his for ever and ever. Think of Whistler now—what he would do with it."

"I can't," Stonehouse said. "Who's Whistler?"

Cosgrave laughed in anticipation of his little joke. "Nobody, old fellow. At least, he never discovered any bugs."

The wind snatched up his forgotten hat and it sailed off up river into the darkness like a large unwieldy bird. He looked after it ruefully.

"That was a new hat. I'll have to go home without one, and the Pater will think I've been in a drunken brawl, and there'll be a beastly row."

"That's the one thing he'll never believe. Well, I don't care. It'll be over soon. If I've passed that exam. I'll get away and he won't be able to nag me any more. And you, do think I've passed, don't you, Stonehouse?"

"If you didn't imagine your answers afterwards."

"Honour bright, I didn't. I believe I did a lot better, really. You know, I'm so awfully happy to-night I'd believe anything. It's queer how this old river fits in with one's moods, isn't it? Last time we were here I wanted to drown myself, and there it was ready to hand, as it were—offering eternal oblivion—and all that. I thought of all the other fellows who had drowned themselves, and felt no end cheered up. And now it makes me think of escape—of getting away from everything—sailing to strange, new countries ——"

"The last time you were here," Stonehouse said, "you'd just come out of the exam. If you really answered as you say you did, there was no reason for your wanting to drown yourself."

"But I did. You're such a distrustful beggar. You think I just imagine things. No, I'll tell you what it was—I didn't care. There I was—I'd swotted and swotted. I'd thought that if only I could squeeze through I'd be the happiest man on earth. And then, when it was all over I began to think: 'What's it all for, what's it all about? What's the good?' Suppose I have passed, I'll get some beastly little job in some stuffy Government office, 200 pounds a year, if I'm lucky. And then if I'm good and not too bright they'll raise me to 250 pounds in a couple of years' time, and so it'll go on—nothing but fug, and dinge, and skimping, and planning—with a fortnight at the seaside once a year or a run over to Paris. I suppose it was good enough for our grandfathers, Stonehouse—this just keeping alive? But it didn't seem good enough to me. Don't you feel like that sometimes—when you think of the time when you'll be able to stick M.D., or whatever it is, after your name—as though, after all, it didn't matter a brace of shakes?"

Robert Stonehouse roused himself from his lounging attitude and thrust his hands deep into his trousers pockets. There was a nip in the wind, and he had no overcoat.

"No. When I've got through this next year I shall feel that I've climbed out of a black pit and that the world's before me—to do what I like with."

"Well—you're different." Cosgrave sighed, but not unhappily. "You're going to do what you want to do, and I expect you'll be great guns at it. I dare say if I were to play the piano all day long—decently, you know, as I do sometimes, inside me at any rate—and get money for it, I'd think it worth while—— But it takes a lot to make one feel that way about a Government office."

His voice was quenched by a sudden rush of traffic—a tram that jangled and swayed, a purring limousine full of vague, glittering figures, and a great belated lorry lumbering in pursuit like an uncouth participant in some fantastic race. They roared past and vanished, and into the empty space of quiet there flowed back the undertones of the river, solitary footfalls, the voice of the drowsing city. The loneliness became something magical. It changed the colour of Cosgrave's thoughts. He pressed closer to his companion, and, with his elbows on the balustrade and his hands clenched in his hair, spoke in an awed whisper.

"It does seem worth while now. That's what's so extraordinary. I feel I can stick anything—even being a Government clerk all my life. I don't even seem to mind home like I did. I'm in love. That's what it is. You've never been in love, have you, Stonehouse?"

"No."

"You're such a cast-iron fellow. I don't know how I have the nerve to tell you things. Sometimes I think you don't care a snap for anything in the world, except just getting on."

Robert Stonehouse hunched his shoulders against the wind. There was more than physical discomfort in the movement—a kind of secret distress and resentment.

"You do talk a lot of sentimental rubbish," he said. "It seems to me it's only a hindrance—this caring so much for people. It gets in a man's way. Not that it matters to you just now. You've got a slack time.

You can afford to fool around."

"You think I'm a milksop," Cosgrave said patiently, "I don't mind. I dare say it's true. There's not much fight in me. I don't seem able to do without people like you can. I think, sometimes, if I hadn't had you to back me up I'd never have been able to stick things. Of course, I'm not clever, either. But you're wrong about being in love. It doesn't get in one's way. It helps. Everything seems different."

Stonehouse was silent, his fair, straight brows contracted. When he spoke at last it was dispassionately and impersonally, as one giving a considered judgment. But his voice was rather absurdly young.

"You may be right. I hadn't thought about it before. It didn't seem important enough. There was a woman I knew when I was a kid—a common creature—who was fond of saying that 'it was love that made the world go round.' (My father married her for her money, which didn't go round at all.) Still, in her way, she was stating a kind of biological fact. If people without much hold on life didn't fall in love they'd become extinct. They wouldn't have the guts to push on or the cheek to perpetuate themselves. But they do fall in love, and I suppose, as you say, things seem different. *They* seem different—worth while. So they marry and have children, which seems worth while too—different from other people's children, at any rate, or they wouldn't be able to bear the sight of them. What you call love is just a sort of trick played on you. If crowds are of any use I suppose it's justified. It's a big 'if,' though."

Cosgrave smiled into the dark.

"It sounds perfectly beastly. Not a bit encouraging. But I don't care, somehow. Do you mind if I tell you about her? I've got to talk to somebody."

"I don't mind. But I don't want to stand here any longer. It's cold, and, besides, I've got to be up west by six."

They turned and strolled on toward Westminster. Robert Stonehouse still kept his hands thrust into his pockets, and the position, gave his heavy-shouldered figure a hunched fighting look, as though he had set himself to stride out against a tearing storm. He took no notice of Cosgrave, who talked on rapidly, stammering a little and scrambling for his words. The wind blew his hair on end, and he walked with his small wistful nose lifted to the invisible stars.

"You see, I can't tell anyone at home about her. It's not as though she were even what people call a lady. (Oh, I'm perfectly sane—I don't humbug myself.) Mother'd have a fit, and the Pater only looks at that kind of thing in one way—his own particularly disgusting way. She drops her aitches sometimes. But she's good, and she's pretty as a flower. I met her at a dance club. I'd never been to such a place before. And then one evening it suddenly came over me that I wanted to be among a lot of people who were having a good time. So I plunged. You pay sixpence, you know, and everybody dances with everybody. Of course I can't dance. She saw me hanging round and looking glum, I suppose, and she was nice to me. She taught me a few steps, and I told her about the exam, and how worried I was about it, and we became friends. I've never had a girl-friend before. It's amazing. And she's different, anyway —— She's on the stage—in the chorus to begin with—but you'd think they'd given her a lead, she's so happy about it. That's what I love about her. Everything seems jolly to her. She enjoys things like a kid —a 'bus ride, a cinema, our little suppers together. She loves just being alive, you know. It's extraordinary—I say, are you listening, Stonehouse?"

"I didn't know you wanted me to listen. I thought you wanted to talk. I was thinking of an operation I saw once—you wouldn't understand—it was a ticklish job, and the man lost his head. He tried to hide it, but I knew, and he saw I knew. A man like that oughtn't to operate."

"And did the other fellow die?"

"Oh, yes. But he would have died anyway, probably. It wasn't that that mattered. It was losing his nerve like that."

"If I saw an operation," Cosgrave said humbly, "I should be sick."

Stonehouse had not heard. They reached the bridge in silence, and under a street lamp stopped to take leave of one another. It was their customary walk and the customary ending, and each wondered in his different way how it was that they should always want to meet and to talk to one another of things that only one of them could understand.

"Why does he bother with me?" Cosgrave thought.

But he was sorry for Robert, partly because he guessed that he was hungry and partly because he

knew that he was not in love.

"I wish you'd come along too," he said a little breathlessly; "I want you to meet her, you know—for us all to be friends together—just a quiet supper—and my treat, of course."

It was very transparent. He tried to look up at his companion boldly and innocently. But the light from the street lamp fell into his strange blue eyes, with their look of young and anxious hopefulness, and made them blink. Robert Stonehouse laughed. He knew what was in Cosgrave's mind, and it seemed to him half comic and half pathetic and rather irritating.

"I don't suppose you have enough to pay for supper, anyway," he said roughly, "or you'll go without your lunch to-morrow. Don't be an idiot. Look after yourself and I'll look after myself. Besides, if you think I'm not going to have a square meal to-night you're enormously mistaken. I'm going to dine well—where you'll never Set your foot, not until you're earning more than 250 pounds a year, at any rate."

"Word of honour?"

"Oh, word of honour, of course."

A shy relief came into the pinched and freckled face.

"Oh, well then—but I do want you to meet all the same; you see, she'd like it—she knows all about you. I'm always bragging about you. Perhaps I could bring her round—if Miss Forsyth wouldn't mind—if she's well enough."

Robert Stonehouse half turned away, as though shrinking from an unwelcome, painful touch.

"She's all right."

"Then may we come? I'm not afraid of Miss Forsyth. She's an understanding person. She won't think people common because of their aitches. Give her my love, won't you, Robert. And good night."

"Oh, good night!" He added quickly, sullenly: "You look blue with cold.
Why don't you wear a decent coat? It's idiotic!"

"Because my coat isn't decent. I don't want her to see me shabby. And I like to pretend I'm rather a strong, dashing fellow who doesn't mind things. Besides, look at yourself!"

"I'm different."

"You needn't rub it in." He was gay now with an expectation that bubbled up in him like a fountain. He made as though to salute Robert solemnly and then remembered and clutched at his wind-blown hair instead. "Oh, my hat! Well, it will make Connie laugh like anything!" he said.

2

To be a habitue of Brown's was to prove yourself a person of some means and solid discrimination. At Brown's you could get cuts from the joint, a porter-house steak, apple tart, and a good boiled pudding as nowhere else in the world. You went in through the swinging doors an ordinary and fallible human being, and you came out feeling you had been fed on the very stuff which made the Empire. You were slightly stupefied, but you were also superbly, magnificently unbeatable.

Mr. Brown was an Englishman. But he did not glory in the fact. It was, as he had explained to Robert one night, his kindly, serious face glowing in the reflection from the grill, a tragedy.

"To be born an Englishman and a cook—it's like being born a bird without wings. You can't soar—not however hard you try—not above roasts and boils. Take vegetables. An Englishman natur'lly boils. And it's no good going against nature. You're a doctor—or going to be—and you know that. You've got to do the best you can, but you can't do more. That's my motto. But if I'd been born a Frenchman—— Well it's no use dreaming. If them potatoes are ready, Jim, so'm I."

Mr. Brown had taken a fancy to Robert Stonehouse from the moment that the latter had challenged him on the very threshold of his kitchen and explained, coolly and simply, his needs and his intentions. Mr. Brown was frankly a Romantic, and Robert made up to him for the souffles and other culinary adventures which Fate had denied him. He liked to dream himself into Robert's future.

"One of these days I'll be pointing you out to my special customers—'Yes, sir, that's Sir Robert himself. Comes here every Saturday night for old times' sake. Used to work here with me—waited with

his own hands, sir—for two square meals and ten per cent. of his tips. You don't get young men like that these days—no, sir."

Robert accepted his prophetic vision gravely. It was what he meant to happen, and it did not seem to him to be amusing.

Brown's was tucked away in a quiet West End side street, and there was only one entrance. At six o'clock the tables were still empty, and Robert walked through into the employees' dressing-room. He put on his white jacket, slightly stained with iodoform, and a black apron which concealed his unprofessional grey trousers, and went to work in the pantry, laying out plates and dishes in proper order, after the manner of a general marshalling his troops for action. He was deft handed, and responsible for fewer breakages than any of the old-timers—foreigners for the most—who flitted up and down the passages with the look of bats startled from their belfries and only half awake. Through an open, glass window he could see into the huge kitchen, where Mr. Brown brooded over his oven, and catch rich, sensuous odours that went to his head like so many etherealized cocktails. He had not eaten since the morning, and though he was too strong to faint, it grew increasingly difficult to fix his mind on the examination question which he had set himself. He found himself wondering instead, what would happen if old Brown lost his *flair* for the psychological moment in roasts, and why it was that a man who had performed an operation successfully a hundred times should suddenly go to pieces over it? What made him lose faith in himself? Nerves? A matter of the liver? We were only at the beginning of our investigations. And then poor little Cosgrave, who as suddenly began to believe in himself and in life generally because he had fallen in love with a chorus girl!

The head waiter looked round the pantry door. He was a passionate Socialist who, in his spare time, preached the extermination of all such as did not work for their daily bread. But he disliked Robert bitterly, as a species of bourgeois blackleg.

"You're wanted. There's a party of ten just come in. Hurry up, can't yer?"

Robert put down his plates and went into the dining-room with the wine list. His table-napkin he carried neatly folded over one arm.

And there was Francey Wilmot.

She had other people with her, but he saw her first. He could not have mistaken her. Of course, she had changed. She was taller, for one thing, and wore evening dress instead of the plain brown frock that he remembered. But her thick hair had always been short, and now it was done up it did not seem much shorter. And it still had that quaint air of being brushed up from her head by a secret, rushing wind—of wanting to fly away with her. She was burnt, too, with an alien sun and wind. Her face and neck were a golden brown, and in reckless contrast with her white shoulders. One saw how little she cared. She sat with her elbows on the table, and the sight of the supple hands and strong, slender wrists stopped Robert Stonehouse short, as though a deep, old wound which had not troubled him for years had suddenly begun to hurt again. And yet how happy he had been, as a little boy, when she had just touched him.

It was evidently a celebration in her honour. A tall young man with side whiskers who came in late presented her with a bunch of roses in the name of the whole company and with a gay, exaggerated homage. They were a jolly crowd. They had in common their youth and an appearance of good-natured disregard for the things that ordinary people cared about. Otherwise they were of all sorts and conditions, like their clothes. Two or three were in evening dress, and one girl who sat at the end of the table and smoked incessantly wore a shabby coat and skirt and a raffish billycock hat. Chelsea or the University Schools was stamped on all of them. There wasn't much that they didn't know, and there was very little that they believed in—not even themselves. For they were of the very newest type, and would have scorned to admit to a Purpose or a Faith. But they could not help being young and rather liking one another, and the good food and the promise of a riotous evening.

Robert knew their kind. He even knew by sight the side-whiskered young man who now clapped his hands like an Eastern potentate. He had been of Robert's year at the University, and had been ploughed twice.

"Wine-ho! Fellow creatures, what is it to be? In honour of the occasion and to show our contempt of circumstances, shall we say a magnum of Heidsieck? All in favour wave their paws——"

The girl in the billycock hat blew a great puff of smoke towards him.

"Oh, death and damnation, Howard! Haven't I been explaining to you all the afternoon that I owe rent for a fortnight to a devil in female form, and that unless someone buys 'A Sunset over the Surrey Cliffs seen Upside Down,' Gerty will be on the streets? Make it beer with a dash o' bitters."

Finally it was Francey who decided. She beckoned, not looking at him, and Robert with a little obsequious bow, handed her the wine card and waited at her elbow. He was not afraid of Howard's recognition. They had never spoken to one another, and in any case Howard would not believe his eyes.

It was strange to stand near to her again and to recognize the little things about her that had fascinated small Robert Stonehouse—the line of her neck, the brown mole at the corner of her eye which people were always trying to rub off, the way her hair curled up from her temples in two unmistakable horns. He had teased her about them in his shy, clumsy way. A very subtle and sweet warmth emanated from her like a breath. It took him back to the day when he had huddled close to her, hiccoughing with grief and anger, and yet deeply, deliriously happy because she was sorry for him. It made him giddy with a sense of unreality, as though the present and the intervening years were only part of one of his night stories, which, after their tiresome, undeviating custom, had got tangled up in a monstrous, impossible dream. And then a new fancy took possession of him. He wanted to bend closer to her and say, very quietly, as though he were suggesting an order, "What about your handkerchief? Do you want it back, Francey?"

Amidst his austerely disciplined thoughts the impulse was like a mad, freakish intruder, and it frightened him, so that he drew back sharply.

"Cider-cup," she said. "It's my feast—and I like seeing the fruit and pretending I can taste it. And then Howard won't get drunk and recite poetry. Three orders, waiter."

He took the wine card, but she held it a moment longer, as though something had suddenly attracted her attention. Their hands had almost touched.

"Yes—three orders will be enough."

The company groaned, but submitted. In reality they were too stimulated already by an invisible, exuberant spirit among them to care much. From where he waited for Francey's order on the threshold of the pantry Robert could see and hear them. It was really the old days over again. Fundamentally things outside himself did not change much. The Brothers Banditti had grown up. They were not nice children any more. The innocent building-ground and nefarious plottings against unpopular authority had given place to restaurants and more subtle wickednesses. But still Francey played her queer, elusive role among them. She was of them—and yet she stood a little apart, a little on one side. Probably Howard thought himself their real leader. They did not talk to her directly very much, nor she to them. But all the time they were playing up to her, trying to draw her attention to themselves and make her laugh with them. She did laugh. It did not seem to matter to her at all that they were often crude and blatant and sometimes common in their self-expression. She laughed from her heart. But her laughter was a little different. It sat by itself, an elfish thing, with a touch of seriousness about it, its arms hugging its knees, and looked beyond them all and saw how much bigger and finer the joke was than they thought it. She was the spirit of their good humour. They could not have done without her.

And he, Robert Stonehouse, stood outside the circle, as in reality he had always done. But now he did not want to belong. He knew now how it hindered men to run with the herd—even to have friends. It wasted time and strength. And these people were no good anyhow. Howard was one of these dissipated duffers who later on would settle down as a miraculously respectable and incapable G.P. The rest were vague, rattle-brained eccentrics who would fizzle out, no one would know how or care.

Only Francey—— But even in the old days it was only because of
Francey that the Banditti had meant anything to him.

The head waiter pushed across the counter a jug of yellowish liquid in which floated orange peel and a few tinned, dubious-looking cherries.

"Take it, for God's sake! People who want muck like that ought to keep to Soho."

Robert poured out with an eye trained to accurate measurements in the laboratory. It was his practice to do well everything that he had to do. Otherwise you lost tone—you weakened your own fibre so that when the big thing came along you slumped. But he could not forget Francey Wilmot's nearness. It did not surprise him any more. But it charged him with unrest, and he and his unrest frightened him. He knew how to master ordinary emotion. Even when he carried off the Franklin Scholarship in the teeth of a brilliant opposition he had not allowed himself a moment's triumph. It was all in the day's work—a single step on the road which he had mapped out deliberately. But this was outside his experience. It had pounced on him from nowhere, shaking him.

He had to look up at her again. And then he saw that she was looking at him too, steadily, with a deep, inquiring kindness.

It was as though she had said aloud:

"Are you really a good little boy, Robert?"

The cider poured over the edge of the glass and over the table-cloth and in a dismal stream on to the lap of the girl with the raffish billycock hat.

"Well, that settles that," she said good-humouredly. "My only skirt, friends. She can't turn me out in my petticoat, can she? Oh, leave it alone, garcong; it doesn't matter a tinker's curse——"

He could not help it. In the midst of his angry confusion he still had to seek out her verdict on him—just as Robert Stonehouse had always done when he had been peculiarly heroic or unfortunate. And there it was, dancing beneath her gravity, her unforgotten, magic laughter.

At half-past ten Brown's cleared its last table. Robert Stonehouse rolled down his sleeves, picked up the parcel which had been placed ready for him on the pantry counter, said good-night to the head waiter, who did not answer, and with his coat-collar turned up about his ears went out in the street. It was quiet as a country lane and empty except for the girl who waited beyond the lamp light. He knew her instantly, and in turn two sensations that were equally foreign and unfamiliar seized him. The first was sheer panic, and the second was a sense of inevitability. The second was the oddest of the two, because he did not believe in Fate, but he did believe in his own will.

It was his own will, therefore, that made him walk steadily and indifferently towards her. His head bent as though he did not see her. It was really the wind in her hair now. It caught the ends of her long, loose coat and carried them out behind her. Her slender feet moved uncertainly in the circle of lamp-light. Any moment they might break into one of the quaint little dances. Or the wind might carry her off altogether in a mysterious gust down the street and out of sight. It was like his vision of her that evening in Acacia Grove. It made him feel more and more unreal and frightened of himself.

He was almost past her when he spoke.

"Robert Stonehouse," she said rather authoritatively, as though she expected him to run away; "Robert Stonehouse——"

He stopped short with his heart beating in his throat. But he did not take the hand that she held out to him. He could only stare at her, frowning in his distress, and she asked: "You do know who I am, don't you?"

"Yes. Francey—Francey Wilmot—Miss Wilmot." He forced himself to stop stammering, and added stiffly: "I did not know you had recognized me."

"Didn't you? I thought—— Well, I did recognize you anyhow. I was so astonished at first that I thought it was a sort of materialization. But you were absurdly the same. And then when you poured the cider out on to poor Gerty's skirt——"

"Was that one of my childish customs?" he asked. "I'd forgotten."

"I nearly stood up and shook hands."

"I'm glad you didn't."

"I thought you'd feel like that. I remembered that you had been rather a touchy little boy——"

"I was thinking of your friends. Howard, for instance."

"Why, do you know Howard?"

"By sight."

"If you've never even spoken to him you can't, of course, tell what he would have felt. Do you mind walking home with me? I don't live far from here, and we can talk better."

He held his ground, obstinate and defiant. It was unjust that anyone, knowing himself to be brilliantly clever, should yet be made an oaf by an incident so trivial.

"I'm sorry. I don't see what we can have to talk about. I'm not keen on childish recollections. I haven't time for them. And it's fairly obvious we don't move in the same set and are not likely to meet again." He burst out rudely. "I suppose you were just curious——"

"Of course. You'd be curious if you found me selling flowers in Piccadilly. You'd come up and say:

'allo! Francey, what have you been doing with yourself?' And you'd have tried to give me a leg up, if it only ran to buying a gardenia for old times' sake."

He suspected her of poking fun at him. And yet there was that subtle underlying seriousness about her and a frank, disarming kindliness.

"You think I'm down on my luck," he retorted, "and so anybody has a right to butt in."

"Not a right. Of course, if I'd met you in Bond Street, all sleek and polished, I shouldn't have dreamed of butting in. I should have said to myself, 'Well, that's the end of the little Robert Stonehouse saga as far as I'm concerned,' and I don't suppose I should ever have thought of you again. But now I shall have to go on thinking—and wondering what happened—and worrying." She drew her cloak closer about her like a bird folding its wings, and added prosaically: "I say, don't you find it rather cold standing about here?"

He turned with her and walked on sullenly, his head down to the wind. He thought: "I shall tell her nothing at all." But to his astonishment she was silent, and finally he had to speak himself.

"I'm afraid this silly business has broken up your party. Or was it getting too lively for you? Howard's beanos used to have a considerable reputation."

"He often seems drunk when he isn't," she returned tranquilly. "I think it's because he enjoys things more than most people are able to. It wasn't that. I wanted to see you so much, and I knew Brown's would be closing about now. So I sent them to a theatre. It seemed the safest place."

"And they went like lambs. But, then, the Banditti always did."

"Oh, the Banditti!" He guessed that she was smiling to herself. "The Banditti wouldn't have grown up like that. They were much too nice—never quite really wicked, were they? Just carried off their feet. Still, they were never quite the same after you left. I think they always hankered a little after the good old days when they rang door-hells and chivied their governesses. Probably they will never be so happy again."

"They had you. It was you they really cared about. Everybody did what you liked."

"You didn't."

"I did—in the end."

It was odd that they should be both thinking of that last encounter and that they should speak of it so guardedly, as though it were still a delicate matter.

"I didn't know you were never coming again. I waited for you in the afternoon—for weeks and weeks."

"Did you?" He looked at her quickly, taken off his guard, and then away again with a scornful laugh. "Oh, I don't believe it. You knew I wasn't nice—not your sort. You're just making it up."

"I wonder why you say that?" she asked dispassionately. "It's cheap and stupid. You're not really stupid and you weren't cheap, even if you weren't nice. And you know that I don't tell lies."

For a moment he was too startled and too ashamed to answer. Cheap. That was just the word for it. The sort of thing that common young men said to their common young women. And, of course, he did know. Her integrity was a thing you felt. But he could never bring himself to tell her that he had been afraid to believe too easily, or that he did not want to have to remember her afterwards, waiting there day by day, in their deserted playground. It troubled him already, like a vague, indefinite pain.

He did not even apologize.

"I suppose I should have come back sooner or later. But I didn't have the chance. My father died that night—unexpectedly." He brushed aside her low interjection.

"Oh, I was jolly glad. But after that we had to clear out. There was no money at all."

"But you lived in a big house. Your father was a great doctor."

"I was a great liar," he retorted impatiently. "I suppose I wanted to impress you. Perhaps he was a great doctor. Anyhow, he never did any work. There was a bailiff in the house when he died and a pile of bills. And not much else."

"What happened, then? Did you go with your stepmother? I remember how you hated her! You

wouldn't admit that she was a mother of any sort."

"No. I don't know what became of her. I never saw her again after that night. I think she went to live with her own people. Christine took care of me."

"I don't remember Christine. I don't think you ever told me about her."

"I wouldn't have known how to explain. I don't know now. She was a sort of friend—my father's and mother's friend. There was an understanding between her and my mother—a promise—I don't know what. So she took me away with her. Not that she had any money, either. We went to live in two rooms in the suburbs, and she worked for us both. She had never worked before—not for money—and she wasn't young. But she did it."

"A great sort of friend. And she came through too——?"

He did not answer at once, and he felt her look at him quickly, anxiously, as though she had felt him shrink back into himself. She heard something in his silence that he did not want her to hear. He put his head down to the wind again, hiding a white, hard face.

"Oh, yes, and we still live in two rooms—over a garage in Drayton Mews. My room 'folds up' in the day-time, and she sits there and knits woollen things for the shops. She has to take life easily now. She had an illness, and her eyes trouble her. But she's better—much better. And next year everything will be different."

The street had run out into the still shadows of a great dim square. For a moment they hesitated like travellers on the verge of unknown country; then Francey crossed over to the iron-palinged garden and they walked on side by side under the trees that rattled their grimy, fleshless limbs in an eerie dance. There was no one else stirring. The eyes of the stately Georgian houses were already closed in the weariness of their sad old age.

But she asked no questions. She seemed to have drifted away from him on a secret journey of her own. He had to draw her back—make her realize——

"I shall be a doctor then," he said challengingly.

"You said you would be a doctor. We quarrelled about it."

"How you remember things——"

"You were such a strange little boy. Besides, you remember them too."

"That's different. I've never had anyone else——" He caught himself up. "I suppose you think I'm still bragging?"

"You never bragged. You always did what you said you were going to do—even stupid things, like climbing that old wall."

So she had seen him, after all. She had watched—perhaps a little frightened for him, a little impressed by his reckless daring.

"Oh, well, I admit it didn't seem likely. People think you have to have a lot of money. We've often laughed about it. For we hadn't anything except what we saved from week to week. And yet we've done it. You can do anything so long as you don't mind what you do. It depends on the stuff you're made of."

He threw his head up and walked freely, with open shoulders. After all, he was proud of those years, and had a right to be. They had tested every inch of him, and it would have been stupid to pretend that he did not know his own mettle. He heard his footsteps ring out through the fitful whimpering of the wind and they seemed to mark the rhythm of his life—a steady, resolute progression. The lighter fall of Francey Wilmot's feet beside him was like an echo. But yet it had its own quality. Not less resolute.

He heard her say quickly, almost to herself:

"It must have been hard going—but awfully worth while. An adventure. I can't be sorry for anyone who suffers on an adventure—any sort of adventure—even if it's only in oneself."

She was more moved than he could understand. But the wind, dashed with ice-cold rain, blew them closer to one another. He could feel the warmth of her arm against his. It was difficult to seem prosaic and casual.

"That's just it. Worth while. Why do people want 'chances' and 'equality' and things made smooth for

them? What's the use of anything if there isn't a top and a bottom to it? What's the use of having enough to eat if you haven't been hungry? I'm going to be a doctor, and I might have slumped into the gutter. I'm jolly glad there is a gutter to slump into——" He broke off, and then went on more deliberately. "Christine and I mapped it out one night when I was ten years old. After school hours I used to run errands and sell newspapers. On half-holidays I went down into the West End and hunted taxis for people coming out of theatres. I took my exams and scholarship one after the other. We counted on that. I kept on earning in one way or another all through my first M.B. and during the two years I've walked the Wards. Now I've had to drop out for a bit to make enough to carry through my finals. Christine's illness was the only thing we hadn't reckoned with."

Her voice had an odd, troubling huskiness.

"You must be frightfully strong. But then you always were. You used to beat everyone——"

"I'm like that now. I've got a dozen lives—like a cat. And one life doesn't know what the other one's doing." He laughed. "Before breakfast I wash down the car of the man who owns our garage. The rest of the morning I coach fellows for the Matric. In the afternoon I swot for myself. You see how I spend my evenings. Brown's been very decent to me. I get part of my tips and two meals—one for myself and one to take home." He showed her the parcel that he carried. "Cold chicken and rice mould," he said carelessly. "We couldn't afford that."

He did not tell her that there had been times when, to keep their compact, they had gone without altogether, when Christine had fainted over her typewriter and he had watched her from out of a horrible, quivering mist—too sick with hunger to help, or even to care much. He did not want Francey to be sorry for him.

"And the tips?" she asked, with grave concern. "I hope we played the game. But poor old Howard is always so hard up——"

"Oh, good enough. Usually I get more than the others, and they hate me for it. I'm quicker and I've got clean hands. People like that."

"I saw your hands first," Francey said, "and I knew at once that you were something different."

It was too dark for her to see his face. Yet he turned away hastily. He spoke as though he did not care at all.

"Brown's a smart fellow. He knows what's coming, and what people are worth to him. We've got an agreement that when I'm Sir Robert I'm to boost the old place and do his operations free. I think he'll be rather sick if he doesn't need any."

It was half a joke, but if she had laughed—laughed in the wrong way—the chances were that he would have turned on his heel and left her without so much as a good-night. For he was strung up to an abnormal, cruel sensitiveness. Whatever else they did, people did not laugh at him. He had never given them the chance that he had given her. He had learnt to be silent, and now she had made him talk and the result had been an uncouth failure. He had thrown his hardships at her like a parvenu his riches. If she did not see through his crudeness to what was real in him, she could only see that he was a rather funny young man who swaggered outrageously. And that was not to be endured.

But she did not laugh at all.

"You're sure of yourself, Robert."

"Yes—I am."

"I'm sure of myself, too. Because I'm sure of things outside myself."

He did not try to understand her. He was wrestling with the expression of his own experiences. He threw out his free hand and turned it and closed the powerful, slender fingers, as though he were moulding some invisible substance.

"Outside things are colourless and lifeless—sort of plastic stuff—until we get hold of them. We twist them to the best shapes we can. Nothing happens to us that isn't exactly like ourselves. Even what people call accidents. Even a man's diseases. I've seen that in the Wards. People die as they live, and they live as they are——"

And now she did laugh, throwing back her head, and he laughed with her, shyly but not resentfully. It was as though a crisis in their relationship had been passed. He could trust her to understand. And he knew that though what he had said was true, it had also sounded young and sententious.

"You think I'm talking rot, don't you?"

"I only think you've changed," she answered, with a quick gravity. "Not outside. Outside you're just a few feet bigger and the round lines have become straight. But when you were a little boy you used to cry a good deal."

"I don't see—how did you know?"

"I did know. There were certain smears—I don't think you liked having your face washed—and a red, tired, look under the eyes. The point is that now I can't imagine your ever having cried at all."

"I haven't." He calculated solemnly. "Not for more than twelve years.
I remember, because it was after I had played truant at the circus."

But he did not want to tell her about the circus. He stopped short and looked at his watch in the lamplight.

"Nearly twelve. We've been prowling round this place for an hour. I've got to get home and work. I thought you said you lived near here."

"I do. Over the way. The big house. I've two rooms on the top floor.
Rather jolly—and near St. Mary's——"

"What—what do you want with St. Mary's?"

But she had already begun to cross the road, and the wind, coming down a side street with a shriek, sent her scudding before it like a leaf. She was half-way up the grey stone steps before he overtook her. She turned on him, the short ends of her hair flying wickedly.

"Of course, it's only right and natural that you should talk of nothing but yourself."

He stammered breathlessly.

"I didn't think—I'm sorry——"

"Do you suppose you're the only person who does what they say they're going to do?"

"What—not—not a doctor, Francey?"

"Not yet. I'm two years behind you. This will be my first year in the Wards. Next year you will be full-blown—perhaps on the staff—and I shall have to trot behind you and believe everything you say." She smiled rather gravely. "You will have got the big stick, after all."

He looked up at her, holding on to the spiked railing that guarded the yawning area. But he had a queer feeling that he had let go of everything else that he had held fast to—that he was gliding down-bill in a reckless abandonment to an unknown feeling. He knew too little of emotion to know that he was happy.

"Why—I shall be there too. I'll be on a surgical post—dresser for old
Rogers. And he's going to take me on his private rounds."

It was not what he had meant to say. He had meant to say, "We shall see each other." Perhaps she guessed. Her hand rested on his, warm and strong and kind, as though nothing had changed at all. Because they were grown up she did not hold back in a conventional reserve. If only he could have cried she would have sat down on the steps beside him, and put her arm about him, and comforted him.

"And I want to meet Christine," she said.

He nodded.

"Rather."

"And it's been fine—our meeting again. But didn't you always know it would happen?"

"I believe I did. Yes, I did. I used to imagine——"

And then he knew and saw that she knew too. He saw it in the sudden darkening of her steady eyes, in the perplexity of her drawn brows. He felt it in her hand that scarcely moved, as though even now it would not shrink from whatever was the truth. It came and went like a flare of fire across the storm. And when it had gone, they could not believe that it had ever been. They were both shaken with astonishment. And yet, hadn't they always known?

"Good-night, Robert Stonehouse."

"Good-night."

But he could not move. He watched the blank door open, and her slender shadow stand out for a moment against the yellow gas-light of the hall. She did not look back. Perhaps she too was spell-bound. The door closed with an odd sound as though the house had clicked its tongue in good-natured amusement.

"Now you see how it happens, Robert Stonehouse!"

At any rate, the spell was broken. Hugging his parcel dangerously close he raced back to the shelter of the trees and waited. High over head the house opened a bright eye at him. He waved back at it with an absurd, incredible boyishness.

Then he walked on deliberately, firmly.

What was it he had to set his mind on?

Of course. That question of therapeutics——

II

1

"I don't understand it," Christine said. "It seems to me better than anything you've ever read to me."

She counted her stitches for the second time, and looked up at the sun that showed its face over the stable roof opposite, as though at a lamp which did not burn as well as it used to do. In the dusty golden light she was like a figure in a tapestry. Perhaps in its early days it had been a trifle crude, a trifle harsh in colour, but now worn and threadbare, trembling on decay, it had attained a rare and exquisite beauty.

She smiled back blindly into the little room.

"Don't you think so, Robert?"

Mr. Ricardo also looked at Robert, eagerly, pathetically.

"It was to gain your opinion—reinforce my own judgment—solely for that purpose—difficult to obtain, the impartial opinion of a trained mind——"

He had grown into a habit of talking like that—in broken disjointed sentences, which only Robert and Christine who knew his thoughts could understand. And now, in the midst of his scattered manuscript he waited, rubbing his shiny knees with his thin, grey, not very clean hands.

But Robert looked at Francey. He had sat all the time with his arms crossed on the oil-clothed table and looked at her, frankly and unconsciously as a savage or a street boy might have done. He was too tired to care. He had come straight from giving the limousine underneath an extra washing down for the Whitsun holidays and oil still lingered in his nails, and there was a faint forgotten smear of it on his cheek, and another near the thick upstanding hair where he had rubbed his hand across. They came as almost humorous relief in a face in which there were things ten years too old—the harsh and bony structure showing where there should have been a round boyishness, and the full mouth set in a fierce, relentless negation of itself. But the oil smears and the eyes that shone out from under the fair overhanging brows were again almost too young. They made the strength pathetic.

He, too, sat in the sunlight, which was not kind to his green, threadbare clothes. But the sun only came into the stable yard for an hour or two, and as it withdrew itself slowly along the length of the table he shifted his position to move with it, unconsciously, like a tired animal. Francey, cross-legged and smoking, on the couch which at night unfolded itself into a bed, saw the movement and smiled at him. Her eyes were as steady in their serenity as his were steady with hunger. She did not change colour, so that whatever she understood from that long scrutiny did not trouble her. He leant forward, as though he were afraid of missing some subtle half-tone in her voice.

"Mr. Ricardo thinks I'm unprejudiced. He's forgotten the times when he pulled my ears and smacked my head. But you are different, Francey. You can say what you think."

"But it wouldn't be at all helpful," she answered very solemnly. "To begin with, I have the scientific mind, and I cannot accept as a basis of argument an entirely untested hypothesis."

Connie Edwards thereupon gave vent to an artificial groan of anguish, followed by an explosive giggle which would have lost her her half of Rufus Cosgrave's chair had he not put his arm round her. There were only three chairs in the room, and as two of them had been already occupied when she and her companion had, as she expressed it, "blown in" half an hour previously, they had perched together, listening with clasped hands and an air of insincere solemnity. For Mr. Ricardo had not stopped reading. He had gone on as though he had not heard their boisterous entry, and even now would have seemed unaware of their existence but for something bitter and antagonistic in the hunch of his thin shoulders. His dark, biting eyes avoided them like those of a sullen child who does not want to see. But Miss Edwards appeared to be not easily depressed. She waved her hand in friendly thanks for the cigarette case which Francey tossed across to her, and, having selected her cigarette with blunt, viciously manicured fingers, poked Cosgrave for a match.

"Gawd Almighty, and Little Connie K.O.'ed in the first round by an untested hypo—hypo—— What was it, Ruffles dear? (Oh, do stop squeezing my hand! This isn't the pictures, and it's a match I want—not love.) An untested hypothesis. Thank you, dearie. I wonder if He's feeling as sore about it as I am?"

She gurgled over her cigarette, and Cosgrave smiled at everyone in turn, as though he had said aloud, "Isn't she a splendid joke?" He looked almost mystically happy.

"Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven," Mr. Ricardo muttered. "Mark it, mark it, Robert—the shallow thinking, shallow jesting, shallow living——"

Miss Edwards winked at Francey, and Francey looked back at her with her understanding kindliness. It seemed to Robert that ever since Connie Edwards had burst into the room Francey had changed. The change was subtle and difficult to lay hold of, like Francey herself. Mentally she was always moving about, quietly, light-footedly, just as she had done among the bricks and rubble of their old playground, peering thoughtfully at things which nobody else saw or looking at them from some new point of view. You couldn't be sure what they were or why they interested her. And now—he had almost seen her do it—she had shifted her position, come over to Connie Edward's side, and was gazing over her shoulder, with her own brown head tilted a little on one ear, and was saying in Connie's vernacular:

"Well, so that's how it looks to you? And, I say, you're right. It's a scream——"

In her mysterious way she had found something she liked in Connie Edwards, with her awful hat and her outrageous, three-inch heels and her common prettiness. Cosgrave obviously was crazy about her. He seemed to cling to her because she had an insatiable hunger for the things he couldn't afford. One could see that he had tried to model himself to her taste. He wore a gardenia and a spotted tie. And, bearing these insignia of vulgarity, he looked more than ever pathetic and over-delicate.

Cosgrave was an idiot who had lost his balance. But Francey was another matter. The Francey who had asked "And are you a good little boy?" accepted Connie Edwards without question. Because it was ridiculous to be hurt about it Robert grew angry with her and frowned away from her, and talked to Mr. Ricardo as though there were no one else in the room.

"I can't think why they didn't take it, sir. It's fine stuff. A shade too long for a magazine article. It may have been that, of course."

But Mr. Ricardo bent down and began to gather up his manuscript. The paper was of all kinds and sizes, covered with crabbed writing and fierce erasures. It was oddly like himself—disordered, a little desperate, not very clean. When he had all the sheets together he sat with them hugged against his breast and bent closer to Christine, speaking in a mysterious whisper.

"It's not that. Robert knows it isn't, but he doesn't care any more. He'll say anything. But I know. I've guessed it a long time. People have found out. They say to one another, when I send in my papers, 'This man is a liar. Every morning of his life he gives his assent to lies. And now he is going to teach the very lies he pretends to exterminate. We can't have anything to do with a man like that.' And there's a conspiracy, Miss Christine, a conspiracy——" His voice began to rise and tremble. "They've taken me off my old classes under the pretext that they are too much for me. They've set me on to Scripture. Then they told me I had to remember—remember circumstances—to prevent myself from saying what I thought of such devilish cruelty. But I saw that they wanted me to break out so that they could get rid of me altogether, and I held my tongue. One of these days, though, I shall stand up in the open places and tell the truth. I shall say what they have done to me——"

He had forgotten, if he had ever fully realized, that there were strangers about him. He shook his fist and shouted, whilst the slow, hopeless tears rolled down the sunken yellow cheeks onto the dirty manuscript.

They stared at him in consternation, all but Francey, who uncurled herself negligently and slid from the sofa.

"It's past my tea-time," she announced, "and I want my tea."

It was as though she had neither seen nor cared. Christine turned her faded, groping eyes thankfully in her direction.

"Of course, my dear. Robert—please——"

"No," he said; "we don't have tea, Francey."

"But, Robert, at least when we have guests——"

"Or guests," he added, with a set, white face.

Cosgrave laughed. He made a comic grimace. He seemed utterly irrepressible and irresponsible, like a colt let out for the first time in a wide field.

"You don't know this fellow like I do, Miss Wilmot. A nasty Spartan. But if you'll put a shilling in the gas meter we'll get cakes and a quarter of tea. He doesn't need to have any if he doesn't want it, but he can't grudge us a corner of table and half a chair each. Miss Christine's on our side, aren't you, Miss Christine? And oh, Connie, there's a pastrycook's round the corner where they make jam-puffs like they did when I was a kid——"

"I'll put the kettle on," Francey said, nodding to him.

She passed close to Robert. She even gave him a quick, friendly touch. He could almost hear her say, "Tag, Robert!" but he would not look at her. And yet the moment after he knew that it was all make-believe. His anger was a sham, protecting something that was fragile and afraid of pain. Now that she had gone out of the barren little room she had taken with her the sense of a secret, gracious intimacy which had been its warmth and colour. He saw that the sunlight had shrunk to a pale gold finger whose tip rested lingeringly on the windowsill, and he felt tired and cold and work-soiled.

He got up and followed her awkwardly, with a sullen face and a childishly beating heart. The kettle was already on the gas, and Francey gazing into an open cupboard that was scarcely smaller than the kitchen itself.

"It's like a boy's chemist shop," she said casually, as though she had expected him, "with the doses done up in little white paper packets. Is it a game, Robert?"

"A sort of game. We used to use too much of everything, and at the end of the week there'd be nothing left. So we doled it out like that."

"Yes, I see. A jolly good idea. That way you couldn't over-eat yourselves."

"I—I suppose you think I was an awful beast about the tea, don't you?"

"No, I didn't—I don't."

"I was—much firmer than I would have been, but I wanted you to stay.
So I couldn't give in."

"If it had been just Cosgrave and Miss Edwards?"

"It wouldn't have mattered—not so much."

"I wasn't hurt. It was tactless of me. But I wanted the tea. I forgot. And I wanted to stay, too. I haven't learnt to do without things that I want."

"You think I don't want them?"

She closed the cupboard door abruptly. The kitchen was so small that when she turned they had to stand close to one another to avoid falling back into the sink or burning themselves against the gas jet. He saw that the fine colour had gone out of her face. She looked unfamiliarly tired.

"I think you want them terribly. I suppose I'm not heroic. I don't like your saying 'No' always—

always."

"I shall get what I really want in the end."

She sighed, reflected, and then laughed rather ruefully.

"Oh, well, get the cups now, at any rate."

"There are only three, Francey."

"You and I will have to share, then."

So she made him happy—just as she had done when they had been children—with a sudden comradely gesture.

But in the next room Mr. Ricardo had begun to talk again. They had to hear him. He was not crying any more. His voice sounded hard and embittered.

"He's changed. He doesn't care. He pretended to listen. He was looking at that girl. She's a strange girl. I don't trust her. She believes in myths. Oh, yes, I know. She did not say so, but I can smell out an enemy. She will try to wreck everything. So it is in life. We give everything—sacrifice everything—to pass on our knowledge, our experience, and in the end they break away from us—they go their own road."

Robert could not hear Christine's answer. He felt that Ricardo had thrown out his arms in one of his wild gestures. "Not gratitude—not gratitude. He was to have carried on my fight. To have been free as I am not——"

Miss Edwards and Rufus Cosgrave came racketing back up the steep and creaking stairs. It was like the whirlwind entry of some boisterous comet dragging at its rear a bewildered, happy tail. They were as exultant as though their paper bags contained priceless loot rescued from overwhelming forces.

"Hurry up there, Mr. Stonehouse. Don't keep the lady waiting. Tea and puff, as ordered, ma'am. No, ma'am, no tipping allowed in this establishment. But anything left under the plate will be sent to the Society for the Cure of the Grouch among Superior Waiters."

She jollied Christine, whose answering smile was like a little puzzled ghost. She nourished a heavily scented handkerchief in the professional manner and grinned at Robert, whose open hostility did not so much as ruffle the fringe of her good humour. In her raffish, rakish world poverty and wry, eccentric-tempered people abounded, and were just part of an enormous joke. And Rufus Cosgrave, who gaped at her in wonder and admiration, saw that she was right. Poor old Robert and exams, and beastly, bullying fathers and hard-upness—the latter more especially—were all supremely funny.

But Robert would not look at the jam-puff which she pushed across to him.

"Thanks. I hate the beastly stuff."

And yet it was a flaky thing, oozing, as Rufus had declared, with real raspberry jam. And he was very young. But he would not give way. Could not. It seemed trivial, and yet it was vital, too. There was something in him which stood up straight and unbendable. Once broken it could never be set up again. And gradually a sense of loneliness crept over him. He went and stood next Ricardo, who, like himself, would have no share in the festivity. And the old man blinked up at him with a kind of triumph.

"And we're going to a hill that I know of," Francey was saying. "No one else knows of it. In fact, it's only there when I am. You go by train, and after that you have to walk. I don't know the way. It comes by inspiration. When you get to the top you can see the whole of England, and there are always flowers. I'm taking Howard's gang, and you people must come along too. It's what you want. A good time——"

"*All* the time," said Miss Edwards, blowing away the crumbs.

"My people are going in a char-a-banc to Brighton," Rufus said. "But
I'll give them the slip. There's sure to be a beastly row anyhow."

"That's my brave boy! Who cares for rows? Take me. Our Mr. Reilly's had the nerve to fix up a rehearsal for the new French dame what's coming to ginger up our show—and, oh, believe me, it needs it—but am I down-hearted? No! Anyway, if she's half the stuff they say she is they'll never notice poor little Connie's gone to bury her fifth grandmother. So I'll be with you, lady, and kind regards and many thanks."

"And you, too. Miss Forsyth?"

Christine shook her head. She was frowning up out of the open window a little anxiously.

"What would you do with a tired old woman?"

"Ruffles will carry you. Throw out your chest, Ruffles, and look fierce. What's the use of a hefty brute like that if it isn't useful?"

"And when you're on my hill," Francey said with a mysterious nod, "you'll understand it better than any of us." She looked away from the grey, upturned face. She added almost to herself: "How dark it is here! The sun has gone down behind the roof."

"Has it? Yes, it went so suddenly. I wondered"—she picked up her knitting, and began to roll it together—"if Robert could go?" she murmured.

"Robert can go. I knew before I asked."

But he flung round on her in a burst of extraordinary resentment.

"I can't. You seem to think I can do anything and everything that comes into your head. People like you never really understand. We're poor. We haven't the money or the time to—to fool round. Nor has Cosgrave, but he likes to pretend—humbug himself and anyone else silly enough to believe in him."

It was as though something long smouldering amongst them had blazed up. Cosgrave banged the table with his clenched fist. His freckles were like small suns shining out of his dead-white face.

"You—you leave me alone, Stonehouse. I—I'm n-not a kid any more. And I d-don't pretend. Connie knows I haven't a c-cent in the world except what poor mother sneaks out of the housekeeping. But I'm s-sick of living as I've done—always grinding, always afraid of everything. If I c-can't have my fun out of life I d-don't want to live at all. I'm not going to Heaven to make up for it—Mr. Ricardo has just told us that—so what's the use? You've g-got your work and that satisfies you. Mine doesn't satisfy me. So when you t-talk about me—you're just t-talking through your hat."

Miss Edwards threw up her hands in mock horror.

"Oh, my angel child, what a temper! And to think I nearly married him!"

She choked with laughter. And underneath the thin flooring, as though roused by her irreverent merriment, the big car shook itself awake with a roar and splutter of indignation. But the sliding doors were thrown open, and its rage died down at the prospect of release. It began to purr complacently, greedily.

It was strange how the sound quieted them. They looked towards the window as though for the first time they were aware of something outside that came to them from beyond the low, confining roofs—a spring wind blowing from far-off places.

"Six cylinder," Cosgrave muttered with feverish eyes. "Do you know, if
I had that thing living under me I'd—I'd go off with it one night, and
I'd go on and on and never come back."

Connie Edwards patted his head. She winked at Francey, but Francey was looking at Robert's sullen back.

"No, you wouldn't. Not for six months or so, anyhow."

He laughed shamefacedly.

"Oh, well, of course I'm rotting. I can't drive a go-cart. Never had the chance. Oh, I say, Robert, don't grouch. I didn't mean to be rude. Of course, you're right in a way. But I get that sort of stuff at home, and if I get it here I don't know what I'll do."

"Oh, you're right, too," Robert muttered. "It's not my business."

Cosgrave appealed sadly to Francey.

"He's wild with me. But a picnic—you'd think any human being might go on a picnic——"

"You're going," she answered quietly, "and Robert too."

He did not take up the challenge. He was too miserable. He had not meant to break out like that. As in the old days, he hungered for her approval, her good smile of understanding. But as in the old days, too, beneath it all, was the dim consciousness of an antagonism, of their two wills poised against one

another.

The car purred louder with exultation. It came sliding out into the narrow, cobbled street. It waited a moment, gathering itself together.

"I wonder where it's going," Cosgrave dreamed. "I hope a jolly long way—right to the other end of England. I'd like to think of it going on and on through the whole world."

Christine leaned forward, peering out dimly.

"Are the trees out yet, Robert?"

They looked at her in silence. It was a strange thing to ask. And yet not strange at all. All day long she sat there and saw nothing but the squat, red-faced stable opposite. Or if she went out it was to buy cheaply from the barrows in a mean side street. And now she was remembering that there were trees somewhere, perhaps in bloom.

Even Miss Edwards looked queerly dashed and distressed.

"Now you're asking something, Miss Forsyth. There are trees in this little old village, but they aren't real somehow, and I never notice 'em. Well, we'll know on Monday. Please Heaven, it doesn't rain."

"I want to get out," Cosgrave muttered; "out of here—right away——"

"I've not had a picnic—not since I was a kid. But I haven't forgotten it, though. Heaps to eat—and an appetite—— Oh, my!"

"And you can go on eating and eating," Francey added greedily, "and it doesn't seem to matter."

"Egg and cress sandwiches——"

"Ham pie——"

"Sardines——"

"Russian salad—mayonnaise——"

"And something jolly in a bottle."

They laughed at one another. But after that the quiet returned again. Francey sat with her hands clasped behind her head and her chair tip-tilted against the wall. To Robert, who watched her from out of the shadow, she seemed to be drifting farther and farther away on a dark, quiet, flowing river.

It grew to dusk. The car had long since set out on its unknown journey. The narrow street with its pungent stable odour had sunk into one of those deep silences which lie scattered like secret pools along the route of London's endless processions. And presently Mr. Ricardo, who had not moved or spoken, but had sat hunched together like a captive bird, leant forward with his finger to his lips.

Christine had fallen asleep. Her hands lay folded upon her work and her face was still lifted to the black ridge of roof where the sun had vanished. There was enchantment about her sleep, as though in the very midst of them she had begun to live a new, mysterious life of her own. She had been the shadowy onlooker. She became the central figure among them.

Mr. Ricardo rose noiselessly. He looked at no one. He passed them like a ghost. They heard him creeping down the stairs and his hurrying, unequal footsteps on the empty street. Cosgrave and Connie Edwards nodded to one another and took hands and were gone. Francey, too, slipped to her feet. She gathered up her hat and coat, her silence effortless. She did not so much as glance at Robert, but at the head of the steep, ladder-like stairs he overtook her.

"Francey—listen——"

With one foot on the lower step, her back against the wall, she waited for him. It was too dark for them to see each other clearly. They were shadows to one another. They spoke in whispers, as though they were afraid of waking something more than the sleeper in the room behind them. He could not have told how he knew that her face was wet.

"I wanted to say—I don't know why I behaved like that. I'm not usually—nervy—uncontrolled. I don't think I've ever lost my temper before. I've had so little to do with people. Perhaps that's it. I've gone my own way alone——"

"And now that our ways have crossed," she began with a sad irony.

"No—not crossed—come together—run out together into the high-road——" He clenched his hands till they were bloodless in the effort to speak. "You see, a few weeks ago I wouldn't have lost my temper—and I wouldn't have said queer, silly things like this—— I'm a sort of kaleidoscope that someone's shaken up. I don't know myself; things have been hard—but awfully simple. I've only thought of—wanted—the one thing. It doesn't seem to me that I've had to fight until now. You don't understand—what it has been——"

"I do—I do!" she interrupted hurriedly. "I've seen Christine—and the way you live—and that dreadful cupboard. Oh, I'm not sorry for you—only afraid. You're nothing but a boy——"

"You needn't be afraid. I'll pull through. It's only another year now. But I can't be like the other people you know—who can be jolly and easy-going—because they're not going anywhere at all. Can't you be patient, Francey?"

"Was I impatient?" He felt her humour flicker up like a flame in the darkness. "I suppose I was. It was the jam-puff. You hurt their feelings. And it was such a little thing."

"I hate jam-puffs," he said, but humbly, because it was not the truth, and he could never explain.

"Come with us, Robert."

"I can't."

"But you want to come?"

"That's just it. I don't know why. It would be waste of time—money—everything—all wrong. What have I to do with Howard and that lot—with girls like Connie Edwards?"

"—and me," she added, smiling to herself.

"Or you with them?"

"Oh, they're my friends. As you say, they're not going anywhere—just dawdling along and picking up things by the wayside—queer, interesting things——"

"I've no use for them," he said doggedly.

"—And Christine wanted to go." She added after a moment, gently, as though she were feeling through the dark, "—is dying to go, Robert."

"You're just imagining it. She's never cared for things like that—only for my getting ahead with my work—my finals."

"Didn't you hear her ask about the trees?"

He looked back over his shoulder like a suddenly frightened child.

"Yes. It—it didn't mean anything, though. It was just for something to say."

"She said a great deal more than she meant to."

"We've mapped out everything—every ha'penny—every minute."

"Let me help, Robert. I've got such a lot. I've no one else. I could make it easier for you both. I should be happier, too. And you could pay me back afterwards with interest—a hundred per cent.—I don't care what."

But now feeling through the dark she had reached the barrier. He answered stonily.

"Thanks. We've never owed anything. We shan't begin now."

She slipped into her coat. She tugged her soft hat down over her hair. There was more than anger in her quick, impatient movements. She was going because she couldn't bear it any more. She had given in. She would never come back. And at that fear he broke out with a desperate cunning.

"It's too bad to be angry with me. I—I want to go."

"And I've asked you——?

"Because you want me?"

"Of course. It will be the first chance we've had to really talk——"

"It can't matter—just for once," he pleaded with himself.

"It might matter a great deal."

She went on down the stairs, very slowly, lingeringly. He leant over the creaking banisters, trying to see her.

"Francey—you duffer—you haven't even told me where to meet you."

"Paddington—the Booking Office—10.15."

He held his breath. Her voice had sounded like that of a spirit laughing out of the black veil beneath. It did not come again. He could not even hear her footsteps. She had vanished. But he waited, trembling before the wonder of his own impulse.

Supposing he had yielded—had taken her hands and kissed them—kissed that pale, beloved face, he who had never kissed anyone but Christine since his mother died?

He had not done it. It had been too difficult to yield. But he stood there, dreaming, with his hot eyes pressed into his hands, whilst out of the magic quiet rose wave after wave of enchantment, engulfing him.

2

They agreed that Francey had not boasted about her hill. It stood up boldly out of the rolling sea of field and common land and was tree-crowned, with primroses shining amongst the young grass. From its summit they could see toy villages and church, spires and motors and char-a-bancs running like alarmed insects along the white, winding lanes. But apparently no one saw the hill. No one came to it. Since it was everything that picnic parties demanded in the way of a hill, it was only reasonable to accept Francey's theory that it was not really there at all—or at most only there for her particular convenience.

They spread their table-cloth on its slope and under the dappled shadows of the half-fledged trees, with Christine presiding on the high ground. Her wispy grey hair fluttered out from under the wide black hat, and she looked pretty and pathetic, with her shabby black bag and her old umbrella, like a witch, as Howard said, who had been caught whilst absent-mindedly gathering toad-stools and carried here in triumph to bless their mortal festivity.

"The umbrella keeps off rain," he explained mysteriously, "and besides that, it's a necromantic Handley-Page which might fly off with her at any minute. When you see it opening, stand clear and hold on to yourselves."

He made a limerick on this particular fancy. It was a very bad limerick, as bad, probably, as his theories on pyridine and its relation to the alkaloids which had floored him in his last exam.; but the Gang applauded enthusiastically, and drank to Christine out of mugs of beer. Unlicked and cynical as they were, they seemed to have a chivalrous tenderness for her. And she was at home among them—silent, smiling wistfully down upon their commonplace eccentricities, as though through the mist of her coming blindness they were somehow lovable.

They ate outrageously of fearsome things. Yet over her third meringue Connie Edwards broke down with lamentations for the lost powers of youth.

"I can remember eating five of 'em," she said, "and coming home to a tea of winkles and bloater paste. Oh Gawd! I'll be in my grave before I can turn round."

She had been from the start in an unusually pensive and philosophic mood—a trifle wide-eyed and even awe-struck. It seemed that the night before the "French dame" had appeared unexpectedly during a rehearsal—a peculiarly gingerless performance according to Connie's account—and had watched from the wings awhile, and then, unasked and apparently without premeditation, had broken in among them and at the edge of the footlights, to a gaping, empty theatre, had danced and sung a little song.

"A French song," Connie said solemnly. "Not a word of the blessed thing could we understand, and yet we were all hugging ourselves. Not pretty either—a mere bone and a yank of hair—and no more voice than a sparrow. But you just went along too. Couldn't help it. And afterwards we played up as though we liked it, and hadn't been plugging at the rottenest show in England for the last ten weeks. And she laughed and clapped her hands, and our tongues hung out we were that pleased. She's It, friends. It. Gyp Labelle from the Folies Bergeres and absolutely It."

Rufus Cosgrave rolled over on his face and lay blinking out of the long grass like a sleepy, red-headed satyr.

"Gyp Labelle," he said drowsily, "Gyp Labelle!"

Robert knew that he was thinking of the Circus. And he did not want to think about the Circus. He pushed the memory from him. He was glad when Howard said gravely:

"That's genius. That's what we poor devils pray to and pray for. We know we haven't got it, but we're always hoping that if we agonize and sweat long enough, one day God will lean out of His cloud and touch us with His finger."

"Michael Angelo," said Gertie Sumners, with a kind of sombre triumph. "The Sistine Chapel. I've got a print of it in my room. That's where you saw it." She leaned back against a tree trunk with her knees drawn up to her chin, and blew out clouds of smoke, and looked more than usually grey and dishevelled and in need of a bath. "In a way it's like that with Jeffries. He rubs his beastly old thumb over my rottenest charcoal sketch, and it's a masterpiece."

Robert, lying outstretched at Francey's feet, wondered at them—at their talk of genius in connection with a revue star and a smudgy, underpaid studio hack, more still at their reverence for a God in Whom they certainly did not believe.

Miss Edwards snatched off her cartwheel hat smothered with impossible poppies, and sent it spinning down the hill.

"What's the good?" she demanded fiercely. "We're just nothing at all. We're young now. But when we aren't young, what's going to happen to the bunch of us?"

"This is a picnic," Howard reminded her. "Not a funeral. You haven't eaten enough. Have a pickle."

But the shadow lingered. It was like the shadow thrown by the white clouds riding the light spring wind. It put out the naming colours of the grass and flowers. It was as though winter, slinking sullenly to its lair, showed its teeth at them in sinister reminder. Then it was gone. It was difficult to believe it could return.

Robert looked up shyly into Francey's face, and she smiled down at him with her warm eyes. They had scarcely spoken to one another, but something delicate and exquisite had been born between them in their silence. He was afraid to touch it, and afraid almost to move. He felt very close to her, very sure that she was living with him, withdrawn secretly from the rest into the strange world that he had discovered. He was happy. And happiness like this was new to him and terrifying. He was like a waif from the streets, pale and gaunt and young, with dazzled eyes gazing for the first time into great distances.

"Italy——" Gertie Sumners muttered. She threw away her cigarette, and sat with her sickly face between her hands. "I've got to get there before I die. Think of all the swine that hoof about the Sistine Chapel yawning their fat heads off, and me who'd give my immortal soul for an hour——"

"You'll go," Howard said, blinking kindly at her. "I'll take you. We'll get out of this for good and all. I'll bust a bank or forge a cheque. You've got the divine right to go, old dear!"

Robert stirred, drawing himself a little nearer to Francey, touching her rough tweed skirt humbly, secretly, as a Catholic might touch a sacred relic for comfort and protection. They were talking a language that he could not understand—-they were occupied with things that he despised, not knowing what they were; they made him ashamed of his ignorance and angry with his shame. He could not free himself of his first conviction that they were really the Banditti—inferior children, who yet had something that he had not. He was cleverer than they were. He would be a great man when they had wilted from their brief, shallow-soiled youth to a handful of dry stubble. (This Gertie Sumners would not even live long. He recognized already the thumb-marks of disease in her sunken cheeks.) And yet he was an outsider, blundering in their wake. Just because they accepted him, taking it for granted he was one of them, they deepened his isolation. He could not talk their talk. He could not play with them. He had tried. The old hunger "to belong" had driven him. But he was stiff with strength and clumsy with purpose. If he and Francey had not belonged to one another, he would have been overwhelmed in loneliness.

He shut his ears against them. But when she spoke he had to listen—jealously, fearfully.

"It would be no use, Howard. You'd come back. You can't strip off your nationality like an old-fashioned coat and throw it away. All this—isn't it English and different from any other country in the

world—deeply, deeply different, just as we are different? England—she's a human, lovely woman, quiet and broad-bosomed, busy about her home, and only sometimes, in the spring and autumn, she stops a little to dream her mystic dreams. In the summer and winter she pretends to forget. She's anxious about many things—how she shall keep us warm and fed—a little stupid-seeming, with wells of all sorts of kindly wisdom.

"And Italy—the saint, the austere spirit, close to God, preparing herself for God, with unspeakable visions of Him. Where I lived"—she made a sudden passionate gesture of delight—"we looked over the Campagna, and there were three hills close to one another with towns perched on their crest, as far from the world and comfort as they could get. And at night they were like the three kings with their golden crowns and dark flowing robes, waiting for God to show them the sign.

"But we build our towns in the valleys and sheltered places. We like our trains to be punctual, and to do things in decent order. We pretend to be a practical and reasonable people. We're of our soil. In Italy what do trains matter—or when they come and go—when, even to those who don't believe in Him at all, it's only God who matters?" She laughed, shaking herself free. "So you'll come back, Howard—because you're part of all this. You'll always hate waiting for your train, and you'll always be a little ashamed of your dreams. And you'll never be real anywhere else."

Howard applauded solemnly.

"I'll make a poem of that—one day, when I'm awfully drunk, and don't know what I'm doing."

But Robert sat up sharply, frowning at her, white, almost accusing.

"When did you live in Italy, Francey?"

"Last year—all last year."

"You mean—you chucked your work—everything—just to play round—–?"

Howard yawned prodigiously.

"You don't get our Francey's point of view, Stonehouse. You don't understand."

"Just to play round," she echoed to herself. Then she laughed and unclasped her hands from about her knees and stood up effortlessly, stretching out her arms like a sleepy child. "And now I'm going to gather sticks for a fire and primroses to take home. Coming Robert?"

"No," he muttered.

Howard rolled over in the grass.

"Sulky young idiot—if I wasn't half asleep—or I'd been asked—–"

His voice died into an unintelligible murmur.

So she went alone. The rest, heavy with food and sunshine, nibbled jadedly at the remnants of the feast, exchanging broken, drowsy comments. Perhaps Gertie Sumners was brooding over the three kings with their golden crowns. But Robert knelt and watched Francey run down the hill-side, faster and faster, like a brown shadow. There was a thick belt of beech trees at the bottom, and she ran into them and was lost.

He rose stiffly. He did not want the others to see—he did not want to know himself, that he was following her. He strolled indolently about the crest of the hill, whistling to the breeze, his eyes hunting the wood beneath like the eyes of a young setter at heel. But when at last he was out of sight he slipped his leash and was off, running recklessly, headlong. The hill rose up behind him and sent him down its hillocky slopes as though before the horns of an avalanche. The wind blew the scent of trees and flowers and young grass against his burning face. It was like draughts of a cold, clear wine. It was like running full-tilt down Acacia Grove leaping and whooping.

It was frightening, too—a hand fumbling at the heart—this fierce coming to life of something dormant, this breaking free—–

The wood had swallowed her. He drew up panting in the cool twilight. Beyond the faint breathing of the leaves overhead and the secret movement of hidden things, there was no sound. He walked on quickly. At first it was only suspense, childish, thrilling. Then it was more than that. His heart began to beat quickly. He tried to call her, but the quiet daunted him. The wood was a still, green pool into which she had dropped and vanished. It was an enchanted wood. There was enchantment all about her. They had seemed so near to one another—and then in a moment she had slipped away from him into a

life of her own where he could not follow.

He had to find her and hold her fast. Nothing else mattered—neither his work, nor his career, nor Christine. It was terrible how little they seemed now—a handful of dust—beside this mounting, imperative desire. He had been so invulnerable. In wanting nothing but what was in himself he had been able to defy exterior events. Now he was stripped of his defence. He could be hurt. He could be made desperately happy or unhappy by things which he had thought trivial and purposeless—the playthings of inferior children.

He came upon her suddenly. She knelt in the long grass, idle, with a few scattered primroses in her lap as though in the midst of gathering them she had been overtaken by a dream. He called her by name, angrily, because of what he suffered. He stumbled to her and flung himself down beside her and held her close to him, ruthless with desire and his child's fear.

In that sheer physical explosion his whole personality blazed up and seemed to melt away, flowing into new form. He had dashed down the hill, a crude, exultant boy, into the whole storm and mystery of manhood. And for all his fierceness his heart was small within him, afraid of her, and of itself, and its own hunger.

At last he let her go. He tore himself from her and dropped face down in the grass, trembling with grief and shame. He heard her say: "Robert—dear Robert," very quietly, and her hand touched him, passing like a breath of cool wind over his hair and neck. He kissed it humbly, pressing it to his wet, hot cheek.

"I was frightened, Francey—and jealous—of everything—of the things you love that I don't even know of—of the places you've been to—of your friends—your money—your work. I thought you'd run away to Italy—or somewhere else where I couldn't follow—that I'd lost you——"

He saw her face and how deeply stirred she was. She had blazed up in answer to him, but that very fire lit up something in her which was not new, but which now stood out full armed—a clear-eyed austerity.

"I felt, too, as though I were running away—to the ends of the world—but not from you, Robert. I wanted you to come too. I asked you. You're not frightened now, are you?"

"Not so much."

"Let's be quiet—quite quiet, Robert. We've got to talk this out, haven't we? I've got to understand. Sit here and help me tie these together. They're for Christine. It'll make it easier for us. You didn't mean this to happen. It was the sun and wind—it goes to one's head like being out of prison after years and years. You mustn't make a mistake. You would never forgive yourself or me. I'd understand if you said: 'It was just to-day and being happy.' But I won't play at our being in love with one another, Robert."

"It isn't a mistake, I'm not playing. I don't pretend I meant to let you know. I was frightened. I wanted to hold fast to you. But I've been sure ever since that night at Brown's——"

"And yet you wanted to avoid me——"

He nodded. Ho knelt beside her, very white and earnest, with his hands clenched on his thighs.

"That was because I knew. I didn't think about it. But I knew all right. And I was afraid it would upset everything to care."

"Doesn't it?"

"Not caring for you. Of course, I know all about life. I'm young and I've never looked at a girl. I've always realized that it would be natural to fall in love—perhaps worse than most men—and that if it was with a girl like Cosgrave's it would be sheer damnation. I'd have to fight it down. But loving you is different. It'll make me stronger. I'll work harder and better because I love you. I'll do bigger things because of you."

Her head was bowed over her primroses. The sunlight falling between the trees on her wild brown hair kindled a smouldering colour in its disorder. He watched her, fascinated and abashed by the knowledge that she was smiling to herself. And suddenly, roughly like an ashamed boy, he took a grey and blood-stained rag from his inner pocket and tossed it into her lap.

"Do you remember that?"

She picked it up gingerly, amusedly.

"Is it a handkerchief, Robert?"

"Don't you remember it?" he repeated with triumph, as though in some way he had beaten her.

For a moment she was silent. And when she looked at him her eyes were no longer smiling.

"You kept it like that——?"

"I wouldn't even wash it. I hid it. It's got dirtier and dirtier."

"It must be horribly germy, Robert. We'll wash it together. As members of the medical profession we couldn't have it on our conscience——"

They laughed then, freely, out of the depth of their happiness. She laid her hand in his and he bent his head to kiss it.

"You do trust me, Francey?"

"Trust you?"

"You don't think it's weak of me to love you? You know I'll pass my finals, don't you—that I'll be all right? People might think I hadn't the right to love you till I was sure. But, then, I am sure—dead sure."

"I'm sure, too." Her voice sounded brooding, a little husky. She took his hand and laid it on her lap, spreading out the fingers as though to examine each one in turn. "It's a clever, beautiful hand, Robert—much the most beautiful part of you. It will do clever, wonderful things. What will *you* do?"

(As though, he thought, his hands were something apart and she was inquiring deeper into what was vitally him.)

He told her. It reassured him to go back to his foundations and to find them still standing. He lost his tongue-tied clumsiness and spoke rapidly, clearly, with brief, strong gestures. His haggard youth gave place to a forcible, aggressive maturity. He was like an architect who had planned for every inch and stone of his masterpiece. Next year he would pass his finals. He would take posts as locum tenens whenever he could and keep his hospital connexions warm. In five years he would save enough to specialize—the throat gave wide opportunities for research. There were men already interested in him who would send him work. In ten years Harley Street—if not before.

In the midst of it all he faltered and broke off to ask:

"Why do you love me, Francey?"

And then, impulsively, she flung her arm about him and drew him close to her. His head was on her breast, and for one uncertain moment she was not Francey Wilmot at all, but the warm living spirit of the sunlight, of the quiet trees and the grass in which they lay—of all the things of which he was afraid.

"Because you're such an odd, sad, little boy——"

3

After tea it began to rain, not dismally, but in a gentle way as people cry who have been too happy.

"In this jolly old country fine weather means bad weather," Connie Edwards commented cynically. She had reason to be depressed. The impossible poppies dripped tears of blood over the brim of the cartwheel hat. But apart from that misfortune she had never got over her original mood of puzzled dissatisfaction, and she and Cosgrave walked droopingly down the narrow lane arm in arm and almost wordless.

So much of winter days was left that it was dark when they reached the foot of the hill—the eerie luminous darkness of the country when there is a moon riding somewhere behind the clouds. Robert could see Christine and Francey just ahead of him. Christine had taken Francey's arm, and they talked together in undertones like people who have secret things to say to one another. How small Christine was! She seemed to have shrunk into a handful of a woman as though the sun had withered her. She walked timidly, with bowed head, feeling her way. Her voice lifted for a moment into the old clearness.

"His father was a wonderful man—a wonderful, good man. Unhappy. Very unfortunate. Not meant for this world. His mother was my dear friend. If they had lived—those two—— I did what I could—I think they will be satisfied—it makes me happy——"

She murmured wearily. And Francey bent her head to listen. Robert loved her for the tenderness of that gesture. Yet it was bitter, too, that they should talk of his father. He wanted to go up to them and tell the truth brutally to Christine's face. He would have liked to have told them the one dream which he carried over from his sleep. But it would have been useless. Christine would only smile with a cruel, loving wisdom.

"You don't understand. You were only a child. Your father was so unhappy——"

The myth had become an invulnerable reality and had grown golden in the twilight of her coming blindness. James Stonehouse had been a good man, a faithful friend, and broken-hearted husband. If those two had lived everything would have been different. She threw her hallowed picture of them on the screen of the dripping dusk so that they seemed to live. Robert saw them too. That was his mother walking at Christine's side, and then his father—— In a sort of shattering vision Robert saw him, a man of promise, black-browed with the riddle of his failure, a man of many hungers, seduced by rootless passions, lured to miserable shipwreck because he could not keep to any course, because he could not give up worthlessness for worth.

Himself——

He staggered before the brief hallucination. The moisture broke out on his white face. It wasn't enough to hate his father. He had to be fought down day by day. He was always there, waiting to pounce out. He lay on his face, pretending to be dead——

It was gone. He shook himself free as from the touch of an evil, insinuating hand out of the dark. This love was his strength. If Francey were like his mother, then she was also good. It was these rag and bobtail friends that poisoned everything. They would have to be shaken off. Francey was a child, fond of gaiety and pleasure, with no one to guide her. She didn't understand.

Howard and Gertie Sumners were walking behind him now with the luncheon-basket between them, talking earnestly in muffled whispers that were too intimate, and behind them again came the Gang itself, laughing, jostling one another, exchanging facetiousness in their medical-Chelsea jargon.

His father would have liked them. Connie Edwards, no doubt, would have been one of those dazzling, noisy phenomena that burst periodically on the Stonehouse horizon.

Supposing he should come to like them too—to tolerate their ways, their loose living, loose thinking ——?

He remembered how that very afternoon he had tried to be one of them, and sickened before himself.

Francey called to him through the darkness.

"Miss Forsyth's so tired, Robert. Couldn't you carry her?"

And he took Christine in his arms, whilst she laughed and protested feebly. It was awful to feel how little she was. Her head rested against his shoulder.

"It's a longer road than I thought. You're very strong, Robert. Your father was strong too."

It had been a successful day. And yet, as they sat packed close together in the dim, third-class carriage, they were like captives who had escaped and were being taken back into captivity. The sickly, overhead light fell on their tired faces, out of which the blood, called up by the sun and wind, had receded, leaving their city pallor. Connie Edwards had indeed produced a lip-stick from her gaudy bead bag, but after a fretful effort had flung it back.

"What's the good? Who cares——?"

And Cosgrave huddled closer to her, wan-eyed, hunted-looking. It was the ghost of that exam that wouldn't be laid—the prophetic vision of the row that waited for him, grinding its teeth.

Only Gertie Sumners and Howard had a queer, remote look, as though in that recent muffled exchange they had reached some desperate resolve.

The wet, gleaming platform slid away from them. There was a faint red light in the west where the sunset had been drowned. Christine turned her face towards it. She was like a little old child. Her little feet in the shabby, worn-out shoes scarcely touched the floor. Her drooping hat was askew—forgotten.

"It has been a wonderful day. But I mustn't come again. I'm too old.
It's silly to fall in love with life when one is old."

Robert leant across to her. He ached with his love and pity.

"Tired, Christine?"

"A little. But it has been worth while. You carried me so nicely—so big and strong."

She leant against Francey, nodding and smiling to reassure him. And presently she was asleep. He saw how Francey shifted her arm so that it encircled the bowed figure, and every ugly thing that had dogged him in that lonely, haunted walk vanished before the kind steadfastness of her eyes.

It was as though she had said aloud:

"We'll take care of her together. We won't let her die before we've made her very, very happy."

Then he took out a note-book and made a shaky sketch of a pompous, drunken-looking house with a huge door, on which were two brass plates, side by side, bearing the splendid inscriptions:

Dr. Frances Stonehouse, Robert Stonehouse,
M.D., F.R.C.S.
Hours 10—1

He showed it to her and they smiled at one another, and there was no one else in the carriage but themselves and their happiness.

III

1

It meant a tightening—a screwing up of his whole life. Time had to be found. The hours had to be packed closer to make room for her. He grasped after fresh opportunities to make money with a white-hot assiduity. He worked harder. For he was hag-ridden by his unfaithfulness. He drew up a remorseless programme of his days, and after that Francey might only walk home with him from the hospital. And there was an hour on Sunday evening when he was too tired for anything else.

It meant a ceaseless, active negation: a "No" to the simple wish to buy her a bunch of flowers, "No" to the longing to walk a little farther with her in the quiet dusk, "No" to the very thought of her.

2

As usual, on the way home, they discussed their best "cases." There was No. 10 in A Ward, a raddled woman of the streets who had been brought in the night before as the result of a *crime passionnel*, and whose injuries had been the subject of long deliberations. Even before they had reached the hospital archway Robert and Francey agreed that Rogers' air of mystery was simply a professional disguise for complete bafflement.

"It's the sort of case I'd like to have," Robert said. "Something you can get your teeth into and worry. I believe if I were on my own—given a free hand—I'd work it out—pull her through. Rogers may too. But just now he's marking time. And there's nothing to hope from time in a job like that. No constitution. Rotten all through. Still, it would be a feather in one's cap."

He brooded fiercely, intently, like a hound on a hot scent. People turned to look at the big, shabby young man with the sunken, burning eyes that stared through them as though they had been so many shadows. He did not, in fact, see them at all. He made his way by sheer instinct across the crowded street.

"She's terribly afraid of death," Francey said. "It's awful to be so afraid. It must make life itself terrible."

"They'll operate soon as they dare—an exploratory operation. If only I could have a say—a real say! It's maddening to know so much—to be sure of oneself. I don't believe Rogers would take me out on his private work if he knew I knew all I do. I'm glad we're on a surgical post together, Francey. I don't know what I'd do if I hadn't got you to talk things over with."

"You daren't talk of anything else," she answered unexpectedly. "You're frightened of our being happy together. You're always trying to justify yourself."

"I'm not—what rubbish!"

He tried to laugh at her. It was so like Francey to dash off down a side issue. And yet it was true. He did try to think as much as he could of that side of their common life. It did add an appearance of stability and reason to the splendid unreason of his loving her. It made up to him for those dismaying breaks when her face and body stood like a scorching pillar of fire between himself and his work, to find that when they were together they could be sternly practical, discuss their eases and criticize their superiors as though, beneath it all, there were not this golden, insurgent sea whose high tides swirled over his landmarks. Not destroying them.

In those latter times he loved her humbly, with wonder and passionate self-abasement. But in their work they stood further away from one another. He could criticize her, and that gave him a heady sense of power and freedom. He never forgot the year that she had deliberately thrown away. And even now, when she stood at the beginning of the road which he had already passed over, she seemed to him full of strange curiosities and wayward, purposeless interests. There were days when an ugly Chinese print, picked up in some back-street pawnshop, or the misfortunes of one of her raffish hangers-on, or some wild student rag, appeared to wipe out the vital business of life. She was known to be brilliant, but he distrusted her power of leaping to conclusions over the head of his own mathematical and exact reasoning. He distrusted still more her tendency to be right in the teeth of every sort of evidence to the contrary. It seemed that she took into her calculations factors that no one else found, significant, unprofessional straws in the wind, things she could not even explain.

And yet she understood when he talked about his work, and that alone was like a gift to him. No one else understood—for that matter, no one else had had to listen. He knew that Christine was too tired, and poor overburdened Cosgrave would only have gazed helplessly at him, wondering why this strong, self-sufficient friend should pour out such unintelligible stuff over his own aching head. So he had learnt to be silent. Even now it was difficult to begin. He stammered and was shy and distrustful and eager, sometimes crudely self-confident, like a child who has played alone too long.

And Francey listened, for the most part critical and dispassionate, but with sudden gestures of unmotivated tenderness: as when in the midst of his dissertation on a theory of insanity and crime she had kissed him.

Sometimes for them both the prose and poetry of their relationship met and clasped hands. That was when they took their walk down Harley Street to have another look at the house which was one day to be adorned with the celebrated brass plates. At present it was solidly occupied by several eminent-sounding medical gentlemen who would have to be ruthlessly dislodged when their time came.

For it was the best house in the street, and, of course, the Doctors
Robert and Francey Stonehouse would have to have the best.

And once they quarrelled about nothing at all, or about everything—they hardly knew. It was an absurd quarrel, which blazed up and went out again like fire in stubble. Perhaps they had waited too long for their allotted hour together—dreamed too much about it, so that when it came they could hardly bear it, and almost longed for it to be over. And in the midst of it Mr. Ricardo drifted in on one of his strange, distressful visits to Christine, and drove them out of doors to roam the drowsy Sunday streets, hand in hand, like any other pair of vulgar, homeless lovers. For Francey could not stay when Mr. Ricardo came. His hatred of her was a burning, poisonous sore that gave no peace to any of them.

"It's a sort of jealousy," Robert reflected. "We three have always held together. He's had no one else to care about. And now you've come, and he thinks you want to take me away from him."

"I do," Francey said unexpectedly.

"Not in the way he means."

"You don't know——"

"He's been good to me. I'd never have got through without him. I can't have him hurt. And you will fight him, Francey. I know he's crabbed and bitter, but so would you be if you'd been twisted out of shape all your life. And you only do it for the fun of the thing. Fundamentally, you think alike."

"We don't, that's just it. I'm sorry for him, and if it had been anything less vital I'd compromise—he'd compromise, too, perhaps. We'd both lie low and look pleasant about our differences. But as it is we can't help ourselves. We've got to stand up and fight——"

"I say, that sounds jolly dramatic."

"It is rather."

"Next thing you'll be saying you believe in God."

"Well, I do——"

He stopped short and let go her hand. He was physically ashamed and uncomfortable. He tried to laugh, but for the moment they were face to face, and he could not mistake her seriousness. They were like strangers, peering at each other through the grey dusk.

"Look here, Francey, dearest, you don't expect me to believe that? You're just joking, aren't you? You're—you're a modern woman, with a scientific training, too. You can't believe in an old, worn-out myth."

"I didn't say that."

"'An untested hypothesis,'" he quoted teasingly, but with a stirring anger.

"I don't know about that, either. We're both bound by our profession to admit an empirical test. And if we human beings can't survive without God——"

"But we can—we do."

"I can't."

He threw up his head.

"Why do women always become personal when they argue?"

"And why do rationalists always become irrational?"

They walked on slowly, apart, vaguely afraid. He wanted to change the subject, to take her by the arm and hold her fast. For she was drifting away from him. Her voice sounded remote and troubling, like a little old tune that he could not quite remember. Its emotion fretted his overstrained nerves. He wanted to close his ears against it. It was a trivial tune which might become a torment.

"It's not only me. It's everyone. Most of us are frightfully unhappy. Don't you realize that? And the more we understand life the more desperate we get. Savages and children may do without a god, but we can't. We know too much. Even the stupidest—the most careless of us. Think of Howard and Gertie and all that lot. Every second word is 'What's the good? What's it all about?' They make a great deal of noise to cover up their unhappiness. They're terrified of loneliness and silence. And one day it'll have to be faced."

"Oh, if you're going to take Howard as an example—" he interrupted.

"—and Rufus Cosgrave," she added.

He laughed with a boyish malice.

"Cosgrave doesn't need a god. He's got me. I'll look after him."

"You think you can? And then we ourselves. We're different, aren't we? We've got our work. We're going to do big things. For whom?—for what? For our fellow-creatures? But if we don't care for our fellow-creatures? And we don't, do we? Not naturally. The Brotherhood of Man is just dangerous nonsense. Naturally men loathe one another in the mass. How can we pretend to love some of those people we see every day in the wards with their terrible faces—their terrible minds? But the idea of God does somehow translate them—it gets underneath the ugliness—they do become in some mystic way my brothers and my sisters."

He found it strangely difficult to answer calmly. It would have been easier to have bludgeoned her into silence by a shouted "It's all snivelling, wretched rot!" like an angry schoolboy. He did not know why he was so angry. Perhaps Ricardo was right. It was something vital. He could feel the old man's shadow at his side, his hand plucking his sleeve, urging him on, claiming his loyalty. They were allies fighting together against a poisonous miasma that sapped men's brains—their intellectual integrity.

"Piling one fallacy on another isn't argument, Francey. We don't need to like our fellow-creatures. It's a mistake to care. Emotion upsets one's judgment. Scientists—the best men in the profession—try to eliminate personal feeling altogether. They're out for knowledge for its own sake. That's good enough

for them."

"And the end of that—organized, scientific beastliness, like modern war. Knowledge perverted to every sort of deviltry. Huge swollen heads and miserable withered hearts. One of these days we'll blow ourselves to pieces——"

They were both breathless and more than a little incoherent. They had entered into a playful tussle, and now they were fighting one another with set teeth.

"I don't believe you believe a word you're saying," he stammered. "You know as well as I do that it's only since we began to throw off superstition that we've begun to move. Or perhaps you don't want to move—don't believe in progress."

"Progress towards what?" she flung back impetuously. "Perfection? Some point where we'd have no poverty, no war, no ignorance, no death even; where we'd all have every mortal thing we want? The millennium? That's only another word for Hell. It's only by pretending that there are things we want, and that we should be happy if we had them, that we can believe in happiness at all. All this unrest, this sick despair every morning of our lives when we drag ourselves out of bed and wonder why we bother—it's just because we've begun to suspect that the millennium is of no use to us. We've got to have more than that—some sort of spiritual background—or cut our throats."

"Wild rhapsodizing, Francey. You don't know a thing."

"I don't. Nor do you. When I said I believed, I meant I hoped—I trusted. And if there isn't a God at the end of it all, you people who want to keep us alive for the sake of the knowledge you get out of us will have to make one up."

Whereat, suddenly, in a cool, refreshing gust, their sense of humour returned and blew them close to one another. They laughed and took hands again—a little shyly, like lovers who had been parted for a long time.

"What rot—our quarrelling over nothing at all," Robert said, "when we've only got this hour together. I wanted to say 'I love you, Francey—I love you, dear' over and over again. Say 'I love you too, Robert.'"

"I love you too," she answered soberly.

But the crack was there—a mere fissure in the ground between them—a place to be avoided even in their thoughts.

3

At night when his work was over and the unrest grew too strong to be fought, he crept down the black, creaking stairs, through the sleeping backwater of Drayton Mews, and out into the streets. He walked fast, with his head down, guiltily, like a man flying from a crime. But in the grave square where Francey Wilmot lived he slackened speed, and, under the thick mantle of the trees, stood so still that he was only a deeper shadow. Then release came. It was like gentle summer rain falling on his fever. There was no one to see his weakness. He could think and feel simply and naturally as a lover, without remorse. Sometimes a light burnt in her window, and then he knew that she was working, making up for those queer, wild play-hours. He could imagine her under the shaded lamplight, the books heaped round her, and her hands clenched hard in the thick brown hair. He could feel the peace, the rich, deep stillness round her. And a loving tenderness, exquisite and delicate as a dream, welled up in him. He said things out of his heart to her that he had never said: broken, stumbling things, melted in the white-heat of their truth into a kind of poetry of which the burden never changed. "I can't live without you—I can't live without you." He could have knelt before her, burying his burning face in her lap in strange humility—childlike surrender.

And when the window was dark he knew that she had gone out to dance, to the theatre, with friends whom he did not know, belonging to that other life in which he had no part. And then his loneliness was like a black sea. He leant against the railings, weak with weariness and hunger, fighting his boy's tears, until she came. He did not speak to her. She never knew that he was there. He hid, his heart stifling him, until the door closed on her. Then, since she had come back to him, belonged to him again, he could go in peace.

The others—Howard and Gertie and even Connie now—went in and out, risking ruthless ejection if she were hard pressed, to sit in the best chairs, with their feet in the fender and drink coffee and

smoke endlessly whilst they poured their good-natured cynicism over life. If they were hungry they rifled Francey's larder, and if they were hard up they borrowed her money. But after the one time Robert never went. He did not want to meet them. And besides the big square room with its mark of other stately days—its panelled walls, rich ceilings and noble doors—was his enemy. It was steeped in a mellow, unconscious luxury that threatened him. There were relics from Francey's old home, trophies from her Italian wanderings, books that his hands itched just to touch, and things of strange troubling beauty. A bronze statue of a naked faun stood in the corner where the light fell upon it, and seemed to gather into itself everything that he feared—a joyous dancing to some far-off music.

The room would not let him forget that Francey held money, which he had had to squeeze his life dry to get, lightly and indifferently. She gave it with both hands. She had always had enough, and it seemed to her a little thing. Between people who cared for one another it counted less than a word, and his sullen refusal of every trivial pleasure and relief that lay in her power to give them hurt and puzzled her. She saw in it only a bitter pride.

"You might at least let me make Christine's life easier in little things," she said.

He could not tell her that Christine would have been afraid for him, as he was afraid of the deep chairs that had seemed to clasp his tired body in drowsy arms, of the rugs that drank up every harsh sound, of the warm, fragrant atmosphere that was like a blow in the face of their chill and barren poverty.

So after that one time he kept away. But he could always see the room and Francey working there, and the slender, joyful body of the faun poised on the verge of its mystic dance.

Once, Francey was too strong for him, and they bought tickets for the theatre, and he sat hunched beside her in the front row of the cheap seats and stared down at the great square of light like an outcast gazing at the golden gates of Paradise. It was *The Tempest*, and he hardly understood. It broke over him in overpowering sound and colour. He was dazed and blinded. He forgot Francey. He sat with his gaunt white face between his bands and watched them pass: Prospero, Miranda, Ferdinand, Ariel—figures of a noble, glittering company—and wretched, uncouth Caliban crouched on the outskirts of their lives, pining for his lost kingdom. But in the interval he was silent, awkward and heavy with an emotion that could not find an outlet. He felt her hand close over his—an, almost anxious hand.

"Robert, you like it, don't you? You're not bored?" He turned to look dazedly at her, stammering in his confusion.

"I've never been to a theatre before."

"Never? Oh, my dear——"

"Only to a circus, long ago." He drew back hastily into himself. He did not want her to be sorry like that. He would not let her see how shaken he was. "I never wanted to go," he said.

After that they walked home together, and in the empty street that led into her square a moonlight spirit of phantasy seemed to possess her, and she sang under her breath and danced in front of him, rather solemnly as she had done as a little girl:

"Come unto these yellow sands
And then take hands. . ."

He caught hold of her. Everything was unreal—they themselves and the unfamiliar street, painted with silver and black shadows.

"Don't—you're dancing away from me; there's nothing for you to dance to."

She smiled back wistfully.

"'The isle is full of noises,
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices. . .'"

"I don't hear them," he muttered clumsily.

"Caliban heard them——"

"And you're Ariel," he said, with sudden, sorrowful understanding.
"Ariel!"

From the steps of the dark house she looked down at him, her eager face smiling palely in the white, still light.

"Ariel wasn't a woman, dear duffer. You'll have to read it. I'll lend it to you. And then we'll go again."

He shook his head.

"No."

"Yes—often—often, Robert. We've been nearer to one another than ever before—just these last minutes—quite, quite close. We've got to find each other in pleasure too."

He rallied all his strength. He said stiffly, pompously:

"It's been awfully nice, of course. And thank you for taking me. But
I don't really care for that sort of thing."

And for a moment they remained facing one another whilst the joy died out of her eyes, leaving a queer distress. Then they shook hands and he left her, coldly, prosaically, as though nothing had happened. But he was like a drunken man who had fallen into a sea of glory.

"The clouds, methought, would open, and show riches
Ready to drop upon me. . ."

There was all that work that he had meant to do before morning. It seemed far off—more unreal and fantastic than a fairy tale. His heart and brain, ached with willingness and loathing.

". . . that, when I wak'd, I cried to dream again. . ."

He set his teeth. He clenched his hands till they hurt him.

"I'll have to keep away from all that," he thought aloud, "altogether—till I don't care any more."

IV

1

After all, Rufus Cosgrave had imagined his answers. Connie Edwards met Robert as he came out of the hospital gates and told him. It was raining dismally, with an ill-tempered wind blustering down the crowded street, and she had not dressed for bad weather. Perhaps she did not admit unpleasant possibilities even into her wardrobe. Perhaps she could not afford to do so. Her thin, paper-soled shoes, with the Louis XIV heels, and the cheap silk stockings which showed up to her knees, made her look like some bedraggled, long-legged bird-of-Paradise. A gaudy parasol could not protect her flopping hat, or her complexion, which had both suffered. Or she had been crying. But she did not sound as though she had been crying. She sounded breathless and resentful.

"He heard this afternoon," she said. "And what must he do but come bursting round to my place—half an hour before I'm due to start for the show—and carry on like a madman. Scared stiff, I was. Tried to make me swear I'd marry him and start for Timbuctoo to-morrow, and when I wouldn't, wanted to shoot himself and me too—as though I'd made a muck of things. Well, I'd done my best, and when it came to that sort of sob-stuff I'd had enough. What's he take me for? Get me into trouble with my landlady—making a row like that."

Robert heard her out in silence, and his intent, expressionless scrutiny seemed to flick her on the raw. She stamped her foot at him. "Oh, for the Lord's sake, get a move on—-do something, can't you? I didn't come here to be stared at as though I were a disease!"

"Where is he?"

"If I knew——! My place probably—with the gas full on—committing suicide—making a rotten scandal. You've got to come and dig him out."

"Where do you live?"

"Ten minutes from here. 10E Stanton Place. I'll show you a short way. I ran like a hare, hoping I'd

catch you, and you'd put a bit of sense into the poor looney's head. Serves me right—taking on with his sort."

"Well—we'd better hurry," Robert said.

"Thanks. I said I'd show you the way. I'm not coming in. Don't you believe it. I've had enough. All I ask is—get him out and keep him out."

"You're through with him?"

Her habitual good-natured gaiety was gone. She looked disrupted and savagely afraid, like an animal that has escaped capture by a frantic effort. And yet it was difficult to imagine Rufus Cosgrave capturing or frightening anyone.

"You bet I'm through with him. You tell him so—tell him I don't want to see him again—I won't be bothered——" She broke off, and added, with a kind of rough relenting: "Put it any blessed way you like—say what's true—we've had our good times together—and it seems they're over—we've no use for one another."

"You mean—now he's failed."

"What do *you* mean—'now he's failed'? What's his rotten old exam got to do with me? I don't even know what it's about."

"You took the good time whilst you could get it, and now when you can't hope for anything more——"

She stopped short, and they faced each other with an antagonism that neither gave nor asked for quarter. They had always been enemies, and now that the gloves were off they were almost glad.

"So that's my line. Cradle-snatching. Vamping the helpless infant!" She burst into a fit of angry, ugly laughter. "A good time! Running round with a poor kid with ten shillings a week pocket-money—eating in beastly cheap restaurants—riding on the tops of 'buses when some girls I know are feeding at the Ritz and rolling round in limousines. That's what I get for being soft. And now because I won't shoot myself, or go off to nowhere steerage, I'm a bad, abandoned woman. What d'you take me for?"

"What you are," he said.

She went dead white under her streaky paint.

"You—you've got no right to say that. You're a devil—a stuck-up devil—I hate you—I'd have always hated you if I'd bothered to mind. I—I gave *him* a good time. That's the truth. He was down and out when I met him, and I set him on his feet. I didn't mind what I missed—or the other girls guying me—I made him laugh and believe he had as good a chance in the world as anyone else. I put a bit of fun into him. I liked the kid. I—I like him now. If he wanted a good time to-morrow I'd run round with him again. But I'm no movie heroine—I'm not out for poison and funerals and slow music. Life's too damn serious for my sort to make a wail and a moan about it."

He stood close to her. He almost menaced her. He did in fact look dangerous enough with his white, set face and unflinching eyes in which stood two points of metallic light. If he had seen himself then he might have cowered away as from a ghost.

"I don't care a rap about you. I do care about my friend. You've got to stand by Cosgrave till he's over the worst."

"I won't—I won't!"

"I'll make you. You took him up. You made him think you cared about him. You're responsible——"

"I'm not—I won't be responsible; it's not my line. I've got myself to look after."

She had the look of someone struggling against an invisible entanglement—a pitiable, rather horrible look of naked purpose. She meant to cut free at whatever cost.

"You little beast!" he said.

He was sick with contempt. He swung away from her, and she stood in the middle of the pavement and called names after him like a drunken, furious street-girl. She did not seem to be even aware of the people who stared at her. When he was almost out of hearing, she added:

"Give him my love!" shrilly, vindictively, as though it had been a final insult. But he took no notice and

now, at any rate, she was crying bitterly enough.

2

"E" proved to be the top room of No. 10, a dingy lodging-house whose front door, in accordance with the uncertain habits of its patrons, stood open from year's end to year's end. Robert went in unnoticed. He ran up the steep, narrow stairs, with their tattered carpeting, two steps at a time. A queer elation surged beneath his anger and distress. Cosgrave's failure was like a personal challenge—a defiance thrown in his teeth. The old fight was on again. It was against odds. But then, he had always fought against odds—won against them.

The room was Connie Edwards herself. It seemed to rush out at him in a tearing rage, flaunting its vulgar finery and its odour of bad scent and cheap cigarette smoke. It made him sick, and he brushed it out of his consciousness. He did not see the poor attempts to make it decent and attractive—the bed disguised beneath a faded Liberty cretonne, a sentimental Christ hanging between a galaxy of matinee heroes, nor a full-length woman's portrait, across which was scrawled "Gyp Labelle" in letters large enough to conceal half of her outrageous nakedness. There were even a few flowers, drooping forlornly out of a dusty vase, and a collection of theatrical posters, to lend a touch, of serious professionalism.

But the end of it all was a frowzy, hopeless disorder.

Cosgrave lay huddled over the littered table by the open window. The red untidy head made a patch of grotesque colour in the general murk. He looked like a poor rag doll that had been torn and battered in some wild carnival scrimmage and flung aside.

There was not much in him—not much fight, as he himself said. Not the sort to survive. Life was too strong—too difficult for him. He bungled everything—even an exam. It would be wiser, more consistent to let him drift. And yet at sight of that futile breakdown, it was not impatience or contempt that Robert felt, but a choking tenderness—a fierce pity. He had to protect him—pull him through. He had promised so much—he forgot when: that afternoon lying in the long, sooty grass behind the biscuit factory, or that night when he had dragged Cosgrave breathless and staggering in pursuit of the Greatest Show in Europe. It did not matter. It had become part of himself. And Cosgrave had always trusted him—believed in him.

"It's all right, old man; it's only me—Robert." For Cosgrave had leapt up with an eager cry, and now stood staring at him open-mouthed. The light was behind him, and the open mouth and blank, shadowy face made a queer, ghastly effect, as though a drowned man had suddenly stood up. Then he sagged pitifully, and Robert caught him by the shoulders and shook him with a rough, boyish impatience. "Don't be an idiot. It doesn't matter all that much. Exams are not everything. Everyone knows that. We'll find something else. If your people are too beastly, you'll come and share with us. I'll see you through—it'll be all right."

But a baffling change came over Cosgrave. He shook himself free. He stood upright, looking at Robert with a kind of stony dignity.

"Where is she?"

"Who?"

"Connie. She sent you, didn't she?"

"Yes. We met——"

"Where is she?"

"I don't know. Gone to the theatre probably."

"Isn't she coming back?"

"Not now."

"Didn't she send a message?"

"She said—it was finish between you. She's a little rotter, Cosgrave."

"She made me laugh," Cosgrave said simply. "I don't mind about the exam.—or about anything now. I suppose I was bound to fail. But I was so jolly happy. I'd never had a good time like that. It's all over now. She doesn't care. She said she couldn't be tied up with a lot of trouble. That's what I am. A lot of

trouble. It was all bunkum—make-believe—to think I could be anything else."

So it wasn't his failure. It wasn't even the loss of a good-for-nothing chorus-girl. It was a loss far more subtle. The recognition of it lamed Robert Stonehouse, knocked the power out of him, as though someone had struck and paralysed a vital nerve centre. He could only stammer futilely:

"She's not worth bothering about."

Cosgrave slumped back into his chair. His hands lay on the table, half clenched as though they had let go and didn't care any more. He looked at Robert wide-eyed with a sudden absolute knowledge.

"That's it," he said. "Not worth bothering about—nothing in this whole beastly, rotten, world. . . . . ."

3

A convenient uncle found him a berth as clerk to a trading firm in West Africa, and with a cheap Colonial outfit and 10 pounds in his pocket, Cosgrave set out for the particular swamp which was to be the scene of his future career. He went docilely, with limp handshakes and dull, pathetic eyes. If he betrayed any feeling at all, it was a sort of relief at getting away from everybody. But emotionally he was dead—like cheap champagne gone flat, as he expressed it in one twisted mood of self-revelation.

Probably he was thinking of Connie Edwards and of their last spree together.

But he never spoke of her.

And it was very unlikely that the swamp would give him a chance to see any of them again.

After all, he had stood for something. He was a rudderless little craft that had come leaking and tumbling willy-nilly in the wake of the bigger vessel. But also he had been a sort of talisman. He had protected Robert as the weak, when they are humble and loving, can protect the strong, giving them greater confidence, making their defeat impossible. With his going went security. Little old fears came crawling out of their hiding-places. At night when Robert climbed the dark stairs to their stable-attic, they set upon him. They clawed his heart. He called to Christine before he saw her, and the answering silence made him sick with panic. It was reasonless panic, for Christine often fell asleep at dusk. She was difficult to wake and when she woke it was strangely, with a look of bewilderment, like a traveller who has come home after a long absence. Once she had spoken his father's name with a ringing joy, and he had answered roughly and had seen her shrink back into herself. Her little hands trembled, fumbling apologetically with the shabby bag she always carried. She was like a girl who, in one withering tragic moment, had become old. But his aching love found no outlet, no word of regret or tenderness. It recoiled back on himself in a dead weight of pain.

He began to watch himself like a sick man. There were hours when he knew his brain to be losing edge—black periods of hideous impotency which, when they passed, left him shaken and wet with terror. Supposing, at the end of everything, be failed? He didn't care so much. His very power of caring had been dissipated. His single purpose lost itself amidst incompatible dreams. He was being torn asunder—and there was a limit to endurance.

Cosgrave had failed. He couldn't concentrate. He was always looking for happiness. He had fallen in love and wasted himself and made a mess of his life.

It was mad to fall in love.

And yet the worst dread of all was the dread of losing Francey. It seemed even the most unreasonable, for they had their work in common and they loved one another. There was no doubting their love. They were very young and might have to wait, but he could trust her to wait all her life. He knew dimly that she had been fond of him as a little boy, and had gone on being fond of him, simply and unconsciously, because it was not possible for her to forget. She would love him in the same way. That steadfastness was like a light shining through the mists of her character—through her sudden fancies, her shadowy withdrawals.

And still he was afraid, and sometimes he suspected that she was afraid too. It was as though inexorable forces were rising up in both of them, essentially of them, and yet outside their control, two dark antagonisms waiting sorrowfully to join issue.

4

It had happened suddenly—not without warning. One little event trod on the heels of another, rubble skirling down the mountain-side, growing to an avalanche.

Or, again, Cosgrave might have been the odd, unlikely keystone of their daily life. He had not seemed to matter much, but now that he had been torn out the bridge between them crumbled.

It had been a day full of bitterness—of set-backs, which to Robert Stonehouse were like pointing fingers. They were the outward expressions of his disorder. He did not believe in luck, but in a man's strength or weakness, and he knew by the things that happened to him that he was weakening. A private operation had gone badly. He had bungled with his dressings, so that the surgeon had turned on him in a burst of irritation.

"Better go home and sleep it off, Stonehouse."

He had not gone. He would not admit that he was ill—dared not. All illness now meant the end of everything. It would wipe out all that they had endured if he were to break down now. It would kill Christine. She must not even guess.

He hung about the hospital common-room. The summer heat surging up from the burning pavements stagnated between the faded walls. He could not touch the food that he had brought with him. He was faint and sick, and the long table at which he sat, with its white blur of newspapers, rose and fell as though it were floating on an oily sea. But he held out. At five o'clock he was to meet Francey at the gates, and, as though she had some magic gift of relief, he strained towards that time, his head between his hands, his ears counting the seconds that dripped heavily, drowsily from the moon-faced clock.

And then she did not come. Outwardly it was only one more trifle, capable of simple explanations. But he saw it through a disfiguring haze of fever, and it was deadly in its significance. He hardly waited. He crossed the thoroughfare, and once in a side street stumbled into a shambling run. He did not stop until he reached her house. His former reluctance broke before the imperative need to see her and make sure of her. He stormed the broad, deep, carpeted stairs, pursued by a senseless panic, But at the top his strength failed him. He felt his brain throbbing in torture against his skull.

The old maid-servant nodded gravely, sympathetically.

"Yes, she's in, sir, but very busy—going away—sir." Going away. He wavered in the dim hall, trying to control his flying thoughts. Going away. And she had said nothing the night before—had not even warned him. Some unexpected, untoward event striking in the dark. Illness. A long separation. (And yet, he argued, he could not live without her. She had no people who could claim her. They were dead. No one to come between them. And there was her work. She would never leave that again.)

But there she stood in the midst of the disorder of a sudden going. Open suit-cases, clothes strewn about the floor, she herself in some loose, bright-coloured wrap, her brown hair tousled and her brows knit in perplexity. She stopped short at sight of him, smiling ruefully, her arms full.

"Oh, my dear—I'd forgotten." (Then she must have seen his face with its dead whiteness, for she added quickly, half laughing): "Not you. Only the time. I've not been at the hospital, and I thought I had still half an hour. I've had to run round like mad, and even now I've got a hundred things to do——"

He gulped. He said: "Where are you going?" in a flat, emotionless voice, as though he did not care.

For a moment she did not answer. She let the clothes drop, forgotten, on the sofa. He could see her weighing—considering what she should say to him.

"Italy—Rome—I expect——"

"Italy—when?"

"I've got to be at the hospital to-morrow. Wednesday probably. I don't believe it'll be for long. I hope not. A week or two. I've got leave for a month."

"Why are you going?"

And now he could not keep the harsh break out of his voice. He could not hide the physical weakness which made it impossible for him to stand. And yet, though she looked at him, she seemed unaware that he was suffering. She was absorbed in some difficulty of her own, set on her own immediate purpose. He knew that mood. It was the other side of her fitful, whimsical way of life that she could be as relentless, as deadly resolute and patient in attainment as himself.

"It's about Howard," she said, abruptly coming to a decision. "I wasn't sure at first what to do about it. I didn't want anyone to know. But you're different. We have to share things. Howard and Gertie—they've both gone—gone off—no one knows where."

"Together?"

"I'm pretty certain of it. At any rate, Gertie, who couldn't even pay her rent, has vanished, and Howard—I heard about Howard this morning."

"What did you hear about him?"

"It was from Salter. You probably don't know him. He came to me because he knew I was a friend of Howard's. He was frightfully upset. It seems there was some sort of club which a crowd of students were collecting for, and he and Howard held the funds. It wasn't much—150 pounds—and Howard drew it out two days ago."

"Does that astonish you?" Robert asked.

She seemed not to hear the scorn and irony of the question. She went on packing deliberately, and he watched her, not knowing what he would say or do. The tide was rising faster. His dread would carry him off his feet.

"No. I was sure things were coming to a crisis."

"He was no good. Anyone could see that."

"I didn't see it."

"Well, you see it now," he flung at her with a hard triumph.

"I don't."

"A mean thief——"

"Not mean, Robert."

"I don't know anything meaner than stealing money from a lot of hard-up students."

"There was Gertie," she said as though that were some sort of extenuation.

"Gertie—they've gone off on some rotten spree—not even married."

(He hated himself—the beastly righteousness of his voice, his contemptible exultation. It was as though he were under some horrid spell which twisted his love and anguish into the expressions of a spiteful prig. Why couldn't he tell her of those deadly, shapeless fears, of his loneliness, his sorrowful jealousies? He was shut up in the iron fastness of his own will—gagged and helpless.)

He saw her start. She stopped definitely in her work as though she were at last aware of some struggle between them. The room was growing dark, and she came a little nearer, trying to see his face.

"I don't suppose so. I don't think it would occur to them."

"No—that's what I should imagine."

"You're awfully hard on people, Robert."

"That sort of thing makes me sick. It ought to make you sick. I don't know why it doesn't. You don't seem to care—to have any standards. You're unmoral in your outlook—perhaps you're too young—you don't realize. A rotter like Howard who takes other people's money just to enjoy himself—a girl like Gertie Sumners who goes off with the first man who asks her——"

"You don't understand, Robert."

"No," he said with a laugh, "I don't."

"Gertie Sumners hasn't long to live. I sent her to the hospital last week, and they told her honestly. And she wanted so much to see Italy. I don't think Howard cares for her or she for him, except in a comradely sort of way. They loved the same things—and he was sorry—he wanted to give her her one good time."

"He told you all that, I suppose?"

"No," she answered soberly. "But I know."

He waited a moment. He was trying desperately to hold back—to stop himself. He was sorry about Gertie Sumners. But everything was against him. The room was against him—the faun dancing noiselessly among the shadows, the little things that Francey had gathered about her, the dear personal things that can become terrible in their poignancy, Francey herself, standing there slender and grave-eyed, judging him, weighing him. They were all leagued together. They spoke with one voice. "We belong TO one another. We understand. But you don't belong. You are outside."

"I don't see, at any rate," he said, "what it has got to do with you—or why you should be going away."

"I'm going after them. There's no one else. Howard will expect prosecution. He will think that he'll never be able to come home. He's pretty reckless, but they will be thinking of that all the time. It will spoil everything for them."

"And what can you do?"

"I can tell them it's all right."

"How can it be?"

"It is," she said curtly. "The money has been paid back."

"Paid back!" Understanding burst upon him. "*You* paid it?"

He stood up. He knew that resentment flickered in her—a fine, dangerous resentment against him because he had dragged so simple and obvious a thing out of its insignificance. But his own anger was like a mad, runaway horse, rushing him to destruction.

"It was stupid of him not to have come to me in the first place," she said, with an effort. "He should have known——"

He broke in fiercely.

"You can't—can't go like that."

"I must. If they had left an address—but, of course, they haven't. I'll have to track them down. It won't be so difficult." A spark of gaiety lit up her serious eyes. "I'll find Gertie lying on her back in the Sistine Chapel. She'll scorn the mirrors."

"You can't leave your work like that."

"The hospital people have been awfully decent about it."

"You told them——?"

"I told them I had urgent, personal business."

"You told them a lie, then?"

(Steady. Steady. But it was too late. His only hope lay in her understanding—her pity.)

"It wasn't a lie. My friends are my business."

"Your friends!" he echoed.

There was silence between them. She was controlled enough not to answer. It would have been better if she had returned taunt for taunt so that at last in the white heat of conflict his prison might have melted and let him free. But there followed a cold, deadly interlude, in which their antagonism hardened itself with reason and bitterness. He went and stood by the window looking out on to the dim square. He said at last roughly, authoritatively:

"Don't go. I don't want you to go."

(If only he could have gone on—driven the words over his set lips—"because I'm afraid—because I'm at breaking-point—because I can't do without you. I'm frightened of life. I've been starved in body and heart too long. I'm frightened because Christine is hard to wake at night—because I can't work any more.")

"I've got to," she said briefly, sternly.

He walked from the window to the door.

"You don't care. You care more for these two than you do for me. I've lived hard and clean. I don't lie or steal. I've never thought of any girl but you. And you put me second to a feckless thief and a——"

She stopped him. Not with a word or gesture, but with the sheer upward blaze of a chivalrous anger. And it was not only anger. That would have been bearable. It was sorrow, reproach, a kind of grieving bewilderment, as though he had changed before her eyes.

"You'd—you'd better go, Robert. We're both of us out of hand. We'll see each other to-morrow. It will be different then."

He went without a word. But on the dark stairs he stood still, leaning back against the wall, his wet face between his hands. He said aloud: "Oh, Francey. Francey, I can't live without you!" He would have gone back to tell her, but he was physically at the end of everything, and at the mercy of the power outside himself. He thought:

"There's still to-morrow. I'll tell her everything. I'll help her to get away. I'll make her understand that it wasn't Howard. To-morrow it will be all right."

And so went on. And the stolid Georgian door closed with a hard metallic click, setting its teeth against him.

"Now you see how it happens, Robert Stonehouse!"

5

But he came out of a night of fever and hallucination with very little left but the will to keep on. Apathy, like a thin protecting skin, had grown over him, shielding him from further hurt. He did not want to feel or care any more. The very memory of that "scene" with Francey made him shrink with a kind of physical disgust. Only no more of that. Back to work—back to reason. If she wished to go in pursuit of Howard and Gertie she would have to go. It seemed strange to him now that he should have minded so desperately.

Christine called to him as he passed her door.

"Is that you, Robert? Have you had your breakfast? Wait, dear—I'll get it for you."

But he crept down the stairs as though he had not heard. Only not so much caring—if only he could forget that he cared.

"Good-bye, dearest, good-bye!"

Her voice followed him, plaintive and clear. It seemed to lodge itself in his heart so that ever afterwards he had only to think of her to hear it like the echo of a small, sad bell. He went on stubbornly, in silence.

He did not try to see Francey. They met inevitably in the wake of the surgeon on whose post they worked, but they did not speak. Their eyes avoided one another. Yet he could not forget her. It was not the old consciousness that had been full of mystery and delight. It hurt. He felt her unsapped joyous living like a blow on his own aching weariness. He thought bitterly of her. How easy life had been for her! She played at living. Her airy fancies, her belief in God, her vagrant tenderness for the rag and bobtail of the earth were all part of that same thing. She had never suffered. Her people had died, but they had died in the odour of sanctity and wealth. She had never had to ask herself: "If I fall out, what will become of us?" She saw pain and poverty through the softening veil of her own well-being. Nothing could really hurt her.

(And yet how lovable she was! He watched her covertly as she stood at the surgeon's elbow—a little graver than usual—a little paler. To-day there was no warm glance with a flicker of a smile in its serene depths to greet him. Her hands were thrust boyishly into the pockets of her white coat, and there was an air of austere earnestness about her that sat quaintly, charmingly upon her youth. He loved the businesslike simplicity of her dress—the dark, tailored skirt and white silk shirt—immaculate—expressive of her real ability, an accustomed wealth. He flaired and hated its expensiveness.)

Money. That lay at the root of everything. If she were ill—what would it matter? A mere set-back. Her work would wait for her. Money would wave anxiety from her door. So she was never ill. Even though

she loved him and they had quarrelled she had kept her fresh skin and clear eyes. Even if she had worried a little, in the end she had slept peacefully. (He felt his own shabbiness, his exhaustion, his burning hands and eyes, his dry and bitter mouth like a sort of uncleanliness.)

And there in the midst of his jagged thoughts there flickered a red anger—a desire to hurt too, to strike, to come to grips at last with her laughing philosophy of life—to tear it down and batter it into the dust and misery in which he stood.

They had come to No. 10's bedside. Things had gone badly with No. 10. She had stood a successful operation, but there had been severe haemorrhage, and, as Robert had said, there was no constitution to fight at the turning point. Her face just showed above the creaseless sheet. Death had already begun to clear away the mask of vice and cynicism and a lost prettiness peered through. But the eyes were terribly alive and old. So long as they kept open there could be no mistaking her. They travelled from face to face, and sought and questioned. Her voice sounded reedy and far-off.

"Not going this trip, am I, doctor?"

Rogers patted the bed.

"Certainly not. Going along fine. What do you expect to feel like—with a hole like that in your inside? Next time you have a young man, see he doesn't carry firearms."

One of the eyes tried to wink—pitifully, obscenely.

"You bet your life. Don't want to die just yet."

"Nobody does."

They drew a little apart. Rogers consulted with his colleague. The serious loss of blood must be made good. A transfusion. There was a young man who had offered himself. A suitable subject. This afternoon at the latest.

They moved on. Robert spoke to the man next him. But he knew that
Francey heard him. He meant her to hear.

"It's crazy. They ought to be glad to let a woman like that slip out. If she lives she'll only infect more people with her rottenness. She's better dead. Instead of that they'll suck out somebody else's vitality to save her. The better the life the more pleased they'll be to risk it. This sacrificing the strong to the weak—a snivelling sentimentality."

The man he spoke to glanced at him curiously—it was not usual for Robert Stonehouse to speak to anyone—and said something about the medical profession and the sanctity of life. Robert laughed. He argued it over with himself. It was true. For that matter Howard and Gertie and Connie would all be better dead. There was no use or purpose in their living. Only sentimentalists like Francey wanted to patch them up and keep them on their feet.

People who cluttered up life ought to be cleared out of it.

He felt light-headed, yet extraordinarily sure of himself again. He answered Rogers' questions with the old lucidity. And presently he found himself in the corridor, still arguing his theme over. He would prove to Francey that she must let Howard and Gertie go to the devil and they would never quarrel again.

He came to the head of the stairs where they met after the morning's work.

The steps were very broad and white and shallow, and gave the impression of great distance. Mr. Ricardo, at the bottom of them, was a black speck—a bird that had blundered into the building by mistake and beaten itself breathless against the walls. As he saw Robert he began to drag himself up, limping. He seemed to shrivel then to a mere face, stricken and yellow, that gaped and mouthed.

Robert did not move. He stood leaning against the balustrade. It was as though an iron fist had smashed through the protecting wall about him, letting in a rush of bitter wind.

"Robert—Robert!"

He nodded.

"I'm coming——"

For he had known instantly.

The tragic journey through the streets was over. They stood beside her. Robert knew too much to struggle, but Ricardo's voice went on, saying the same things over and over again, pleading.

"Do something—do something. Wake her, Robert, dear boy, for God's sake.
What is the use of all your studying if you can't even wake her?"

"It's no use," he said.

"She was sitting there—I was to have read her the last chapter—she was so quiet—asleep she seemed —-for an hour—I sat—not moving—then I was afraid!"

Robert nodded.

She had laid his supper for him. It was much too early for her to have laid it. She had spread muslin over the bread and cheese. And then she had sat down quietly in her chair by the window and waited. (How long had she waited there? Many years perhaps. It had been very lonely for her.) Her head was thrown back a little, and her closed eyes lifted to the light that came over the stable roofs. The grey hair hung in wisps about the transparent face—very still, as though the air had died too. She had changed profoundly, indefinably. She looked younger, and there was a new serenity about the faintly opened mouth. Her hands lay peacefully on the little shabby bag. Her little feet in the ill-fitting shoes just reached the ground. In a way it was all so familiar. And yet he felt that if he touched her he would find out that this was not Christine at all. This was something that had belonged to her—as poignant, as heart-rending as a dress that she had worn.

"Robert, isn't there anything—to do?"

"No."

They had nothing to say to one another. They had made a strange trio—lonely and outcast by necessity—but now a link had snapped and it was all over. They stood apart, each by himself. Ricardo, crouching against the window-sill, pressed his hand to his side as though he were hurt and bleeding to death. He said, almost inaudibly:

"I've no one. Nobody will ever listen. She believed in me. She was sure that one day—I would go out—and tell the truth. She knew I wasn't—a cowardly—beaten, old man."

Robert could not touch her whilst Ricardo stood there crying. Her repose was too dominating. And if he touched her something terrible and incalculable might happen. He felt as though he were standing on the edge of a precipice, and that suddenly he might let go and pitch over.

It had come true at last—his boy's nightmare that had grown up with him—that only waited for darkness to show itself. Christine had left him. She was dead, and it seemed that he had no one in the world. For Francey, loving him as she did, had failed him. But Christine had never failed him. Never at any time had she asked, "Are you a good little boy, Robert?" It would never have occurred to her. She was so sure. She had loved him and, believed in him unfalteringly, and, in her quiet way, died for him.

Ricardo drew himself up. He plucked at Robert's sleeve. A change had come over him in the last minutes. His sunken brown eyes had dried and become rather terribly alert. Something too fine—too exquisitely balanced in him had been disturbed and broken beyond hope.

"It proves what I have suspected for a long time, Robert. You know it's not a light thing to make an enemy like that. He's taken his time, but you see in the end he has taken everything I had. First he made me a liar and a hypocrite. Then he took you. He sent that girl specially to come between us. And now Miss Christine. I suppose he thinks that's done for me. But it's a great mistake to make people desperate, Robert. You should always leave them some little thing that they care for and which makes them cowards. Now, you see, I simply don't care any more. I don't care for myself or even my poor sister. I'm going to fight him in the open, gloves off. I'll wrestle with him and prevail. I'll give blow for blow. I'm going now to Hyde Park to tell people the truth about him. They take him altogether too lightly, Robert. They're inclined to laugh at him as of no account. That's a great mistake, too. I shall warn them." He nodded mysteriously. "God is a devil—a cruel, dangerous devil."

Then he bent and kissed Christine's hand, very solemnly and tenderly, as some battered, comical Don Quixote might have done before setting out on a last fantastic quest. And presently Robert heard him patter down the narrow stairs and over the cobbles to the open street.

They were alone now. He bent over her and said: "Christine—Christine," reassuringly, so that she should not be afraid, and gathered her in his arms. How little she was—no heavier than a child—and

cold. Her grey head rested against his shoulder. If she had only stirred and laughed, and said: "Your father was strong too!" he would have answered gently. He would have been glad that the memory of his father could make her happy. But it was all too late.

He carried her into her room. It was like her to have left it so neat and ordered—each thing in its place—her out-door shoes standing decorously together under the window, and her best skirt peeping out from behind the cretonne curtain. Her hair-brush, with the comb planted in its bristles, lay exactly in the middle of the pine-wood dressing-table. When she had put it there, she had not known that it was for the last time.

Or had she known? She had called out to him so insistently. She had wanted to say good-bye. And he had gone on, not answering.

They said that people, at the end, saw their whole life pass before them. Perhaps she had seen hers. Perhaps she had trodden the old road that he was travelling over now. Only her vision of it would be different. It was James Stonehouse and Robert's mother that she would see—radiant figures of wonderful, unlucky people—and little Robert, who belonged to both of them, tagging in the rear.

But he saw her—Christine lying white and still under the great mahogany side-board, Christine coming back day after day in gallant patience to scrub the floors and his ears, and pay the bills and chase away the duns, and do whatever was necessary to keep the staggering Stonehouse menage on its feet.

She had held him close to her and comforted him.

Her splendid faithfulness.

He laid her on the narrow bed against the wall, and smoothed her dress and folded her hands over her breast. Her bag, which he had gathered up with her rolled on to the floor. A book fell out. He picked it up mechanically. It was a little Bible, and on the fly-leaf was written:

"From JIM and CONSTANCE to their friend, CHRISTINE."

The writing was his father's. It had faded, but one could still see how regular and beautiful it was. Then the date. His own birthday—the first of all the unfortunate birthdays.

He looked at it for a long time, stupidly, not realizing. Then suddenly he saw it—in a new light. Ricardo. How frightfully—excruciatingly funny. Ricardo. He felt that he was going to laugh—shout with laughter. It was horrible. Laughter rising and falling—-like a sort of awful sickness—choking him.

Instead his heart broke. He flung himself down beside her and pressed his face against her cold, thin cheek. And, instead of laughter, sobs that tore him to pieces—and at last, in mercy, tears.

"Oh, Christine, Christine—my own darling! I did love you—I never told you—you never, never knew how much!"

The earth-old cry of unavailing, inevitable remorse.

7

So there was no one but Francey now.

He did not know what he hoped, or indeed if he hoped for anything. He turned to her instinctively. And when the door of the ward opened he did, in fact, feel a faint lifting of the flat indifference which had followed on that one difficult rending surrender. He went to meet her. If she had looked at him with her usual straightness, she might have remembered the boy of whom she had been fond—a small, queer boy, who did not like having his face washed, and who came to her truculent and swaggering, with smears under his red eyes.

Even then it is doubtful whether she could have changed the course on which both of them were set.

He did not want her to see. And yet, unknown to himself, he did count on her instant understanding, on some releasing, quickening word or look that would give back life to the dead thing in him. But her eyes, preoccupied and unhappy, avoided him. He could not have appealed to her. He could not have said, as he had meant to do, "Christine is dead." He was silenced by the certain knowledge that all real communication between them had been broken off.

"No. 10 is going to pull through," she said.

They walked slowly down the corridor. He found it difficult to keep his feet. He wondered vaguely why she should talk of No. 10 when Christine was dead. He was puzzled—-confused.

"It seemed likely," he muttered. "Rogers had got his teeth into her."

"I suppose you think he was a fool to try?"

(What was she talking about? He would have to arrange for the funeral. And the money. He did not know whether there would be money enough. It was hideous—to think of a thing like that—to have to go into a shop and say to some bored shopkeeper: "I want a nice cheap coffin, please." For Christine—for whom he had never been able to buy so much as a bunch of flowers.)

"I—I don't know."

"You see, I heard what you said."

(What had he said? He tried to remember. No. 10. Better dead. Yes, of course that was it. He couldn't go back on that. His mind seemed to strain and stagger under the challenge like a half-dead horse under the whip.)

"She didn't hear me, anyway."

"I want to know—was it just—just a sort of pose—or did you mean it?"

"It was true."

"That doesn't seem to me to matter. It was a beastly thing to have thought—beastlier to have said ——"

He stopped short, as though she had struck him across the face. For an instant he was blind with pain, but afterwards he steadied, grew deadly cool and clear-headed. There was a constant movement in the corridor and he turned abruptly, almost with authority, into an empty operating theatre. Instinctively he had chosen his ground. Here was symbolized everything that he trusted and believed in —a cool, dispassionate seeking, the ruthless cutting out of waste. Yet in the half-light the place surrounded them both with a ghostly, almost sinister unreality. Its stark immaculateness lay like a chill, ironic hand on their distress. It made mock of their unhappiness. It divested them of their humanity. The nauseating sweetness that still lingered in the sterilized air was like incense offered up on the grotesque sacrificial altar that stood bare and brutal beneath the glass-domed roof.

And now Robert saw Francey's face. It was white and pinched and unfamiliar, as though all her humour and whimsical laughter and loving-kindness had been twisted awry in a bitter fight with pain. But he knew her eyes of old. Long ago he had seen them with the same burning deadly anger. And he knew that it was all over. Their patient antagonism had come to grips at last over the bodies of their suffering love for one another.

Even then she held back.

"You don't know how hard life can be. It was hard for her——" But at that he burst out laughing, and she added quickly, reading his thought: "Nothing that you've gone through is of any use if it hasn't taught you pity."

"Your pity would take a half-dead rat from a terrier."

"You have no right to judge," she persisted.

He smiled with white lips.

"Oh, yes, I have! We all have. We condemn men to prison—to death."

"You do believe in God," she said bitterly. "You believe in yourself."

"It comes to this, Francey, doesn't it? You're through with me? You don't care any more?"

Her eyes narrowed with a kind of desperate humour. It was as though for a moment she had regained her old vision of him—a sad queer little boy.

"You say that because you want to shirk the truth. You're almost glad—presently you will be very glad. You never did want to care—not from the first. Caring got in your way. You will be free now." She waited, and then added very quietly, without anger: "I love you. I dare say I always shall—but I couldn't live with you—it would break my heart if we should come to hate one another. Don't think any more

about it. I'll have gone to-morrow, and I'll try to arrange not to come back till you're through. It will be all right."

"Francey, it's such a foolish thing to quarrel about."

"It's everything," she said simply.

She turned to go. Even then he could have stopped her. He could have said: "Francey, Christine died this morning!" and their sad enmity might have melted in grief and pity. But what she had said was true. It was everything. And his reason, his will, rising up out of the general ruin, monstrous and powerful, stood like an admonishing shadow at his elbow.

"It's much better. There's nothing to make a coward of you now. You're free."

He half held out his hand, but it was only a convulsive, dying movement.
He let her go.

PART III

I

1

As to Gyp Labelle, if she had known the part she played in their lives, which in the nature of things was not possible, she would have broken into that famous laugh of hers.

To her, at any rate, it would have seemed immensely, excruciatingly funny.

As the result of an exchange of two remarkably casual notes they met at Brown's for dinner. Brown's had occurred to both of them as a natural meeting-place. Cosgrave, it is true, had only dined there once and that free (as a friend of Brown's friend), but the impression made upon a stomach accustomed to Soho and tea-shop fare had been indelible. Stonehouse himself dined there as a matter of custom. Besides, there was a touch of sentiment to their choice—a rather bitter sharp-tasting sentiment like an aperitif.

Brown himself had aged considerably, and did not remember very well.

"Old friend of the doctor's, sir? Well, so am I. Getting on—getting on. But I'm waiting till I can squeeze my money's worth out of him. When's that knighthood coming, doctor? I want to be able to tell that story—as good a story as you'd read anywhere. He's got to keep me alive, sir, till it comes true."

He went off to the kitchen tittering to himself over an ancient joke which, together with his "feeling" for the psychological moment in the matter of roasts, was about all that was left him.

Stonehouse, his chin resting in his hand, studied the menu from which they had already chosen.

"When the last Honours List came out, he was quite serious and pathetic about it," he said. "Things move either too slowly or too quickly for old people. He does realize that I make quite a good story as I stand, but he wants the finishing touches—the King clasping me by the hand, or kissing me on both cheeks, or whatever he thinks happens on those occasions—and wedding bells as a grand finale."

"The place seems to have grown shabby," Cosgrave said. "Or perhaps it's only me."

"Oh, no. It is shabby. And perhaps you've noticed, they don't wait here as they used to."

Cosgrave looked directly at his companion, almost for the first time, and caught a spark in the eyes that stared into his—a rather dangerous spark, which cleverer people than himself had found difficult to make sure of. Then he laughed flatly.

"You can see how funny it is now——"

"I always did."

"—because you were so sure it would pan out—like this. How long is it?"

"About eight years."

"My word! Let's—let's look at one another and take stock."

Stonehouse sat back and bore the inspection with a faint smile. He knew himself, and how he impressed others. The eight years had done a great deal for him. His strength had cast its crudeness and had attained a certain grace—the ease of absolute control and tried confidence in itself. He still dressed badly—indifferently, rather—but his body had toned down to the level of the fine hands, which he held loosely clasped upon the table.

He looked at once very young and very fine drawn and, as Cosgrave thought, a little cruel.

"You seem—awfully well and prosperous, Robert. And a sight better looking."

Stonehouse laughed. All he said in reply was:

"And you look prosperous and ill. What was it? Enteric?"

Cosgrave shrugged his thin shoulders. He was still flamboyantly red-headed and generously freckled, but now that the first flush of excitement had ebbed, his face showed a parchment yellow. His eyes, wistful in their setting, were faded, as though a relentless tropical sun had drunk up their once vivid, boyish colouring.

"Oh yes, that and a few other trifles. I think I've housed most West African bugs in my time. Everyone had them, but I was such poor pasture that I got off better than most. Three of my superiors died of 'em, and I stepped right into their shoes. It pays, you see, if you can hold out. People like a fellow who isn't always clamouring to come home—and you bet I never did. But, finally, I took an overdue leave and a hunk of savings and trekked back. I'd always planned it—a good time, you know—but somehow it hasn't come off. I expect I left it too long. In the end I didn't really want to come at all—wanted to lie down and die, but hadn't the strength of mind to insist. I'd been in London a week before I wrote you—just drifting round—too weak-kneed to take the first step. I tore up that idiotic note three times."

"Well, as long as you posted the fourth effort," Stonehouse said, "it's all right."

They fell then unexpectedly into one of those difficult silences which beset the road of friends who have been separated too long. The past stood at their elbow like an importunate and shabby ghost. And yet it was all they had to lead them back into the old intimacy.

"We've got too much to say," Cosgrave broke out at last, with a painful effort, "too much ground to cover—and I dare say we don't want to cover it. If we'd written—but I never heard from you after that one letter—after Miss Christine's death."

"I was ill," Stonehouse explained, eating tranquilly. "I got through my finals with a temperature which would have astonished my examiners, and then I went to pieces altogether. Had to go into hospital myself. A nervous breakdown. Three months I had of it. They were very decent to me, and when I came out they got me a berth as ship's doctor on one of the smaller transatlantic liners. I got hold of things again and pulled them my way. But I didn't want to look back. My illness had made a definite break—I wanted to keep free."

Cosgrave nodded. He had been playing with his food, and now a look of disgust and weariness came into his thin face.

"I can understand that. I suppose it would have been better if I'd left well alone, and not written at all."

"It wouldn't have made much difference," Stonehouse said: "A week or two. Sooner or later we'd have run into one another. People who've been at school together always seem to. And you and I especially."

"I don't know. I was always a poor specimen—I never meant much to you."

Stonehouse looked up at him and smiled. This time it was an unmistakable smile and rather charming, like a warm line of light falling across his face.

"I was awfully glad to get your letter," he said. "I'd begun to worry rather."

Cosgrave flushed up.

"That's—that's about the nicest thing that's happened to me for a long time. I'd probably cry with pleasure—only I don't seem able to feel much anyway. It's those damn bugs, I suppose!"

"I'll pull you out of that."

"Got me diagnosed already?"

"It's not very difficult."

"I suppose—I suppose you're an awful swell, Stonehouse."

"Not yet. I'm better at my job than a great many men who are swells. But I'm young—that'll cure itself. Oh, yes—I'm all right. Things have gone on coming my way. I'll tell you about it sometime."

Cosgrave's eyes had rounded with their old solemn admiration.

"A fashionable West-End surgeon—oh, my word! I say, have you got a bed-side manner tucked away somewhere?"

"No. That's not fashionable for one thing, and for another, it wouldn't suit my style. I'm not interested in people. I'm interested in their diseases. They know it, and rather like it." A touch of chill scorn showed itself for a moment in his face. "They're frightened of me. I'm as good as an electric shock to their lethargic, overfed carcasses. They can't get over a young man with his way to make who wipes his boots on them. They have to come back for more."

Cosgrave gave his little toneless laugh.

"I wish to God you'd frighten me. You know, when I felt how rotten I was I thought of you. You always bucked me up—I believe I had a fool idea that I'd find you in some scrubby suburban practice. Shows the bugs must have got into my brain too, doesn't it? Now I suppose I'll have to ask you to reduce your fees."

"I'll let you down easy. Say, a guinea a consultation!"

"I could manage that—if you don't want to consult too often. I've got my bit saved. Not much to squander on out there, except whisky, and I never took to that. Besides—my father's dead. He didn't mean to leave me his money—you know how he loathed me—but there was a mix-up over the will that was to cut me out—not properly witnessed or something. Anyhow, I came out into a few thousand. Rather a joke on the old man, wasn't it?"

"One might almost hope for another life if one were sure he were grinding his teeth over it."

A faint perplexity flickered across the sallow face.

"Oh, I don't know. I don't seem to bear him any particular grudge now. Perhaps it would be better if I could. When one's young one judges very harshly. Parents and kids don't understand each other—not really—and don't always love each other either, if the truth were known. Why should they? The old man and I were like strangers tied to one another by the leg. I used to think if I could pay him back for all the beastly times he gave me I'd die happy. But I don't feel like that now. I expect he was pretty miserable himself. There's too much of that sort of thing for us to wish it on to one another."

"You're very tolerant," Stonehouse said. "I'm not. But then I haven't inherited anything." He stopped abruptly and his manner hardened. But Cosgrave did not pursue the subject. His interest had suddenly slumped into what was evidently an habitual apathy, and only when they had paid their bill and drifted out into the street did he revert for a moment to the past.

"And the Gang—and Frances Wilmot?" he asked. He looked shyly at his companion's profile, which showed up for a moment in a bold, tranquil outline against the lamplight. It betrayed nothing.

"We might walk back to my rooms and talk in peace. Oh—Francey Wilmot? I don't know much. She went abroad—finished her course very late—she was always a bit of a dilettante. People with money usually are."

Cosgrave said no more. He knew all he wanted to know. It saddened him. Somehow he had counted on that half-divined romance, had played with it in his fancy as with a kind of vicarious happiness.

3

On board the S.S. *Launceston* there had arrived, an hour before sailing, an American gentleman—a certain Mr. Horace Fletcher, who, having been called home suddenly, had had to take what accommodation he could get on the first available boat. Two days later he had lain unconscious,

strapped to the captain's table, whilst the ship's doctor, a young man, himself in the horrible throes of seasickness, had performed a radical operation for acute mastoiditis. There had been no facilities. The whole thing had been in the last degree makeshift. The half-trained stewardess had held his instruments ready for him, and the sea-sickness, comic in retrospect, had weighed heavily against Mr. Fletcher's chance of seeing land again. Nevertheless, the eminent New York surgeon, consulted at the first opportunity, had pronounced the operation a neat performance—under the circumstances a masterpiece.

It was the nearest possible approach to a medical advertisement. Mr. Fletcher was a member of a well-known New York family, and the papers had given the story, with fantastic details as to the ship's doctor's career, a first-page prominence. Mr. Fletcher himself had proved to be both generous and grateful. In assessing the value of his own life at 1,000 pounds, he had argued with good humour and good sense, he had erred on the side of modesty, and Robert Stonehouse, having weighed the argument gravely, had accepted its practical conclusion as just and reasonable. He had taken rooms, thereupon, if not actually in Harley Street, at least under the ramparts, fitted them out with the most modern surgical appliances that his capital allowed, and had sat down to wait. Fortunately he had learnt the art of starving before. He slept in a garret, and the bottom drawer of the handsome mahogany desk in his consulting-room knew the grim secret of his mid-day meals. But in six months the tide had turned. Doctors had remembered him from his hospital days when, if they had not liked him, they had learnt to respect his genius and his courage, and had sent him patients. The patients themselves, oddly enough, took a fancy to this gaunt, very serious young man, who so obviously cared nothing at all about them, but whose interest in their diseases was almost passionate. And within two years the tide had brought him in sight of land.

This was what he had meant by "getting hold of things again and pulling them his way." There was perhaps something rather simple in a theory of life which had necessitated so much suffering on the part of Mr. Fletcher in order that Dr. Stonehouse might take the first long stride in his career. But Cosgrave, listening to Stonehouse's own account of the incident, saw in it only an example of a strange, inexorable truth. What men called "Fate" was the shadow of themselves. They imposed their characters upon events, significant or insignificant, willingly or unwillingly. Beyond that there was no such thing as Fate at all.

They stepped back from the crowd into the shelter of the Piccadilly Tube. They had been walking the streets for an hour, and as much of their lives as they were able to tell one another had been told. Now they were both baffled and tired out. Of what had really happened to them they could say nothing, and their memories, disinterred in a kind of desperate haste ("Do you remember that row with Dickson about my hair, Robert?") had crumbled, after a moment's apparent vitality, into a heap of dust. It was all too utterly dead—too unreal to both of them. The things that had mattered so much, which had seemed so laughable or so tragic, were like the repetition of a story in which they could only force a polite interest. Their laughter, their exclamations, sounded shallow and insincere.

And yet it was borne in upon them that they did still care for one another. They had had no other friendship to compare with this. Strictly speaking, there had been no other friends. There had been acquaintances—people whom you talked to because you worked with them.

Robert Stonehouse had always known his own loneliness. His patients believed in him; his colleagues respected him. Their knowledge of him went no further than the operating theatre where they knew him best. He had reckoned loneliness as an asset. But to feel it, as he felt it now beneath this stilted exchange, was to become aware of a dull, stupid pain. He found himself staring over the heads of the people, and wishing that Cosgrave had never come back. And Cosgrave said gently, as though he had read his thought and had made up his mind to have done with insincerities:

"You're not to bother about me, Robert. It's been jolly, seeing you again and all that, but we'd better let it end here. It always puzzled me—your caring, you know, about a hapless fellow like myself. It's against your real principles. I'm a dead weight. I couldn't give anyone a solitary water-tight reason for my being alive. I think you did it because you'd got your teeth into me by accident and couldn't let go. I don't want you to get your teeth into me again."

"I don't believe," Stonehouse said, with an impatient laugh, "that I ever let go at all."

His attention fixed itself on the illuminated sign that hung from the portico of the Olympic Theatre opposite, and mechanically he began to spell out the flaming letters:

"Gyp Labelle—Gyp Labelle!" At first the name scarcely reached his consciousness, but in some strange way it focused his disquiet. It was as though for a long time past he too had been indefinitely ill, and now at an exasperating touch the poisoned blood rushed to a head of pain. He felt Cosgrave plucking at his sleeve, fretfully like a sick child, raised to a sudden interest.

"I say, Stonehouse, don't you remember?"

"The Circus? Yes, I was just thinking about it. It's not likely to be the same though."

"Why not? She was a nailer. Oh—but you didn't think so, did you? It was the woman on the horse—the big barmaid person—I forget her name—Madame—Madame——"

It was ridiculous—but even now it annoyed him to be reminded of her essential vulgarity. There was a glamour—almost a halo about her memory because of all that he had felt for her. A silly boy's passion. But he would never feel like that again.

"Well, she could ride, anyhow. I don't know what your long-legged favourite was good for."

"She made me laugh," Cosgrave said. He asked after a moment: "Have you ever wanted anything so much as you wanted to go to that Circus, Stonehouse?"

"Oh, yes—crowds of things!"

"I don't believe it somehow. I know I haven't. Oh, I say, I wish I could want again like that—anything—to get drunk—to go to the dogs—anything in the world. It's this damnable not wanting. Do you know I've been trying every night this week to drift into that show—just to see if it were really that funny kid. I felt I ought to want to. Why, even the fellows down in Angola had heard of her."

"She's probably well known in hotter places than that," Stonehouse remarked.

"Yes—so I gathered. That's what made them so keen. They used to talk of her—telling the wildest yarns, as though it did them good just to think there was someone left alive who had so much go in them. Queer, isn't it? Do you remember what a susceptible chap I used to be—that poor little Connie—what's-her-name, whom I nearly scared out of her five senses? Well, I've not cared a snap for any woman since then. And I want to—I want to. I'd be so awfully happy if I could only care for some nice girl and marry her. There was someone on the boat—such a jolly good sort—and I think if I only could have cared she'd have cared too. But I couldn't. I tried to work myself up—but it was like scratching on a dead nerve—as though something vital had gone clean out of me."

His voice cracked. Stonehouse, startled from his own reflections, became aware that Cosgrave, whose apathy had hung about them like a fog, hiding them from each other, was on the point of tears—of breaking down helplessly in the crowded entrance. And instantly their old relationship was re-born. He took him by the arm, sternly, authoritatively, as he had always done when little Rufus Cosgrave had begun to flag or cry.

"You're coming home with me. When you're fit enough we'll do the show opposite and make a night of it. We'll see what going to the devil can do for you."

"Perhaps she'd make me laugh again," Cosgrave said, quavering hysterically.

4

At any rate he had kept faith with himself. That theatre-night with Frances Wilmot had been the first and last until now, and now assuredly he did not care any more. But it made him remember. How intoxicated he had been! He had walked home like a man translated into a strange country—words had rushed past his ears in floods of music, and the silver and black streets had been magic-built. Was it his youth, or had Francey, dancing before him, her head lifted to catch unearthly harmonies, thrown a spell over his judgment? She had gone, and he was older—but he had a feeling that the disillusionment was not only in himself. It was in the atmosphere about him—in the stale air, stamped on the stereotyped gilt and plush of the shabby theatre and on the faces of the people. He wondered whether they had all grown too old. Perhaps the spirit which had driven them into these dark boxes to gaze open-mouthed, crying or laughing, through a peep-hole into a world of ideal happiness, or even ideal sorrow, was dead and gone like their faith in God and every other futile shadow which they had tried to interpose between themselves and truth. This that remained was perhaps no more than a tradition—a convention. When people were bored or unhappy they said: "Let's go to a theatre!" and when they came out they wondered why they had been, or what they had hoped for.

Reality was beginning to press hard on men. It was driving them into an iron cul-de-sac, from which there was no escape. Suicide and madness, obscure and hideous maladies of the brain herded in it. Perhaps, after all, there had been some value in those old fairy stories. And he remembered, with a faint movement of impatience, Francey Wilmot's final shaft: "If there isn't a God you'll have to make one up." But even if a man were to juggle with his own integrity, turn charlatan, there was no faith-

serum which you could inject into a patient's veins.

Cosgrave sat limply in his stall, and by the reflected light from the stage Stonehouse could see his look of wan indifference. He was no better. All day long he lay on his bed in the small spare room Robert had given him and stared up at the white ceiling. There was a crack, running zig-zag from the window to the door, which reminded him, so he said, of a river in Angola, a beastly slimy thing trailing through mosquito-infested swamps and villainous-tangled jungles. When he dozed it became real, and he felt the heat descend on him like a sticky hand, and heard the menacing drone of the mosquitoes and the splash of oars as unfriendly natives who had tracked him along the water's edge shot out suddenly from under the shadow of the mango trees in their long boats—deadly and swift as striking adders.

And then, near the door, the river broke off—poured into the open sea—or fell over a cataract—he did not know what—and he woke up with a sweating start and took his medicine. He was so painstakingly docile about his medicine that Robert Stonehouse guessed he had no faith in it. Sometimes indeed he had an idea that Cosgrave was rather sorry for him, very much as old people are sorry for the young, knowing the end to all their enthusiasms. It was as though he had travelled ahead, and had found out how meaningless everything was, even his clever friend's strength and cleverness.

So he did not get better. And the forces that Robert Stonehouse had counted on had failed. He had been a successful physician outside his specialty and his sheer indifference to his patients as human beings had been one of his chief weapons. He braced them, imposing his sense of values so that their own sufferings became insignificant, and they ceased to worry so much about themselves. But with Cosgrave he was not indifferent. Some indefinable element of emotion had been thrown into the scales, upsetting the delicate balance of his judgment.

And his old influence had gone too. It had failed him from that moment in Connie Edwards' room when suddenly Cosgrave had realized the general futility of things.

"I'll see him through all the same," Stonehouse thought, with a kind of violence, "I'll pull him through."

After the first few moments he had ignored the scene before him. It was boring—imbecile. Even to him, with his contempt for the average of human intelligence, it seemed incredible that the gyrating of a few half-naked women and the silly obscenities of a comedian dressed in a humourless caricature of a gentleman should hold the attention of sane men for a minute. Now abruptly the orchestra caught hold of him, shook him and dragged him back. It was playing something which he had heard before—on a street barrel-organ, and which he disliked now with an intensity for which he could give no reason. It was perhaps because he wanted to remain aloof and indifferent, and because it would not let him be. It destroyed his isolation. His pulse caught up its beat like the rest. His personality lost outline—merging itself into the cumbrous uncouth being of the audience.

Though it was a rhythm rather than a tune it was not rag-time. Rag-time Stonehouse appreciated. He recognized it as a symptom of the *mal du siecle*, a deliberate break with the natural rhythm of life, a desperate ennui, the hysterical pressure upon an aching cancer. Ragtime twitched at the nerves. This thing jostled you, bustled you. It was a shout—a caper—the ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay of its day, riotous and vulgar. It was the sort of thing coster-women danced to on the pavements of Epsom on Derby night.

The stage, set with a stereotyped drawing-room, was empty as the curtain rose. Two hands, dead white under their load of emeralds, held the black hangings over the centre doorway—then parted them brusquely. Stonehouse heard the audience stir in their seats, but there was only a faint applause. No one had come to the theatre for any other purpose than to see her, but they knew her history. And, after all, they were respectable people.

Cosgrave caught him by the arm.

"Oh, my word—it's her right enough!"

She stood there, motionless, her fair head with its monstrous crest of many-coloured ostrich feathers flaming against the dead background. Her dress was impudent. It winked at its own transparent pretence at covering a body which was, in fact, too slender, too nervously alive to be quite beautiful (Stonehouse remembered her legs—the long, thin legs in the parti-coloured tights, like sticks of peppermint, belabouring the rotund sides of her imperturbable pony). But her jewels clothed her. Their authentic fire seemed to blaze out of herself—to be fed by her. And each one of them, no doubt, had its romance—its scandal. That rope of pearls in itself was a king's ransom. People nudged each other. It was part of the show that she should flaunt them.

She had been a plain child, and now, if she was really pretty at all, it was after the fashion of most

French women, without right or reason, by force of some secret magnetism that was not even physical. Her wide mouth was open in a rather vacant, childish smile, and she was looking up towards the gallery as though she were expecting something. "Hallo, everyone!" she said tentatively, gaily. They stared back at her, stolid and antagonistic, defying her. She began to laugh then, as she laughed every night at the same moment, spontaneously, shrilly, helplessly, until suddenly she had them. It was like a whirlwind. It spared no one. They were like dead leaves dancing helplessly in its midst. Even Stonehouse felt it at his throat, a choking, senseless laughter.

He saw Cosgrave lean forward, and in the half light he had a queer, startled look. With his thick red hair and small white face he might have been some sick thing of the woods scenting the air in answer to far-off familiar piping's. He made Robert Stonehouse see the faun in Frances Wilmot's room, the room itself and Frances Wilmot, with her chin resting in her hands, gazing into the fire. The picture was gone almost before he knew what he had seen. But it was knife-sharp. It was as though a hand fumbling over a blank wall had touched by accident a secret spring and a door had flown wide open, closing instantly.

"I'm Gyp Labelle;
If you dance with me
You must dance to my tune
Whatever it be."

She jumped into the incessant music as a child jumps into a whirling skipping-rope. She had a quaint French accent, but she couldn't sing. She had no voice. And after that one doggerel verse she made a gesture of good-humoured contempt and danced. But she couldn't dance either. It was a wild gymnastic—a display of incredible, riotous energy, the delirious caperings of a gutter-urchin caught in the midst of some gutter-urchin's windfall by a jolly tune. A long-haired youth leapt on to the stage from the stage-box, and caught her by the waist and swung her about him and over his shoulder so that her plumes swept the ground and the great chain of pearls made a circle of white light about them both.

"Those pearls!" Stonehouse heard a man behind him say loudly. "Prince Frederick gave them to her. And then he shot himself. They belonged to the family. He had no right, of course, but she wanted them."

He could feel Cosgrave stir impatiently.

It went on, as it seemed to him, for an incredible length of time. It was like a prairie fire that spread and blazed up, higher and brighter. And there was no escape. He had a queer conviction that his was the only static spirit in the whole theatre, that secretly, in their hearts, the audience had flung themselves into the riot with her, the oldest and staidest of them, as perhaps they had often wanted to do when they heard a jolly tune like that. It was artless, graceless. One only needed to let oneself go.

"I'm Gyp Labelle,
Come dance with me."

The jaded disgust and weariness were gone. Something had come into the theatre that had not been there before. Nothing mattered either so much or so little. The main business was to have a good time somehow—not to worry or care.

She had whirled catherine-wheel fashion, head over heels from end to end of the stage. The long-haired youth swept the hair from his hot, blue-jowled face in time to catch her, and they stood side by side, she with her thin arms stretched up straight in a gesture of triumph, her lips still parted in that curiously empty, expectant smile.

Then it was over. Once the curtain rose to perfunctory applause. People settled back in their seats, or prepared to go. It was as though the fire had been withdrawn from a molten metal which began instantly to harden. A woman next to Stonehouse tittered.

"So vulgar and silly—I don't know what people see in her."

"I want to get away," Cosgrave said sharply. "It's this beastly closeness."

He looked and walked as though he had been drinking.

Although the show was not over, the majority of the audience had begun to stream out. Two men who loitered in the gangway in front of Stonehouse exchanged laconic comments.

"A live wire, eh, what?"

For some reason or other Stonehouse saw clearly and remembered afterwards the face of the man

who answered. It was bloated and full of a weary, humorous intelligence.

"Life itself, my dear fellow, life itself!"

5

Cosgrave scarcely answered his companion's comments. He withdrew suddenly into himself, and after that he shirked the subject, understandably enough, for if he had had illusions on her account they must have been effectively shattered. But also he ceased to lie all day on his bed and stare up at the mosquito-infested river of his nightmare. He grew restless and shy, as though he were engaged with secret business of his own of which Stonehouse knew nothing, and of which he could say nothing. Yet Stonehouse had caught his eyes fixed on him with the doubtful, rather wistful earnestness of a child trying to make up its mind to confide. (There was still something pathetically young about Rufus Cosgrave. Now that his body was growing stronger, youth peered out of his wan face like a famished prisoner demanding liberty.)

What he did with himself during the long hours when Stonehouse was in his consulting-room or on his rounds Stonehouse never asked. At night he sat at the study window of his friend's flat (shabby and high up since all spare money was diverted to other and better purposes), and looked over the roofs of the houses opposite, smoking and watching the dull red glow that rose up from the blazing theatres westwards.

"It is a fire," he said once, "and all the cold, tired people in London come to warm their hands at it."

Robert Stonehouse went on with his writing under the lamplight.

"Are you cold?"

"Not now." He added unexpectedly: "You think I'd be all right, don't you, if only you could have a go at my tonsils or my adenoids? I believe you're just waiting to have a go at them."

"Your tonsils are septic," Stonehouse agreed gravely. "I told you so, but I wouldn't advise anything drastic until you're stronger. We'll think about it in a month or two. You're better already."

Cosgrave chuckled to himself. In the shadow in which he sat the chuckle sounded elfish and almost mocking.

"Oh, yes, I'm better!"

Stonehouse took his first holiday for three years, and carried Cosgrave off with him to a rough shooting-box in the Highlands lent him by a grateful and sporting patient, and for a week they tramped the moors together and stalked deer and fished in the salmon river that ran in and out among the desolate hills. The place was little more than a shepherd's cottage, growing grey and stubborn as a rock out of the heather, and beyond that proffered them occasionally by a morose and distrustful gillie they had no help or other companionship. They won their food for themselves, cooked it by the smoking fire, and washed heroically in the icy river water. A sting of winter was already in the wind and a melancholy and bitter rain swept the hills, giving way at evening to unearthly sunsets. They saw themselves as pioneers at the world's end. And Stonehouse, who had calculated its effect on Cosgrave, was himself caught up in the fierce, rough charm of that daily life. He who had never played since that circus night played now in passionate earnest. He proved a good shot, and, for all his inexperience, an indomitable and clever hunter. His close-confined physical energy could not shake itself. He liked the long and dogged pursuit, the cruel, often fruitless struggle up the mountain-sides, the patient waiting, the triumph of that final shot from a hand unshaken by excitement or fatigue. A stag showing itself for an instant against the sky-line called up all the stubborn purpose in him; then he would not turn back until either his quarry had fallen to him, or night had swallowed them both.

And Cosgrave, half forgotten, tagged docilely at his heels, or lay in the wet heather on the crest of a hill overlooking the world, and watched and waited with strange, wide-open eyes. But he never gave the signal. He shot nothing. His failure seemed to amuse and even please him. A faint, excited colour came into his cheeks, lashed up by the wind and rain. And once, a hare running out from under his feet, he gave a wild "halloo!" like a boy and set off in pursuit, headlong down the stony hillside, his gun at full cock, threatening indiscriminate destruction.

"You might have killed yourself," Robert said angrily. But Cosgrave laughed, his eyes narrowed to blue-grey slits as though he did not want Stonehouse to see all that was in them.

"I shouldn't have minded," he panted, "going off on the crest like that—I wanted to run—I forgot."

"Well, for the Lord's sake, don't forget."

But for an instant at least he knew what Cosgrave meant. It had been the sight of that downward rushing hill and the sudden choking exultation. He had felt it too—that night in Acacia Grove in pursuit of the Greatest Show—and once again. He could smell the scent of the trees and the young grass blowing in his face.

And at the bottom there had been a mysterious wood like a deep, green pool.

Then on the eighth day Cosgrave disappeared. He had set out in the early morning for the nearest station to fetch their letters and fresh provisions, and at dusk a village youth reached Stonehouse with a note which had been scrawled in such haste that it was almost illegible. It was as though Cosgrave had yielded suddenly and utterly to a prolonged pressure.

He had to go back to town. It was something urgent. Stonehouse was not to bother. He would be all right now.

The next day Stonehouse stalked and brought down his first "Royal." This time the chase had cost him every ounce of his endurance, and in the chill dusk he stood watching the gillie at his work on the lovely body (still so warm and lissom that one could almost see the last sorrowful heaving of its golden flanks) with a kind of stolid triumph as though now he had wiped out that other failure, for he realized that he had been both too sanguine and too impatient. When you were angling a man with a sick brain back to health, you had to go slowly—delicately.

"It's because I care," he thought, half amused and half angry. "And why do I care? It's as he said—a rotten habit."

But he returned to town. He tracked Cosgrave to his former lodging-house, where a stout, heavily-breathing landlady showed every readiness to be communicative and helpful.

"Yes, sir—he's here again—I think he was expecting you—mentioned your name—he's out now and won't be back till late—dinner at the Carlton, he said. If you'd like to leave a note, sir——"

She led him upstairs and watched him with a fat amusement as he stood silent and frowning on the threshold.

"It *is* a fair mess," she admitted blandly. "I was just trying to get things a bit together when you rang, sir. I'm to throw away all that old stuff, he said. A reg'lar new start he's making—*and* a lively one, I don't think. Theatres and supper parties ever since he's been back, sir, and right glad I've been to see it, though I don't 'old with carryings-on, in a general way. But after them there tropiks he'd need a change. He was that down, sir, when he first came, I didn't know what to think."

The room might have belonged to a young dandy returned to London from the wilds of Central Africa. It was littered with half-open boxes, new suits, a disorderly regiment of shining, unworn boots and shoes, a pile of ties that must have been chosen for sheer expensiveness. (Stonehouse remembered the spotted affair with which Cosgrave had wooed Connie Edward's approval.) The shabby suit in which Stonehouse had first met him had been flung with the other cast-offs into a far corner. It was all very young and reckless and jolly. One could see the owner, as he rampaged about the room, whistling and cursing in a good-humoured haste.

"'Ere's 'is writing-table; I'll just make room for you, sir——"

He stopped her.

"It doesn't matter. If he's to be at the Carlton I'll probably look him up myself."

"Dining early, he said, sir—seven o'clock."

"Yes—thank you."

A folded, grey-tinted letter lay half hidden in the general melee. It had a bold, irrepressible look, as though it were aware of having blown the room to smithereens and was rather amused. Stonehouse could see the large, sprawling hand that covered it. He touched it, not knowing why—nor yet that he was angry. Something that had been asleep in him for a long time stirred uneasily and stretched itself.

"Ladies"—his companion simpered—-"always the ladies, sir."

Stonehouse laughed.

An hour later he was waiting for Cosgrave in the Carlton lounge. He had never been in the place before—or in any place like it—and it confused and astonished him. He was like a monk who had come unprepared into the crude noise and glitter of a society desperately pleasure-seeking. He could regard the men and women round him with contempt, but not with indifference, for they represented a force against which he had not yet tried himself except in theory. And they set a new standard. Here his life and his attainments were of no account. What mattered was that he wore his travelling clothes, and that he stood stockily in the gangway like a man who does not know what is expected of him. It was ridiculous, but it was true that he became ashamed.

But he held his ground stubbornly. He was not aware of any definite plan or expectation. If he had asked himself what he intended he would have said he meant to look after Cosgrave, who was in a bad way. As a friend and as a doctor he had the right. He would not have admitted that his own personality had become involved, that he had felt himself obscurely challenged.

Then he saw Cosgrave. He saw him before his companion, though for everyone else she obscured him utterly. She walked a few steps ahead, a bizarre, fantastic figure, her fair head with its deep band of diamonds lifted audaciously, the same fixed smile of childish expectancy on her oval, painted face. Her dress had left vulgarity behind. It was too much a part of herself—in its way too genuine—to be merely laughable. It was like her execrable dancing, the expression of an exuberant, inexhaustible life. As she walked, with short impatient steps, she swayed the great ostrich-feather fan and twisted her rope of pearls between her slender fingers. The open stare that greeted her seemed to amuse and please her.

And Cosgrave. Saville Row, Stonehouse reflected rapidly and contemptuously, must have been bribed to have turned out such perfection at such short notice. Too much perfection and too new. An upstart young rake. No, not quite that, either. Pain had lent an elusive beauty to the plain and freckled face, and happiness had made it lovable. It was obvious that he was trying to suppress his pride and astonishment at himself and not succeeding. The corners of his mouth quivered shyly and self-consciously, and the wide-open eyes were fixed with an engaging steadfastness on the figure in front of him as though he knew that if he looked to the right or left he would give himself away altogether. Stonehouse could almost hear his voice, high-pitched and boyish.

"Oh, I say, Robert, isn't it wonderful—isn't she splendid?"

Stonehouse himself stood right across their path. It was accidental, and now he could not move. He had grown to rely too much on his emotional inaccessibility, and the violence and suddenness of his anger transfixed him. This woman had trapped Cosgrave. She had caught him in the dangerous moment of convalescence—in that rebound from inertia which carries men to an excess incredible to their normal conscience. And she was infamous. She had broken one man after another.

She could not have overlooked Stonehouse. Apart from his conspicuous clothes, his immobility and white-set face must have inevitably drawn her attention to him. Her eyes, very blue and shadowless, met his stare with a kind of bonhomie—almost a Masonic understanding—and the uncompromising antagonism that replied seemed to check her. She hesitated, then as he at last stood back, passed on still smiling, but mechanically, as though something had surprised her into forgetting why she smiled.

Cosgrave followed her. He brushed against Stonehouse without recognition.

In that moment Stonehouse's anger ran away with him. Thrusting aside the protests of a puzzled and rather frightened waiter he chose a table that faced them both. Cosgrave, blindly absorbed, never looked towards him, but twice she met his eyes, still with a faintly puzzled amusement, as though every moment she expected to penetrate a mask of crude enmity to a no less crude admiration and desire. Then she spoke to Cosgrave laughingly, as Stonehouse knew, with the light curiosity of a woman who has met something tantalizingly novel, and Cosgrave turned, uttered an exclamation, and a moment later came across. He acted like a man suffering from aphasia. He seemed totally oblivious of the immediate past. They might have been casual friends who had met casually. He was radiant.

"What luck your being here. I didn't know you went in for frivolity of this sort—if you call it frivolous dining in solitary state. Come over and join us. We're just having a bite before the show. You remember Mademoiselle Labelle, don't you?"

Stonehouse nodded assent. He left his table at once. He seemed frigidly composed, but he was sure that she would not be deceived. She knew too much about men—that was her business—and she meant to pay him out, make him seem crude and absurd in his own eyes.

"It's Stonehouse—my old friend—I was telling you about him—we don't need to introduce you,

Mademoiselle."

She gave him her hand, palm down, to kiss, and he turned it over deliberately. The fingers were loaded to the knuckles. He reflected that each of these stones had its history, tragic, comic or merely sordid. He let her hand drop. He saw that the affront had not touched her. Perhaps others had begun like that.

"*Ce cher docteur*—'e don't like me," she complained pathetically to Cosgrave. "'E sit opposite to me and glare like a 'ungry tiger. Believe me, I grow quite cold with fear. Tell me why you don't like me, Monsieur?"

"He was only wanting to be asked," Cosgrave broke in with his high, excited laugh. "Why, he introduced us. I was all down and out—couldn't decide which bridge to chuck myself off from—and he lugged me into your show. He said——"

"Well, what 'e say?"

Cosgrave blushed.

"He said: 'Let's see what going to the devil can do for you.'"

She jerked a jewelled thumb at him, appealing to Stonehouse.

"'E 'as cheek, that young man. 'E send in 'is card to my dressing-room, saying 'e got to meet me. *Comme ca*! As though anyone could just walk in! I was curious to see a young man with cheek like that. So I let 'im come. *Et nous voila*!" She leant across to Stonehouse, speaking confidentially, earnestly. "But you—*c'est autre chose—monsieur est bien range*—an artist perhaps for all that—'e see me dance and think perhaps, '*Voyons*—she cannot dance at all—nor sing—nor nozzings. Just enjoy 'erself.' You think I don't deserve all I get, *hein*?"

"I think," said Stonehouse smiling, "that there are others in your profession less fortunate, Mademoiselle."

As, for instance, that woman in the hospital—Frances Wilmot's protegee. Queer how the memory of that ruined, frightened face peering over the bed-clothes and begging for life should come back to him after eight years. And yet the connexion was obvious enough. He looked at Mademoiselle Labelle with a new interest. It was impossible that she should have read his thoughts, but he knew by the little twist of her red mouth that she had understood his insult. She seemed to ponder over it dispassionately.

"That's true—*c'est bien vrai, ca*. I 'ave been lucky. I shall always be lucky. Everybody knows that. They say: 'Our Gyp, she will 'ave a good time at 'er funeral.' No, no. Monsieur Rufus, I will not drink. If I drink I might dance—'ere on this table—and ze company is so ver' respectable. Listen." She laid her hand on Stonehouse's arm as unconsciously as though he had been an old friend. "Listen. They play ze 'Gyp Gal-lop.' That is because I am 'ere. Ze conductor, 'e know me—he like 'is leetle joke. *C'est drole*—every time I 'ear it played I want to get up and dance and dance——" She hummed under her breath, beating time with her cigarette.

"I'm Gyp Labelle;
If you dance with me. . . ."

Obviously she knew that the severely elegant men and women on either hand watched her with a covert, chilly hostility. But there was something oddly simple in her acceptance of their attitude. Therein, no doubt, lay some of her power. She was herself. She didn't care. She was too strong. She had ruined people like that—people every whit as hostile, and self-assured, and respectable—and had gone free without a scratch. She could afford to laugh at them, to ignore them, as it pleased her.

(And what would Frances Wilmot with her wrong-headed toleration, have urged in extenuation? A hard life, perhaps? Stonehouse smiled ironically at himself. The old quarrel was like an ineradicable drop of poison in the blood.)

She smoked incessantly. She ate very little. And as time went on she seemed to draw away from the two men into a kind of secret ecstasy of enjoyment like some fierce animal scenting freedom. The sentences she dropped were shallow, impatient, even stupid. And yet there was Rufus Cosgrave with his hungry eyes fixed on her, trapped by the nameless force that lay behind her triviality, her daring commonness.

She rose to go at last.

"And you take him with you, *Monsieur le docteur*. If 'e sit many more nights in ze front row 'e find

out, too, I can't dance, and then I break my 'eart. Besides, I 'ave my reputation to think of in this ver' propaire England, *hein*?"

"I'm coming with you," Cosgrave said quietly.

She shrugged her shoulder.

"*Eh bien*, what can I do? They are all ze same. Good-bye, *Monsieur le docteur*. You scare me stiff. But I like you. Nest time I 'ave ze tummy-ache I ring you up.

"I shouldn't—if I were you."

"Why? You give me poison, p'raps?"

"I might," he said.

II

1

So Rufus Cosgrave disappeared, like an insignificant chip of wood sucked into a whirlpool, and this time Stonehouse made no attempt to plunge in after him. With other advanced and energetic men of his profession he stood committed to a new enterprise—the creation of a private hospital, which was to be a model to the hospitals of the world—and he had no time to waste on a fool who wanted to ruin himself. But though he never thought of Cosgrave, he could not altogether forget him. At night he found himself turning instinctively towards the window where the delicate, rather plaintive profile had shown faintly against the glow of the streets, and the empty frame caused him a sense of unrest, almost of insecurity, as though a ghost had risen to convince him that the dead are never quite dead, and then had vanished.

He took to returning to his consulting-rooms, where he regained his balance and his normal outlook. The sober reality of the place thrust ghosts out-of-doors. Here was no lingering shadow of poverty to recall them. The bright, cold instruments in their glass cases, the neatly ordered japanned tables, the cunning array of lights were there to remind him that he was a man who had made a record career for himself and who was going farther. In the day-time he took them as a matter of course, but now he regarded them rather solemnly. He went from one to another, handling them, testing them, switching the lights of special electrical devices on and off, like a boy with a new and serious plaything. There was no one to laugh at him, and he did not laugh at himself. He stood in the midst of his possessions, a little insolently, with his head up, as though he were calling them up one by one to bear him witness. He was self-made. He had torn his life out of the teeth of circumstance. There was not an instrument, not a chair or table in the lofty, dignified room that he had not paid for with sweat and sacrifice and deprivation. No one had given him help that he had not earned. Even in himself he had been handicapped. The boy he had been had wanted things terribly—silly, useless, gaudy things that would have ruined him as they had ruined his father. He remembered how in the twilight of Acacia Grove he had listened to the music of far-off processions, and had longed to run to meet them and march with the jolly, singing people, and how once it had all come true, and he had lied and stolen.

Once only. Then he had stamped temptation under foot. He had become master of himself. And now he was not tempted any more by foolish desires. He meant to do work that would put him in the front rank of big men.

And, thinking of the old struggle, he threw out his hand, as he had done that night when he had met Francey Wilmot, and clenched the slender, powerful fingers as though he had life by the throat, smiling a little in the cold, rather cruel way that Cosgrave knew—a theatrical gesture, had it been less passionately sincere.

It was in his consulting-room that Cosgrave found him after a prolonged, muddle-headed search that had lasted till close on midnight. Cosgrave himself was drunk—less with wine than with a kind of heady exhilaration that made him in turn maudlingly sentimental or recklessly hilarious. And yet there was a definite and serious purpose in his coming—a rather pathetic desire to "put himself right," to get Stonehouse, who leant against the mantleshelf watching him with a frank contempt, to understand and sympathise.

"Of course—you're mad with me—you've got every right to be—it was a rotten thing to do—bolting like that—beastly ungrateful and inconsiderate. It was just because I couldn't explain. I knew you thought it was the fresh air and—and hunting down those poor jolly little beggars—and all the time it was just a girl and a blessed tune running through my head."

He began to hum, beating time with tipsy solemnity, and even then the wretched song brought something riotous and headlong into the subdued room.

The door seemed to have been flung violently open with an explosive gesture, as though some invisible showman had called out: "Look who's here!" and the woman herself had catherine-wheeled into their midst, standing there in her exotic gorgeousness, with her arms spread out in salutation and her mouth parted in that rather simple smile. Robert could almost smell the faint perfume that surrounded her like a cloud. It was ridiculous—yet for the moment she was so real, that he could have taken her by the shoulders and thrust her out.

"And you did want me to get better, didn't you?" Cosgrave pleaded wistfully, "even if it wasn't with your medicine. And in a sort of way it was your medicine, wasn't it? You made me go to see her."

Stonehouse had to sit down and pretend to rearrange his papers in order to hide how impatient he felt.

"My professional vanity isn't wounded, if that's what you're getting at. If you were better I'd be very glad. As far as I can see you're only drunk."

"I know—a little—I'm not accustomed to it—but it's not that, Robert. Really, it isn't. I'm jolly all—the time—even in the early morning. Seem to have come back to life from a beastly long way off—all at once—by special aeroplane. I don't think I've felt like this since—since——"

"Since Connie Edwards' day," Robert suggested. "But I expect you've forgotten her."

Cosgrave stared, round-eyed and open-mouthed and foolish.

"Connie——? No—I haven't. You bet I haven't. Often wonder what became of her. She was a jolly good sort."

"You didn't think so by the time she'd finished with you."

"I was an ass. A giddy, hysterical ass. I didn't understand. Poor old Connie! She could just swim for herself—but not for both of us. And I scared her stiff—tying myself round her neck like that."

Stonehouse cut him short.

"Nobody could accuse Mademoiselle Labelle of being a poor swimmer," he said. (He wondered at the same moment whether there was something wrong with him. He was so intently conscious of her. He could see her lounging idly in the big chair opposite, so damnably sure of herself and amused. He wanted to insult and, if possible, hurt her.)

"You're awfully down on people, Robert. Hard on 'em. Often wonder why you haven't chucked me off long ago. But that's an old story. You ought to like her for being able to swim well. It's what you do yourself."

"I don't mind her swimming well," Robert returned. "But I understand that she's been able to drown quite a number of people better able to look after themselves than you are. As far as you're concerned, it seems—rather a pity."

Cosgrave shook his head. A certain quiet obstinacy, not altogether that of intoxication, came into his flushed face. And yet he looked sorry and almost ashamed.

"I'm not going to drown. You know—I hate standing out against you, Robert. You've been so—so jolly decent to me—and I believe in you—more than in anything in the world. Always have done. If you said 'the earth's square,' I'd say, 'Why, yes, so it is—old chap!' But this—this is different—it's like a dog eating grass—a sort of instinct."

"Instinct!" Robert echoed ironically. "If you know where most instincts lead to——" He stopped, and then went on in a cold, matter-of-fact tone, as though he were diagnosing a disease. "It's not my business—but since you've come here I'd be interested to hear what you think is going to be the end of it all. I might persuade you to look facts in the face. By position you're a little suburban nobody, who was pushed out to West Africa to become a third-rate little trader. You've survived, and you've got a little money to burn. To you it seems a fortune. But it won't pay this woman's cigarette bills. She makes

you ridiculous."

"I am ridiculous," Cosgrave interrupted patiently. "I always have been, you know. I expect I always shall be. I'm the square peg in the round hole—and that's always comic. But she doesn't laugh at me. She's just let me join in like a good sport. I know I'm out of place, too, among her smart pals—you needn't rub it in—but she doesn't seem to make any difference, I might be the smartest of the lot. I tell you, when I think of the good times I've had, I feel—I feel"—absurd and drunken tears came into his eyes—"as though I were in church—I'm so awfully grateful."

"Her smart pals pay pretty dearly for their good times. It will be time to be grateful when she's had enough of you." It escaped him against his will. He knew the futility of such taunts which seemed to betray an anger too senseless to be admitted. He did not care enough to be angry.

"You—you don't understand, old chap. Seems cheek—my saying that to you. But you're not like other people—you don't need the things they have to have to keep going. And, anyhow, she's not responsible for the asses men make of themselves." He was becoming more fuddled as the warmth of the room closed over his wine-heated brain. But his eyes had changed. They had narrowed to two twinkling slits of gay secretiveness. "More things in heaven and earth than you dream of, old chap. But you don't dream, do you? Never did. Got your teeth into facts—diseases—and getting on—and all that. What's a song and a dance to you? But I wish you liked her, all the same. P'raps you do, only you won't own up. She liked you, you know. Fact is, it was she sent me along to dig you out."

At that Stonehouse was caught up sharply out of his indifference. He flushed and thrust his hands into his pockets to prevent them from clenching themselves in absurd resentment.

"What do you mean?"

Cosgrave nodded. But he looked suddenly confused and rather sulky, like a play-tired child who has been shaken out of its sleep to be cross-examined.

"Well—some people would be jolly flattered. There's to be a big beano on her birthday—a supper party behind the scenes—and she said: 'You bring along your nice, sad, little friend—*ce pauvre jeune homme*.' You know, Stonehouse, it made me laugh, her describing you like that. I said: 'You don't need to be sorry for Robert Stonehouse. He can keep his own end up as well as anybody.' But she said: '*Ce pauvre jeune homme*.' I couldn't get her to see you were a damned lucky fellow." He dropped back into the corner of the chesterfield and yawned and stretched himself. "I want you to come too. Do you good. P'raps she's right. P'raps you've had a rotten time in your own way. Though I don't know—I'd be happy enough, if I were you—always seem to come out on top—not to care for any damn thing on earth, except that—not even Francey Wilmot—or even me—just a sort of pug-dog you trailed behind on the end of a string—a sort of mascot."

He was going to sleep. He waggled his arm feebly, groping for Stonehouse. "Say you'll come. I'd be awfully proud—show you off, you know. Always was—awfully proud—have such a pal."

He was the very figure of stupid intoxication as he lay there with his crumpled evening clothes and disordered hair—and yet not ugly either, but in some way innocent and simple. (Robert could see little Rufus Cosgrave, excited and tired out after the chase to the Greatest Show in Europe, peering through the disguise of rowdy manhood.)

Stonehouse threw a rug over him, resigning himself to the inevitable. But when he had switched off the main lights he gave an involuntary glance over the suddenly shadowed room as though to make sure that the darkness had exorcised an alien and detestable presence.

So she was sorry for him. That, at any rate, was amusing. Or perhaps she thought he was afraid of her in the obscure duel that was being fought out between them.

Cosgrave caught hold of him as he passed.

"The end of it all will be that I'll go back to my old swamp and tell the fellows that I've had a first-rate leave. I'll tell 'em about her, and they'll sit round open-mouthed—thinking I'm no end of a dog—and that they'll do the same next time they get a chance. They'll be awfully bucked to hear there's a good time going after all." He pleaded drowsily: "Say you'll come though, Robert. You're such a brick. I'm beastly fond of you, you know."

Robert Stonehouse withdrew his hand sharply from the hot, moist clasp. (How he had run that night! As though the devil had been after him instead of poor breathless little Cosgrave with his innocent confession.)

"Oh, I'll come," he said.

2

After all, nothing changed very much. Grown-up people masqueraded. They pretended to laugh at the young fools they had been and were still behind the elaborate disguise of adult reasonableness and worldly wisdom. For Robert Stonehouse, at any rate, it was ridiculously the old business over again—children whose games he despised and could not play, despising him.

It seemed that she had invited everyone and anyone whose name had come into her head, without regard for taste or sense, and the result, half raffish and half brilliant, somehow justified her. The notable and notorious men there, the bar-loungers whose life gave them a look of almost pathetic imbecility, the women of fashion and the too fashionable ladies of the chorus had, at least temporarily, accepted some common denominator. They rubbed shoulders in the stuffy, dingy, green-room with an air of complete good-fellowship.

Robert Stonehouse stood alone among them, for nothing in his life had prepared him to meet them. He had been accustomed to encounter and master significant hardship, not an apparently meaningless luxury and aimless pleasure. He knew how to deal with men and women whose sufferings put them in his power or with men of his own profession, but these people with their enigmatic laughter, their Masonic greetings, almost their own language (which was the more troubling since it seemed his very own), threw him from his security. They made him self-conscious and self-distrustful. They might be ten times more worthless than he believed them to be, and he might be ten times a bigger man than the Robert Stonehouse who had made such a good thing of his life. They had still the power to put him in the wrong and to make him an oaf and an outsider. And they knew it. He felt their glances slide over him furtively and a little mockingly. Yet outwardly he conformed to them. He wore his clothes well enough, and his self-control covered over his real distress with a rather repellent arrogance. He was even handsome, as a plain man can become handsome whose mind has dominated from the start over a fine body. And with this air of power went his flagrant youthfulness.

But the girl standing next him dropped him a flippant question with veiled irony and dislike in her stupid eyes, and turned away from him before he answered. She was a vulgar, garish little creature, and he could afford to smile satirically (and perhaps too consciously) at the powdered shoulder which she jerked up at him. And yet he was deeply, miserably shamed.

It was like a play in which he was the only one who did not know his part. Even Cosgrave played up—a little too triumphantly, showing off—as a tried man-of-the-world. And at her given moment the star performer made a dramatic entry into the midst of them, a cloak of pale blue brocade thrown over her scanty dress and her plumes still tossing from the elaborately tousled head.

They greeted her with hand-clapping and laughter, and she held out her thin arms, embracing them as old friends. In her attitude and in her eyes which passed rapidly from one to another, there was good-humoured understanding. She knew probably what the more immaculate among them thought of her, and that they were there to boast about it as English people boast of having visited Montmartre at midnight. It was daring and amusing to be at this woman's notorious dinners. They thought they patronized her, whatever else they knew. But in reality the joke was on her side.

"*Allons*—to ze feast, friends."

She had seen Robert Stonehouse, and she went straight to him, waving the rest aside like a flock of importunate pigeons, and took his arm. "You and I lead the way, *Monsieur le docteur*."

He did not answer. He was glad that she had signalled him out. It smoothed his raw pride. And yet he thought: "This is her way of making fun of me." And he hated her and the scented warmth of her slim body as it brushed lightly against his. He hated his own excited triumph. For the first time he became aware of something definitely abnormal in himself, as though a dead skin had been stripped off his senses and he had begun to see and hear with a primitive and stupefying clearness.

The rest followed them noisily along grimy, winding passages and between dusty wedges of improbable landscapes out on to the stage. A long table had been laid in the midst of the stereotyped drawing-room, which formed the scene of her grotesque dancing, and absurdly elaborate waiters in powdered hair and knee-breeches hovered in the wings. They were not real waiters, and from the moment they came out into the footlights the guests themselves became the chorus of a musical comedy. It was difficult to believe in the over-abundant flowers with which the table was strewn or in the champagne lying ostentatiously in wait.

The curtain had been left up, and the dim and dingy auditorium gaped dismally at them. The empty seats were threatening as a silent, starving mob pressed against the windows of a feasting-house. But the woman on Stonehouse's arm waved to them.

"I like it so. I see all my friends there—my old friends who are gone—God knows where. They sit and laugh and clap and nod to one another. They say: '*Voyons*, our Gyp still 'aving a good time.' And I kiss my 'and to them all."

She kissed her hand and threw her head back in the familiar movement as though she waited for their applause. And when it was over she looked up into Robert Stonehouse's face.

"*Monsieur le docteur* is a leetle pale. One is always nervous at one's debut. You never act before, *hein*?"

"Not in a theatre like this," he said.

And he felt a momentary satisfaction because she knew that his answer had a meaning which she did not understand.

She persisted.

"Monsieur Cosgrave say you would not come. To say you never do nothing—only work and work. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"Don't dance—don't go to the theatre—don't love no one—don't get a leetle drunk sometimes? Never, never?"

"No," he said scornfully.

"Don't want to, *hein*?"

"I hate that sort of thing."

(But she was making him into a ridiculous prig. She turned the values of life topsy-turvy with that one ironic, good-natured gesture.)

"*Eh, bien*, it's a good thing for my sort there are not too many of your sort, my friend. But per'aps it is not quite so bad as it seems, for you 'are come after all."

"I had to," he thrust at her.

"'Ow you say—professionally?"

"Yes."

"But I 'ave not get ze tummy-ache—not yet."

"I don't care about you."

"You want to look after your leetle friend, *hein*?"

"Yes."

She was unruffled—even concerned to satisfy him.

"Well, then, you be policeman. You sit 'ere. It is always better to watch ze thief than ze *coffre-fort*. You keep an eye on me and see I don't run away with 'im. *Voyons, mesdames et messieurs*, our friend 'ere 'ave the place of honour. 'E sit next me and see I behave nice. 'E don't like me ver' much. 'E think me a bad woman."

They laughed with her and at him. He felt himself colour up and try to laugh back. (And it was oddly like his attempt to propitiate Form I when it had gibed him on that bitter pilgrimage from desk to desk.) He took his place at her right hand. He could see Cosgrave half-way down the table, and his thin, freckled face with its look of absurd happiness. He was unselfishly overjoyed that his friend should have been thus signalled out for honour. Perhaps he harboured some crazy certainty that after this Stonehouse would understand and even share his infatuation. He caught Robert's eye and smiled and nodded triumphantly.

"Now you see what she's really like, don't you?"

A string band, hidden in the orchestra under a roof of palms, played the first bars of her dance, and then stopped short and waited solemnly. She still stood, glass in hand.

"It is my birthday. God and I alone know which one. I drink to myself. I wish myself good luck. *Vive* myself. *Vive* Gyp Labelle and all who 'ave loved 'er and love 'er and shall love 'er!"

She drank her wine to the last drop, and the band began to play again, knitting the broken, noisy congratulations into a kind of triumphal chorus. It was very crude and theatrical and effective. It did not matter, any more than it matters in a well-acted play, that the whole incident had been rehearsed. It was as calculated and as spontaneous as that nightly, irresistible burst of laughter.

Rufus Cosgrave stood up shyly in his place. Had he been dressed a shade less perfectly and resisted the gardenia in his button-hole, he would have been better disguised. As it was, there could be no mistaking a little fellow from the suburbs who had got into bad company. And in spite of the West Africa swamp and its peculiar forms of despairing vice, he was so frightfully innocent that he did not know it,

"And—and we're here to—to wish you luck too—that you go on—as you are—dancing and laughing—making us all laugh and dance with you—however down in the dumps we are—for ever and ever—and to bring you offerings—for you to remember us by."

There must have been a great deal more to it than that. Stonehouse could see the notes clenched in one tense hand, but they had become indecipherable and he let them drop. He came from his place, stumbling over the back of somebody's chair, to where she stood, and laid a small square box done up in tissue paper at her side. She laughed and caught him by the ear, and kissed him on both flaming cheeks.

"A precedent—fair play for all!" the man opposite Stonehouse shouted.

They came then, one after another, treading on each other's heels, and she waited for them, an audacious figure of Pleasure receiving custom, and kissed them, shading her kiss subtly so that each one became a secret little joke out of the past or lying in wait in the future, at which the rest could guess as they chose. Some of the women whom she knew best joined in the stream. They bore her, for the most part, an odd affinity and no ill-will. They had set out on the same road and had failed, and their failure stared out of their crudely painted faces. But perhaps they were grateful to her for not having forgotten them—or for other more obscure reasons. They gave her what they could—extemporary gifts some of them—a tawdry ring or a flower which she stuck jauntily among the outrageous feathers. The significantly small parcels she did not open—either from idle good nature or from sheer indifference. Stonehouse wondered what Cosgrave's little box contained. Probably a year or two of the mosquito-infested swamp to which he would soon return to boast of this night's extravaganza.

"And you, *Monsieur le docteur*?"

For he had gone on eating and drinking with apparent tranquillity.

"Oh, I have nothing—nothing but admiration," he said smiling.

She shook her head.

"*Ca ne va pas*. The chief guest. Ah, no! That is not kind. A birthday—*c'est une chose bien serieuse, voyons*. Who knows? Per'aps you never 'ave another chance—and then you 'ave remorse—'orrible, terrible remorse. Or do you never 'ave remorse either, *Monsieur le docteur*?"

"No—not yet."

"You must not run ze risk, then."

He thought savagely.

"If I had a diamond stud she would make me give it her."

He took a shilling from his pocket and laid it gravely in the midst of her trophies.

"Is that enough?"

And then before he could draw back she had kissed him between the eyes.

"*Quite*, then. I keep it for a mascot, and you will remember to-morrow morning, when you are ver' grave and important with some poor frightened patient, that Gyp Labelle kiss you last night, and that

you are not different from ze others, after all. And I will take my shilling from under my pillow, and say: 'Poor Gyp, that's what you're worth, my friend!'"

"He doesn't know you yet."

Robert Stonehouse looked up sharply. The interruption had started a new train of thought. Beyond the flushed face of the man opposite him, he could see the empty stalls, row after row of gaunt-ribbed and featureless spectators, watching him. The play had become a nightmare farce in which he had chosen a ludicrous, impossible part. But he had to go on now.

"Except for Cosgrave there, I've known Mademoiselle Labelle longer than any of you. I've known her ever since I was a boy."

He felt rather than saw their expressions change. She too stared with an arrested interest, but he looked away from her to Cosgrave, smiling ironically. If it humiliated her and made her ridiculous too—well, that was what he wanted. He wanted to pay her back—most of all for the excitement boiling in him—the sense of having been toppled out of his serenity into a torrent of noise and colour by that audacious touch of her lips upon his face. And there was Cosgrave—and then again some older score to be paid off—something far off and indistinct that would presently come clear.

"Don't you remember, Rufus?"

"Rather. But I know you a minute longer, Mademoiselle. I saw you before he did."

"That was because Mademoiselle Moretti rode first."

"Ah—the Circus!" She threw her head back, drawing a deep breath through her nostrils as though she savoured some long-lost perfume blown in upon her by a sudden wind. "Now I remember too. Ze good Moretti. She ride old Arabesque. 'E 'ave white spots all over 'im—on 'is chest and what you call 'is paws, and every evening she 'ave to paint 'im like she paint 'er face. Madame Moretti—that was a good sort—*bonne enfant*—what you say?—domestic—not really of ze Circus at all. She like to wash up and cook leetle *bonnes-bouches* for supper. She was a German—Fredechen we call 'er—and she could make Sauerkraut—*eh bien*, I—*moi qui vous parle—une bonne Francaise*—I make myself sick with 'er Sauerkraut. Afterwards she grow too stout and marry ze *proprietaire* of what you call it?—a public-'ouse—'Ze Crown and Garter' at some town where we stop a week. By now, I think she 'ave many children and a chin for each."

Cosgrave laughed noisily.

"Didn't I tell you, Robert? A barmaid!"

"Yes—you had better taste." But he was hot with anger. "And then you came at her heels, Mademoiselle. You rode—what was it—a donkey, a fat pony? I forget which. Perhaps I was thinking too much of Madame Moretti. But I remember you were dressed as a page and wore coloured tights that didn't fit very well, and that everybody laughed because of your thin long legs. And you threw kisses to us—even Cosgrave got one, didn't you, Cosgrave? And then I'm afraid I forgot you altogether. You see, there were camels and elephants and a legless Wonder and I don't know what, and it was my first circus."

"It must 'ave been a donkey," she said, narrowing her eyes. "I 'ave ridden so many donkeys."

He saw then that she did not mind at all the fact that she had once been a circus-clown. Rather he had tossed her a memory on which she feasted joyfully, almost greedily. She pushed her plate and glass away from her, and sat with her face between her hands.

"Well—I 'ave 'ad good times always—but per'aps they were ze best of all. Ah, ze good old Circus—ze jolly life—one big family—monkeys and bears and camels and elephants and we poor 'umans, all shapes and sizes, long legs and short legs and no legs—loving and quarrelling—good friends always—Monsieur George with 'is big whip and 'is silly soft 'eart—ze gay dinners after we 'ave 'ad full 'ouse and ze no dinners at all when things go bad—and then ze journeys from town to town—sometimes it rain all day and sometimes it is so hot and the dust rise up and smother us. But always when we come near ze town we brighten up, we pretend we are not tired at all. We make jokes and wonder what it will be like 'ere. Always new faces—new streets—new policemen—and always ze same too—ze long procession and ze torchlights and ze music and ze people running like leetle streams down ze side streets to join up and march along—ze leetle boys and girls with bright eyes—shouting and waving, so glad to see us."

It was not much that she said, and she did not say it to them. She disregarded them all, and yet by some magic, through the medium of the jerky, empty sentences she made them see the vulgar, gaudy

thing as she was seeing it. The subdued music, the tinkling of plates and glasses, they themselves made a background for her swift picture. They watched it—the old third-rate circus—trail its cheap glitter and flare and bang out of darkness and across the stage and into darkness again—tawdry and sordid, and yet kindly and gay and gallant-hearted too.

Robert Stonehouse stared heavily in front of him. He had drunk—not much, but too much. He was not accustomed to drinking. The very austerity of his life betrayed him. These people too—these women—half-naked with their feverish, restless eyes—these men with their air of cynical and weary knowledge—were getting on his nerves. He wished he had not come. He wished he had not reminded her of that accursed circus, for it had involved remembering. He had called up a little old tune that would not be easily forgotten, that would go on grinding itself round and round inside his brain, and when he had chased it out would come back, popping out at him, bringing other small, pale ghosts to bear it company. He could see Cosgrave and himself—the little boys with bright eyes—and feel the reverberations of their astonishment, their incredulous delight. For a moment they had held fast to the tail-end of the jolly marching procession, and then it had been ripped out of their feeble hands. But the procession went on. It was always there, round the corner, with its music and fluttering lights, and if one was infirm of purpose like Cosgrave, or like a certain James Stonehouse, one ran to meet it, flung oneself into it, not counting the cost, lying and stealing.

He heard her voice again and pressed his hands to his hot eyes like a man struggling back out of a deep sleep.

"Where are they all now? *Dieu sait*. Monsieur Georges 'e die. As for me I go 'ome to ze old Folies Bergeres, and for six months I wait—a leetle ugly nobody with long thin legs dancing with ten other ugly leetle nobodies with all sorts of legs be'ind La Jolleta. You don't remember 'er, '*hein*! Ah, *c'est vieux jeu ca* and you are all too young, *Mesdames et Messieurs*. She was ze passion of your grandpapas. God knows why. Why do you all love me, *hein*? *Une Mystere*. Well, she was ver' old then, but she 'ave ze good 'ealth and ze thick skin of ze rhinoceros. And some'ow no one 'ave ze 'eart to tell 'er. It become a sort of joke—'ow long she keep going—ze Boulevards make bets about it. But for me it is no joke. I am in a 'urry, *moi*, and I know I can do better than she did ever—I 'ave something—'ere—'ere—that she never 'ave. And so one night I put a leetle pinch of something that a good friend of mine give me in La Jolleta's champagne what she drink before she dance, and when ze call-boy come she lie there on ze sofa—'er mouth open—*comme ca*—snoring—like a pink elephant asleep—'ow you say—squiffy—dead to ze world. Ze manager 'e tear 'is 'air out, and then I come and show 'im and 'e let me go on instead because there is no one else. And the people boo and shriek at me, they are so angry and I make ze long nose at them all—and presently they laugh and laugh."

They could see her. It wouldn't have seemed even impudent. Even then she had been too sure of herself.

"And when I come off ze manager kiss me on both cheeks. *Et c'etait fait*."

They applauded joyously. Her brutal egotism was a good joke. They expected nothing else from her. She was like an animal whose cruelty and cunning one could observe without moral qualms.

"It was a mean thing to have done," Stonehouse said loudly and truculently—"a treacherous thing."

A shadow was on Cosgrave's face. He leant towards her, almost pleading.

"And La—La—what did you call her? La Jolleta—what became of her?"

She made a graphic gesture.

"She went into the sack, little one—-into the sack. She was old. One should go gracefully."

"You too," Stonehouse said, in a savage undertone.

"I—— Oh, no, *jamais, jamais*." She lifted the monstrous crest of plumage from her head and set it in the midst of the flowers and rumpled up her hair till she was like the child riding the fat pony. "You see yourself—I never grow old, my friend."

"You are older already," he persisted.

But the man opposite broke in again. He leant towards Stonehouse, his inflamed eye through the staring monocle fixing him with an extraordinary tipsy earnestness.

"No, doctor, you are mis-mistaken. It would be intolerable—you understand—quite intolerable. There are things that—that must not be true—as there are other things that must be true. We've staked our last penny on it, sir, and we've got to win. Mademoiselle here knows all about it, and she'll play the

game. A sport, doctor, a sport. Won't let old friends go bankrupt—no—certainly not."

They laughed at him. It seemed unlikely that he himself knew what he was talking about. But he shook his head and remained sunk in solemn meditation, twirling the stem of his glass between thick, unsteady fingers. The girl next him nudged him disgustedly.

"Oh, wake up! You'll be crying in a minute. Talk of something else."

"Tell us the story of the Duke and the Black Opal, Gyp."

She waved them off.

"No—no—that is not discreet. One must not tell tales. That might frighten someone 'ere who loves me."

And she looked at Stonehouse, a little malicious and insolently, childishly sure. He leant towards her, speaking in an undertone, trying to stare her down.

"Do you mean me, Mademoiselle?"

"And why not, *Monsieur le docteur*? Would it be so strange? You say you love nobody. But it seems you love ze poor fat Moretti—terribly, terribly, no doubt, so that you almost break your small 'eart for 'er. And per'aps someone else too. You say you don't drink—but you are just a leetle drunk already. You are not different from ze rest. I tell you that before—and I know. I am a connoisseur. It is written—'ere in the eyes and in the mouth. It is dangerous, the way you live. *Quant a moi*—I don't want you, my friend—we two—that would be an eruption—a disaster—I should be afraid."

She pretended to shudder, and a moment later seemed to forget him altogether. She pressed her cigarette out on her plate and went over to the piano, touching Cosgrave lightly on the shoulder as she passed him.

"Come, my latest best-beloved, we 'ave to amuse ze company. We sing our leetle song together."

But first she made a deep low bow to the shadowy theatre. She kissed her fingers to the empty boxes that stared down at her with hollow, mournful eyes. (Were there ghosts there too, Stonehouse wondered bitterly? The unlucky Frederick, perhaps, with the fatal hole gaping above the temple, applauding, leaning towards her!)

She sang worse than usual. She was hoarse, and what voice she had gave way altogether. It did not seem to matter either to her or to anyone else. What she could not sing she danced. There was a chorus and they joined in filling the gloom behind them with sullen, ironic echoes. She reduced them all, Stonehouse thought, to the cabaret from which she sprang.

And it was comic to see Cosgrave with his head thrown back, playing the common, noisy stuff as though inspired.

When it was over he swung round, gaping at them with drunken, confidential earnestness.

"You know, when I was a kid I used to see myself—on a stage like this—playing the Moonlight Sonata."

She rumpled up his thick hair so that it stood on end like Loga's names.

"You play my song ver' nice. And that is much better than playing ze
Moonlight Sonata all wrong, my leetle friend."

3

It was a sort of invisible catastrophe.

No one else knew of it. In the day-time he himself did not believe in it—did not, at first, think of it at all. It had all the astonishing unreality of past pain. He went his way as usual, was arbitrary and cocksure with his patients, and looked forward to the evening when he could put them out of his mind altogether and give himself to his vital work. For the hospital had become a fact. It stood equipped and occupied, an unrecognized but actual witness to his tenacity. Other men would get the credit. The Committee who had appointed him consulting surgeon, not without references to his unusual youth and their own daring break with tradition—had no suspicion that even the fund which, in a fit of inexplicable far-seeingness they had allotted to research, had been created under his ceaseless

pressure. And not even in his thoughts was he satirical at their expense. They had provided the money and done what he wanted and so served their purpose. Among his old colleagues he bore himself confidently but unobtrusively. He could afford to pay them an apparent deference. He was going farther than they were. His eyes were fixed on a future far beyond the centres of their jealousies and ambitions when he would be freed from the wasteful struggle with petty ailments and petty people, and the last pretence of being concerned with individual life. It was a time of respite and revision. He was young—in his profession extraordinarily young—and he was able to look back, as a mountaineer looks back from his first peep over the weary foothills, knowing that the bitter drudgery is past and that before him lies the true and splendid adventure.

That was in the day-time. But with the dusk, the discreet shutting of doors and the retreating steps of the last patient, a change came. It was like the subtle resistless withdrawal of a tide—a draining away of power. He could do nothing against it. He could only sit motionless, bowed over his papers, striving to keep a hold over the personality that was slipping from him. And then into the emptiness there flowed back slowly, painfully, a strange life—a stream choked and muddied at its source—breaking through.

It was a physical thing. Some sort of nervous reaction. With the dread of that former break-down overshadowing him he yielded deliberately. He would leave the house and walk—anywhere—but always where there were people—down Regent Street, sweeping like a broad river into a fiery, restless lake. There he let go altogether, and the crowds carried him. He eddied with them in the glittering backwaters of the theatres, and studied the pallid, jaded faces that drifted in and out of the lamp-light with the exaggerated attention of a mind on guard against itself. He hated it all. It emphasized and justified his aloofness from the mass of men. These people were sick and ugly—sicklier and uglier in their pleasure-seeking than in their stubborn struggle for survival, which had at least some elemental dignity. It was from their poisoned lives that women like Gyp Labelle sucked their strength. It was their childish perverted instincts that made her possible. They made the very thought of immorality a grisly joke. And yet their nearness, the touch of their ill-grown, ill-cared-for, or grossly over-nurtured bodies against his, the sound of their nasal strident voices brought him relief. He could not shake off their fascination for him. He was like a man hanging round the scene of some conquered, unforgotten vice.

It was one dismal November evening that, turning aimlessly into a Soho side-street, he came upon an old man who stood on a soap-box under a lamp and preached. He held a Bible to the light and read from it, and at intervals leant forward and beat the tattered book with his open hand.

"You hear that, men and women. This is the liar, the tyrant, the self-confessed devil whom you have worshipped from the beginning of your creation. You see for yourselves the sort of beast he is. There isn't a brute amongst us who would do the things he's done. He's made you fight and kill and torture each other for his sake. And all down the ages he has laughed at you—he is laughing now because, after all—he knows the truth—he knows what I tell you here night after night"—and Mr. Ricardo leant forward and pointed a long, dirty finger at the darkness—"that he doesn't exist—that he is a dream—a myth—a hope——"

Someone cheered—perhaps because the last words had a sound of eloquent conclusion—and Mr. Ricardo nodded and took breath. He was like a scarecrow image that had been stuck up by a freakish joker in a London street. The respectability that still clung to him made him the more ludicrous. His clothes were the ruined cast-offs of a middle-class tradesman, and over them he wore his old masters gown. It did not flutter out behind now, but lay dank and heavy along his sides like the wings of a shot bird.

Robert Stonehouse stood back against the shuttered windows of a shop and stared at him. The sea, rushing out in some monstrous tidal wave had left its floor littered with old wreckage, with dead, forgotten people who stirred and lifted themselves. A grotesque, private resurrection. . . .

The crowd around Mr. Ricardo listened in silence, not mocking him. There were wide-eyed, haunted-looking children, and men and women not quite sober who drifted out from the public-houses to gape heavily at this cheaper form of entertainment. Possibly they thought he was some missionary trying to induce them to sign the pledge. Some of them must have known that he was mad. But even they did not laugh at him. Into their own dark and formless thoughts there may have come the dim realization that they, too, were misshapen and outcast. The rain falling in long, slanting lines through the dingy lamplight seemed to merge them into a mournful kinship.

He spoke rapidly, and for the most part the long, involved sentences rolled themselves without meaning. But now and then something struggled clear—a familiar phrase—an ironical echo. Then Robert Stonehouse saw through the disfigurement to the man that had been—the poor maimed and shackled fighter gibing and leering at his fellow-prisoners.

"And now, my delightful and learned young friends——"

And yet he had stood up for little Robert Stonehouse in those days—had armed him, and opened doors, and made himself into a stepping-stone to the freedom he had never known. And had gone under. . . .

"That is all for tonight, men and women. I thank you for your support. You may rest assured that the fight will go on. The end is in sight, and if need be I shall lead the last attack in person."

Then he stepped down from his soap-box and swung it on to his shoulders by means of a cord, and went limping off in a strange and anxious haste.

Stonehouse pushed roughly through the dispersing, purposeless crowd and caught up with him as he was about to lose himself in a dark network of little squalid streets. He felt oddly young and diffident, for the schoolmaster is always the schoolmaster though he be mad and broken.

"Mr. Ricardo—don't you remember me?"

The old man stopped and blinked up uncertainly from under the sodden brim of his hat. His dirty claw-like hands clutched his coat together in an instinctive gesture of concealment. He seemed disturbed and even rather offended at the interruption.

"I—ah—I beg your pardon. No, I'm afraid not. It is—ah—not unnatural. You understand—I have too many supporters."

"Yes—yes—of course. But you knew me years ago when I was a boy.
Don't you remember Robert Stonehouse?"

It was evident that the name fanned some faint memory which flickered up for a moment and then went out.

"You will excuse me. It is possible. I have heard the name. But I have long since ceased to concern myself with persons. In a great struggle such as this individuals are submerged."

He walked on again, slip-slopping in his shapeless boots through the slush, his head down to the rain.

"Christine," Robert said, "don't you remember Christine?"

(He himself had not thought of her for years, and now deliberately he had conjured her up.)

Mr. Ricardo hunched his shoulders. He peered round at Stonehouse, frowning suspiciously.

"You are very persistent, sir. Are you God?"

"No."

"It is better to be quite frank with one another. Not an emissary of
God?"

"No."

He seemed only half satisfied.

"You will excuse my asking. I have to be very careful. There have been certain signs of late that the enemy is anxious to negotiate—to—ah—reach some compromise. No direct offer, you understand, but various feelers—hints—suggestions—terms of a most unscrupulous and subtle nature—traps into which a man less—ah—wary than myself might well fall. This Christine—yes—yes—I have to be on my guard."

"I have nothing to do with God," Robert said gently. "I'm a friend—on your side. I'd like to help. If I knew where you lived so that I could learn more about your work——"

But Mr. Ricardo shrank away from him.

"I don't like the sound of that. I dare say I do you an injustice, young man, but I can't afford to take risks. My headquarters are my secret."

"Well"—he tried to speak in a matter-of-fact and reasonable way—"at any rate, a general must have munition. I'd like to help financially. You can't refuse me that."

They were almost through the labyrinth of Soho and on the brink of Oxford Street. Mr. Ricardo stopped again with his hand spread out flat upon his breast in a gesture not without power and dignity.

"You think I am a failure, sir, because I go poorly dressed. You are mistaken. In the struggle that I am carrying on, outward and material things are of no account. I might have all the wealth and all the armies of the world, sir, and be further from victory than I am now. The fight is here, sir, in the spirit of man, and the weaker and poorer I become the nearer I am to the final effort. I am a fighter, sir, stripping himself—presently I shall throw off the last hindrance, and if the enemy will not show himself I shall seek him out—I shall force him to stand answer——" He broke off. The chain of white-hot coherency had snapped and left him peering about him vaguely, and a little anxiously, as though he were afraid someone had overheard him.

"It has been very difficult—there were circumstances—so many circumstances——" He sighed and finished on the toneless parrot-note of the street orator: "My next meeting will be at Marble Arch, 3 p.m., on Tuesday. Thank you for your attention, and good-night."

He lifted his hat and bowed to left and right as though to an assembled multitude. The lamp-light threw his shadow on to the grey, wet pavements, and with the soap-box perched on his shoulders it was the shadow of a huge hunchback. Then he shuffled off, and Stonehouse lost sight of him almost at once in the dripping, uncertain darkness.

He walked on mechanically, aimlessly. He was tired out and dejected beyond measure by this tragic encounter. It was not any immediate affection for the old man, who had been no more to him than a strange force driving him on for its own purposes; it was the others he had evoked—and, above all, the sense of common misfortune which no man can avert for ever. For the moment he lost faith in his own power to maintain himself against a patient and faceless Nemesis.

It was morbid—the old terrifying signs of breakdown—the pointing finger.

"Thus far and no further with your brain, Robert Stonehouse."

And then, suddenly, he found that he was in a familiar street, and, stopping short, as though from old custom, to look up. There was the finest house in Harley Street which they were to have decorated with their brass plates. If it had risen straight out of the ground at the behest of his fancy he could not have been more painfully disconcerted. He had never known before that he had avoided it. He knew it now, and the realization was like the opening of a door into a dark and unexplored chamber of his mind. He stood there shivering with cold, and wet, and weariness. Who lived there now, he wondered? The old back-numbers whom they were to have ousted so ruthlessly? Well, he could find out. Someone lived there, at any rate. He could see a light in one of the upper rooms. He crossed over and went up the steps cautiously, like a thief. All the brass plates but one had gone. That one shone brightly in the lamp-light, giving the door a one-eyed, impish look. He could read the letters distinctly, and yet he had to spell them over twice. It was as though she herself had suddenly opened the door and spoken to him.

"Frances Wilmot, M.D."

Then he turned and walked away. But at the next corner he stopped and looked up again at the lighted window. What freakish fancy had possessed her——? Perhaps she was there now. He could see her in the room that had been his enemy. And he had brief vision of himself standing there in the empty street as he had done when he had loved her so desperately, gazing up at that signal of warmth and comfort out of the depths of his own desolateness.

He said "Francey!" under his breath, ironically, as though he had uttered a child's "open-sesame!" to prove that there had never been any magic in the word. But the sound hurt him.

This time he did not look back.

Nor was there any reassurance to be found that night in the concrete justification of his life. He set himself down to work in vain. One ghost called up another. The room with its solemn, bloodless impedimenta became—not a monument to his success, but a Moloch, to whom everything had been sacrificed—the joy of life, its laughter, its colour—and Christine. And not only Christine. He had been sacrificed too.

But he saw Christine most clearly. She sat in the big arm-chair where his patients waited for his verdict. She wore the big, floppy, black hat that she had liked best, and the grey hair hung in the old untidy wisps about her face. The chair was much too big for her. Her little feet hardly touched the ground. Her hands in the darned gloves were folded gravely over the shabby bag. He could see her looking about dimly and hear the clear, small voice.

"How wonderful of you, Robert! How proud your dear father would have been!"

He fidgeted with the papers on his table, rearranging, re-sorting, desperately trying not to suffer. But he would have torn the whole place down in ruins to have remembered that he had given her one day of happiness.

Well, there had been that one day on Francey's hill—the picnic. She had liked that. The wood at the bottom, like a silent, deep, green pool—and Francey's arms about his shoulders, Francey's mouth on his, giving him kiss for kiss.

Ghosts everywhere—and no living soul who cared now whether he failed or won through, whether he suffered or was satisfied. Only Cosgrave perhaps—poor, unlucky little Cosgrave—always hunting for happiness—breaking himself against life—going to the dogs for the sake of a rotten woman.

He fell forward with his face hidden in his arms and lay there shaken by gusts of fever. They weakened gradually, and he fell asleep. And in his sleep his father drew himself up suddenly, showing his terrible white face, and clutched at little Robert Stonehouse, who skirted him and ran screaming down the dark stairs.

"You can't—you can't—you're dead. I'm grown up—I'm free—I'm not like you—you can't—you can't ——"

But the next morning he was himself again, sure and cool-headed and cool-hearted. He did not believe that he had suffered or in the recurrence of that terror.

III

1

Probably she had expected him. It must have seemed to her, so Stonehouse reflected as he followed the shrivelled old woman down a passage dim and gorgeous with an expensive and impossible Orientalism, a natural sequel to his enmity. Men did not hate her—or they did so at their peril. Then she would be most dangerous. The luckless Frederick, so the story ran, had snubbed her at a charity bazaar, and had made fun of her dancing. And he had stolen and finally shot himself for her sake. Perhaps she thought there was a sort of inevitability in this programme.

He had to wonder at and even admire the mad splendour of the place. Her taste was as crude and flamboyant as herself, but it too had escaped vulgarity which at its worst is imitative of the best, a stupid second-handness, an aggressive insolent self-distrust. She was not ashamed of what she was. She was herself all through, and she trusted herself absolutely. She wanted colour and there was colour. She wanted Greek columns in a Chinese pagoda and they were there. The house was like a temple built by a crazy architect to a crazy god, and every stick and stone in it was a fanatic's offering.

The old woman jerked her head and stood aside. Her toil-worn face with the melancholy monkey eyes was inscrutable, but Stonehouse guessed at the swift analysis he was undergoing. In his iron temper he could afford to be amused.

"Mademoiselle is within."

The room was a huge square. To make it, two floors at least of the respectable Kensington house must have been sacrificed. The walls were decorated with Egyptian frescoes and Chinese embroideries, and silk divans which might have figured in a cinema producer's idea of a Turkish harem were set haphazard on the mosaic floor. In the centre a stone fountain of the modern-primitive school and banked with flowers splashed noisily. Somehow it offered Kensington the final insult. But she had wanted it, just as she had wanted the Greek columns. There was even a certain magnificence about the room's absurdity. It was so hopelessly wrong that it attained a kind of perfection.

She herself sat on the edge of the fountain and fed a gorgeous macaw who, from his gilded perch, received her offerings with a lofty friendliness. But as Stonehouse entered she sprang up and ran to him, feeling through his pockets like an excited child.

"The poison—the poison!" she demanded.

He had to laugh.

"I forgot it," he said.

"*C'est dommage*. You 'ave not taken it yourself by any chance?"

"No—I wouldn't do that at any rate."

"*C'est vrai*. I ask—you 'ave an air *un peu souffrant*. Well, never mind. It's droll though—I think about you just when you ring up—I 'ave a damn pain—not ze tummy-ache this time—and I say: '*Le pauvre jeune homme*, 'ere is a chance for 'im to pay me out for kissing 'im when 'e don't want to be kissed.' You remember—I say I send for you one day. But ze old pain—it 'as gone now. You—'ow do you say?—you conjure it away."

"Your pains don't interest me," he said. "For one thing I don't believe you ever had any. I suppose you think a pain is the best entertainment to offer a doctor. It's thoughtful of you, but I didn't come here to be amused."

"Then I wonder what you want of me," she remarked. She went back to her place on the fountain's edge, sitting amidst the flowers and crushing them under her hands. The pose appealed to him as expressively callous, and yet it was innocent too, the pose of a child or an animal who destroys without knowledge or ill-will.

"Do people usually want things from you?" he asked.

"Always—all ze time."

"And you give so much."

She eyed him seriously.

"I give what I 'ave to give."

"And take what you can get."

"Like you, *Monsieur le docteur*."

The absoluteness of his hatred made it possible for him to laugh with her.

"My fees are fairly reasonable at any rate. I've helped some people for nothing."

"Because you love them?"

"No."

"*C'est dommage aussi*. You should love someone. It is much 'ealthier. I love everyone. Per'aps I love too much. I make experiments. You make experiments—and sometimes leetle mistakes. *Comme nous autres*. 'Ze operation was a *grand succes*—but ze patient die.' I know. Some of mine die too."

"Prince Frederick, for instance?"

She lifted the long chain of pearls about her neck and considered them dispassionately.

"That *canard*! You think 'e give me these? *Ce pauvre* Fredi! 'E couldn't 'ave given me a chain of pink coral. I could 'ave bought 'im and 'is funny little kingdom with my dress-money. 'E shoot 'imself. Well, that was 'is *affaire*. 'E 'ave no doubt explain 'imself to ze *bon Dieu*, who is particulaire about that sort of thing. As to ze old pearls—my agent 'e set that story going—*pour encourager les autres*."

"Cosgrave among them?" he suggested.

"Monsieur Cosgrave? We won't talk about 'im just now, if you please. 'E make me ver' cross. I 'ate to be cross. It is ver' difficult to 'ave a good time with English people. They are so damn thorough. When they want to go to ze devil they want to go ze whole way."

"Perhaps that's why I'm here," he said ironically.

"*Voyons—voyons, c'est ennuyeux*——" She broke off and gave a little husky, good-natured laugh. "I remember. You think me a bad woman. But I am not a bad woman at all. Ze leetle girls in ze chorus—they are sometimes bad because they want things they 'ave no right to 'ave. They are just leetle girls with nothing to give, and they want to live ze big life and they tumble into ze gutter. They are ze ginger-beer who pretend to be ze champagne. *Mais mot*—I am ze real champagne. I make things seem jolly that are not jolly at all—ze woman who sit next you at dinner—ze food—ze bills who wait for you at 'ome—life. If you take too much of me you 'ave ze 'eadache. *Enfin, ce n'est pas ma faute*. I 'ave so much

to give. I 'ave so much life. One life—one country—one 'usband is not enough. But I am not bad. If there was any sense in things they would give me an order and a nice long title—*Grande Maitresse de la Vie —Princesse de Joie*." She lifted her eyebrows at him to see whether he appreciated the joke. "Ah well—no. I talk too much about myself. Tell me instead what you think of my leetle 'ome. *C'est joli, n'cest-ce-pas*?" She waved towards the Chinese embroideries and added, with a child's absolute content: "I like it."

"I suppose you do," he retorted. "It reminds me of a quaint old custom I read about somewhere. When our early ancestors were building a particularly important house they buried a few of the less important citizens alive under the foundations. It seemed to have a beneficial influence on the building process."

She offered him her cigarette-case. She seemed to be considering his remark carefully. Suddenly she laughed out with an unfeigned enjoyment.

"I see. My victims, *hein*? You can make leetle jokes too. But why so ver' serious? I'm not burying you, am I?"

"No. You couldn't. And you're not going to bury Cosgrave. Oh—I don't want to waste my time and yours making accusations or appealing to what doesn't exist. I only want to point out to your—your business instinct that Cosgrave isn't worth burying. He's poor and he's unlucky. He won't bring you luck or anything else. Much better to let him go."

"Let 'im go? But I want 'im to go! Yesterday I would not see 'im. I didn't want to see 'im."

"That was a good reason. It's all rather late in the day, though. Two months ago Cosgrave came to England with about 3000 pounds. I know, because he told me. And now that's gone. You know where."

"I make a guess, my friend."

"He bought you presents—outrageous for a man in his position."

"Someone 'ave to buy them," she explained good-humouredly. "I don't ask about positions. It's not polite."

"Now he's at the end of his tether. He's got to go back to his job. Last night he came to my rooms for the first time for weeks. He was—was almost mad. When he first came to England he was very ill. That does not concern you. But what may concern you is that he has become dangerous. He threatened to shoot you."

"Well, before 'e know me 'e threaten to shoot 'imself. Decidedly, 'e is getting better, that young man."

Her shameless, infectious laughter caught him by the throat. He wanted to laugh too, and then thrust her empty, laughing face down into the water of her comic fountain till she died. There were people who were better dead. He had said so and it was true, in spite of Francey Wilmot and her childish sentimentality. Suddenly the woman in the hospital and this riotous houri were definitely merged into one composite figure of a mindless greed and viciousness. He clenched his hands behind his back, hiding them.

"If you would only sit down we should talk so much 'appier," she said regretfully. "You seem so far off —so 'igh up. Please sit down."

"I don't want to."

"Because you're afraid we might get jolly together, *hein*? Well, you stand up there then, and tell me something. Tell me. You don't love nobody. You are a very big, 'ard young man, who 'ave made 'is way in ze world and know 'ow rotten everybody else is. You 'ave 'ad 'ard times and 'ard times is ver' bad for everyone, except per'aps Jesus Christ, for either they go under and are broken, un'appy people, or they come out on top, and then zey are 'arder than anyone else. Well, you are ze big, 'ard young man. But you run after this leetle Monsieur Rufus as though 'e was your baby brother. Well—'e is a nice leetle fellow—but 'e is just a leetle fellow—with a soft 'eart and a soft 'ead. Not your sort. And, you're not 'is sort. 'E's frightened of you. 'E want someone who pat 'is 'ead and let 'im cry on 'is shoulder. You can't 'elp 'im—and you fuss over 'im—you come 'ere and try to put 'is 'eart *affaires* in order and it's no use at all. *C'est ridicule, enfin*."

He looked away from her, so that she should not see that this time she had struck home. She had knocked the weapon out of his hand, and for the moment, in his astonishment and pain, he could not even hate her. It was true. He couldn't help Cosgrave any more. His strength and ability were, as she said, of no use. That was what Cosgrave had meant when he had laughed about the adenoids. He had failed Cosgrave from the moment that Cosgrave had demanded love for himself and human tenderness.

He had no tenderness to give. He was a hard young man. He said slowly, and with a curious humility:

"I used to back him up when he was a kid. He trusted me too—and it's got to be a sort of habit. I want him to be happy."

"Because you are so un'appy yourself?"

"I'm all right," he said stubbornly. And then he added, still not looking at her. "Please give him up—so—so that he won't break his heart over it. I'm not a rich man either, but I'll make it worth your while."

She sprang up with a gesture of amused exasperation.

"'Ow *stupide* you are, my clever friend. You are like ze old father in ze *Dame aux Camellias*. You make me quite cross. This Rufus—I can't give 'im up. 'E don't belong to me. I never ask for 'im. 'E come into my dressing-room and I like 'im for 'is cheek and I give 'im a good time. Now he is *ennuyeux*. 'E want to marry me and make an honest woman of me." She patted Stonehouse on the shoulder with so droll a grimace that he bit his lip to avoid a gust of ribald, incredible laughter. It was as though by some trick she changed the whole aspect of things so that they became simply comic—scenes in a jolly, improper French farce. "And now I 'ope you see 'ow funny that is. And please take Monsieur Cosgrave away and keep 'im away. I don't ask no better."

His anger revived against her. And it was a thing apart from Cosgrave altogether—a bitter personal anger.

"It can't be done like that. You can't take drugs away from a drug-fiend at one swoop. Let him down gently—treat him as a friend until he has to go—get him to see reason."

"No," she said. "You don't understand. You 'ave not 'ad my experience. If I let 'im 'ang on 'e get much worse. If I push 'im off—poof!—an explosion! Then 'e find a nice leetle girl who is not like me at all and marry—ver' respectable—and 'ave 'eaps of babies. That is what 'e want. But it is not my *affaire*—and I won't be bothered. I tell you 'e is too *ennuyeux*——"

He lashed out at her.

"—and too poor. My God, you're no better than a woman of the streets."

She assented with a certain gravity.

"*C'est bien vrai, ca—bien vrai*. I was born in ze gutter—I crawl out of ze gutter by myself. I keep out of ze gutter—always. And I don't cry and wring my 'ands when people try to kick me back again. I kick them. I look after myself. Monsieur Cosgrave—and all those others—they must look after themselves too. Do you think they bother about me if I become *ennuyeuse*—like them—and cry because they don't love me and like some leetle girl in ze chorus better? Not they. They want fun and life from me—and I give them that. When they want more they can—'ow you say?—get out?"

He stared at her in white-hot detestation.

"I see. I've just wasted my time. You're—you're as infamous as they say. You're taking everything he has, and now he can go and hang himself. You're worse than a woman of the streets because you're more clever."

She kissed her fingers at him in good-humoured farewell. "I like you ver' much—*quand meme*," she said. "Next time I come and call on you, per'aps!"

2

That same night Cosgrave, frustrated at the theatre, tried to force an entrance to the Kensington house, and the old woman, seconded by a Japanese man-servant, flung him out again and into the arms of a policeman who promptly arrested him. Stonehouse went bail for him, and there was a strange, frantic scene in his own rooms.

For this was not the gentle young man who had met Connie Edwards' infidelity with an apathetic resignation. He was violent and indignant. His sense of outrage was a sort of intoxication which gave an extraordinary forcefulness to his whole bearing. He stormed and threatened—the misery that stared out of his haggard blue eyes shrivelling in the heat of an almost animal fury. (And yet he stammered too—which was comically what the other Rufus Cosgrave would have done.)

"I—I love her. I've never loved anyone else. That Connie business—a b-boy and girl affair—a silly

flirtation—this—the real thing. I—I'm a m-man now. N-no one's going to play fast and loose with me. No, by God! I'll see her—she's got to have it out with me. I've a right to an explanation at least—and by God I'll have one!"

"For what?" Stonehouse asked.

"She loved me," Cosgrave retorted.

"I don't believe it."

"You d-don't believe it? W-what do you know about it? Didn't she behave as though she did? Didn't she go about with me? Didn't she take things from me—no decent woman would have taken unless she loved me?"

"She doesn't happen to be a decent woman," Stonehouse observed. "To do her justice she doesn't pretend to be one."

Cosgrave advanced upon him as though he would have struck him across the face. But he stopped in time, not from remorse, but as though pulled up by a revelation of maddening absurdity.

"Oh, you—you! You don't understand. You aren't capable of understanding. You're a block—a machine—you don't feel—you g-go about—rolling over p-people and things like—like a damned steam-roller. You're not a man at all. You don't love anyone—not even yourself. What do you know about anything?"

He was grotesque in his scorn, and yet Stonehouse, leaning with an apparent negligence against the mantel-shelf, felt himself go dead white under the attack. He had lost Cosgrave. And he knew now that he needed him desperately—more now than even in his desolate childhood—that unconsciously he had hugged the knowledge of that boyish affection and dependence to him with a secret pride as a talisman against he hardly knew what—utter isolation, a terrifying hardness. He made up his mind to have done now with reserve, to show before it was too late at least some of that dwarfed and suffocated feeling. But he faltered over his first sentence. He had trained himself too long and too carefully to speak with that cold, ironic inflexion. He sounded in his own ears formal—unconvincing.

"You're wrong. I do care. I care for you. You're my friend. I do understand, in part, at any rate. I can prove it. When I saw how unhappy you were I went to her—I tried to reason with her."

He broke off altogether under the amazed stare that greeted this statement. The next instant Cosgrave had tossed his hands to heaven, shouting with a ribald laughter:

"Oh, my Heaven—you poor fish! You think you can cure everything. I can imagine what you said: 'I suggest, Mademoiselle, that you reduce the doses gradually.'"

It was so nearly what he had said that Stonehouse flinched, and suddenly Cosgrave seemed to feel an impatient compassion for him. "Oh, I'm a beast. It was jolly decent of you. You meant well. But you can't help."

And *that* was what she had said. Stonehouse made no answer. He saw himself as ridiculous and futile. He was sick with disgust at his own pain. If he had lost Cosgrave he wanted to have done with the whole business now—quickly and once and for all.

There was a sense of finality in the shabby room. The invisible bond that had held them through eight years of separation and silence had given way. It was almost a physical thing. It checked and damped down Cosgrave's excitement so that he said almost calmly:

"Well, I shan't attempt to see her again. You'll have that satisfaction. I'll get out of here—back to my jolly old swamp, where there aren't any beastly women—decent or indecent—only mosquitoes."

He waited a moment, as though trying hard to finish on a warmer, more generous note. Perhaps some faint flicker of recollection revived in him. But it could only illuminate a horrifying indifference. He went out without so much as a "good-night."

The morning papers gave the Kensington House incident due prominence.
It was one more feather in Mademoiselle Labelle's outrageous head-gear.
The Olympic had not so much as standing room for weeks after.

Cosgrave kept his word. He did not see her again, and within a week he had sailed for West Africa—to die. But ten days later Stonehouse received a wireless, and a month later a letter and a photograph of a fair-haired, tender-eyed, slightly bovine-looking girl in evening dress. It appeared that she was a Good Woman and the daughter of wealthy and doting parents, and that in all probability West Africa

would see Rufus Cosgrave no more.

So that was the end of their boyhood. Cosgrave had saved himself—or something outside Stonehouse's strength and wisdom had saved him. They would meet again and appear to be old friends. But the chapter of their real friendship, with all its inarticulate romance and tenderness, was closed finally.

Stonehouse kept the photograph on the table of his consulting-room. He believed that it amused him.

3

Still he could not work at night. He resumed his haunted prowlings through the streets. But he took care that he did not pass Francey Wilmot's house again. He knew now that he was afraid. He was ill, too, with a secret, causeless malady that baffled him. There were nights when he suffered the unspeakable torture of a man who feels that the absolute control over all his faculties, which he has taken for granted, is slipping from him, and that his whole personality stands on the verge of disintegration as on the edge of a bottomless pit.

For some weeks he hunted for Mr. Ricardo in vain. He tried all the favoured spots which a considerate country sets aside for its detractors and its lunatics so that they may express themselves freely, without success. Mr. Ricardo seemed to have taken fright and vanished. But one afternoon, returning from the hospital, Stonehouse met him by accident, and followed him. He made no attempt to speak. He meant, this time, to find out where the old man lived, and, if possible, to come to his assistance, and his experience taught him the danger and futility of a direct approach. He followed therefore at a cautious distance that it was not always possible to maintain. Although it was early in the afternoon a dense but drifting fog wrapped the city in its dank folds, and the figure in front of him sometimes loomed up like a distorted shadow and then in a moment plunged into a yellow pocket of obscurity, and was lost. Then Stonehouse could only listen for his footfalls, quick and irregular, echoing with an uncanny loudness in the low vault of the fog.

Mr. Ricardo had evidently been speaking, for he carried the soap-box slung over his shoulder, and he was in a great hurry. It was extraordinary how fast the lame, half-starved old man could walk.

They crossed the park and over to Grosvenor Place. There was no doubt that Mr. Ricardo knew where he was going, but it flashed upon Stonehouse that he was not going home. There was something pressed and sternly in earnest about the way he hurried, as though he had some important appointment to keep and knew that he was already late. Once Stonehouse had to run to keep him within hearing.

They went the whole length of Victoria Street. Stonehouse had been physically tired out when he had started. Now he was not aware of being tired at all. A gradually rising excitement carried him on, unconscious of himself. He had no idea what he expected, but he knew definitely that something deeply significant was about to happen to them both, that they were running into some crisis.

Outside the Abbey the fog became impenetrable. The traffic had stopped, and the lights, patches of opaque rayless crimson, added to the confusion. There were people moving, however, faceless ghosts with loud footfalls, feeling their way hesitatingly, and among them Mr. Ricardo vanished. Almost at once Stonehouse lost his own bearings. In the complete paralysis of all sense of direction which only fog can produce, he crossed the wide street twice without knowing it. Then he came up suddenly under the spread statue of Boadicea and into little knots of people. A policeman was trying to move them on without success. They hung about hopefully like children who cannot be convinced that a show is really over.

"It's no good messing round here. You aren't helping anyone. Better be getting home."

Stonehouse knew what had happened. It was extraordinary how sure he was. It was almost as though he had known all along. But he said mechanically to one slouching shadow:

"What is it?"

A face, dripping and livid in the fog, like the face of a dead man, gaped at him.

"Some old fellow gone over—no, he didn't tumble, I tell yer. You cawn't tumble over a four-foot parapet. Chucked 'isself, and I don't blame 'im. One of them police-launches 'as gone out to fish 'im out. But they won't get 'im. Not now, anyway. Can't see two feet in front of yer, and the tide running out fast."

Stonehouse felt his way to the parapet and peered over. Above the water the fog was pitch-black and moving. It looked a solid mass. He could almost hear it slapping softly against the pillars of the bridge as it flowed seawards. By now Mr. Ricardo had travelled with it a long way. His death did not seem to Stonehouse tragic, but only inevitable and ironical. It was as though someone had played a grave and significant, not unkindly, joke at Mr. Ricardo's expense. Nor did Stonehouse feel remorse, for he knew that he could have done nothing. As Mr. Ricardo had said, it was not material things that had mattered. He had not killed himself because he was starving, but because the long struggle of his spirit with the enigma of life had reached its crisis. He had gone out to meet it with a superb gesture of defiance, which had also been the signal of surrender and acknowledgment.

The crowd had moved on at last. In the muffled silence and darkness Stonehouse's thoughts became shadowy and fantastic. Though he did not grieve he knew that a stone had shifted under the foundations of his mental security. Death took on a new aspect. It seemed unlikely that it was so simply the end.

He found himself wondering how far Mr. Ricardo had travelled on his journey, and whether he had met his enemy, and, face to face with him, had become reconciled.

IV

1

He did not know why he had consented to receive her, unless it was because he knew that they would meet inevitably sooner or later. He felt very able to meet her—cool, and hard and clear-thinking. It was early yet. A wintry sunlight rested on his neatly ordered table, and he could smile at the idea that in a few hours he would begin to be afraid again.

She had made no appointment. Urged by some caprice or other she had driven up to his door and sent up her card with the pencilled inscription "*Me voici*!" Standing at his window he could just see the long graceful lines of her Rolls-Royce, painted an amazing blue—pale blue was notoriously her colour—and the pale-blue clad figure of her chauffeur. It occurred to him that she had chosen the uniform simply to make the man ridiculous—to show that there were no limits to her audacity and power. She was, he thought, stronger than the men who thought they were ruling the destinies of nations. For she could ride rough-shod over convention and prejudice and human dignity. She was perhaps the last representative of an autocratic egotism in a world in which the individual will had almost ceased to exist. She seemed to him the survival of an eternal evil.

And yet when he saw her he laughed. She was so magnificently impossible. It seemed that she had put on every jewel that she could carry. She was painted more profusely than usual, and her dress was one of those fantastic creations with which producers endeavour to bluff through a peculiarly idiotic revue. But she carried it all without self-consciousness. It was as natural to her as gay plumage to a bird-of-paradise.

She gave him her hand to kiss, and then laughed and shook hands instead with an exaggerated manliness.

"I forget," she said. "It is a bad 'abit. You see. I keep my promise. I make ze return call. And 'ow kind of you to see me."

"It didn't occur to you that I might refuse," he told her.

"No, that's true. I never thought about it. You 'ave a leetle time for me, *hein*?"

"About ten minutes," he said.

He assumed a very professional attitude on the other side of his table. He wanted to nonplus and disconcert her, if such a thing were possible. Now that his first involuntary amusement was over he felt a return of the old malignant dislike. She had cost him Cosgrave's friendship, and he wanted to hurt her—to get underneath that armour of soulless good-humour. "I knew that you'd turn up one day or other," he said.

She looked at him with a rather wistful surprise.

"'Ow clever of you! You knew? Don't I look well, *hein*? I feel well—quite all right. But I say to myself: '*Voyons*—'alf an hour with nothing to do. I pay that cross doctor a visit.' I would 'ave come before, but I 'ave been so busy. We re'earse 'Mademoiselle Pantalonne,' ze first night to-morrow. You come? I send you a ticket."

"Thanks. That form of entertainment wouldn't entertain me—except pathologically. And if I went to the theatre I'd rather leave my profession outside."

"Path—pathologically," she echoed. "That sounds 'orrid—rather rude.
You don't like me still, *hein*, doctor?"

"Does that surprise you?"

"It surprise me ver' much," she admitted frankly. She picked up the photograph on the table and examined it with an unconscious impertinence. "You like 'er?" she asked. "That sort of woman?"

"I don't know," he said. "I've never met her."

"She is not your wife?"

"She is Cosgrave's wife."

It was evident that although the episode had been concluded less than three months before she had already almost forgotten it.

"Cosgrave? *Ah oui, le cher petit Rufus*? There now—did I not tell you? Didn't I 'ave reason? Tell me —'ow many babies 'ave 'e got?"

"They were married last month," Stonehouse observed.

"*Ah—la la*! But 'ow glad I am! I can see she is the right sort for 'im. A nice leetle girl. But first 'e 'ave to 'ave a good time—just to give 'im confidence. Now 'e be a ver' good boy—a leetle dull per'aps, but ver' good and 'appy. I would write and tell 'im 'ow glad I am—but per'aps better not, *hein*?"

She winked, and there was an irresistible drollery in the grimace that made his lips twitch. And yet she was shameless—abominable.

"The ten minutes are almost up," he said, "and I suppose you came here to consult me."

He knew that she had not. She had come because he was a tantalizing object, because she could not credit his invincibility, which was a challenge to her. She laughed, shrugging her shoulders.

"You are an 'orrible fellow! You think of nothing but diseases and wickedness. I wonder if you 'ave ever 'ad a good time yourself—ever laughed, like I do, from ze 'eart?"

He looked away from her. He felt for a moment oddly uneasy and distressed.

"No, I don't suppose I have."

"Ah, *c'est dommage, mon pauvre jeune homme*. But you don't like me.
What can I do?"

"I don't expect you to do anything."

"Not my business, *hein*? No one 'ave any business 'ere who 'ave not got an illness. Ver' well. I will 'ave an illness—a ver' leetle one. No, not ze tummy-ache. *C'est vieux jeu ca*. But a leetle sore throat. You know about throats, *hein*?"

"My specialty," he said smiling back at her with hard eyes.

"Bien, I 'ave a leetle sore throat—*fatigue plutot*—'e come and 'e go. I smoke too much. But I 'ave to smoke. It's no good what you say."

"I'm sure of that," he said.

He made her sit down in the white iron chair behind the screen and, adjusting his speculum, switched on the light. He was bitterly angry because she had forced this farce upon him. He felt that she was laughing all over. The pretty pinkness of her open mouth nauseated him. He thought of all the men who had kissed her, and had been ruined by her as though by the touch of a deadly plague. He pressed her tongue down with a deliberate roughness.

"You 'urt," she muttered. But her eyes were still amused.

"A great many people get hurt here," he said contemptuously, "and don't whine about it."

2

Ten minutes later they sat opposite each other by his table. She was coughing and laughing and wiping her eyes.

"*C'est abominable*," she gasped, "*abominable*!"

He waited. He could afford to wait. He had the feeling of being carried on the breast of a deep, quiet sea. He could take his time. Her laughter and damnable light-heartedness no longer fretted and exasperated him. Rather it was a kind of bitter spice—a tense screwing up of his exquisite sense of calm power. She was like a tigress sprawling in the sunshine, not knowing that its heart is already covered by a rifle. He prolonged the moment deliberately, savouring it. In that deliberation the woman in the hospital, Francey Wilmot, Cosgrave, and a host of faceless men who had gone under this woman's chariot wheels played their devious, sinister parts. They goaded him on and justified him. He became in his own eyes the figure of the Law, pronouncing sentence, weightily, without heat or passion or pity.

"You do it on purpose," she said, "you make me cough."

He arranged his papers with precise hands.

"I'm sorry—I know you came here as a joke. It isn't—not for you. It's serious." He saw her smile, and though he went on speaking in the same quiet, methodical tone, he felt that he had suddenly lost control of himself. "Medical science isn't an exact science. Doctors are never sure of anything until it has happened. But speaking with that reservation I have to tell you that your case is hopeless—that you have three—at the most four months——"

She had interrupted with a laugh, but the laugh itself had broken in half. She had read his face. After a long interval she asked a question—one word—almost inaudibly—and he nodded.

"If you had come earlier one might have operated," he said. "But even so, it would have been doubtful."

Already many men and women had received their final sentence here in this room, and each had met it in his own way. The women were the quietest. Perhaps their lives had taught them to endure the hideous indignity of a well-ordered death-bed without that galling sense of physical humiliation which tormented men. For the most part they became immersed in practical issues—how the news was to be broken to others, who would look after the house and the children, and how the last scene might be acted with the least possible inconvenience and distress for those who would have to witness it. Some men had raved and stormed and pleaded, as though he had been a judge whose judgment might be revoked: "Not me—others—not me—not to-day—years hence." They had paced his private room for hours, trying to get a hold over themselves, devastated with shame and horror at the breakdown of their confident personalities. Some had risen to an impregnable dignity, finer than their lives. One or two had laughed.

And this woman?

He looked up at last. He thought with a thrill that was not of pity, of a bird hit in full flight and mortally hurt, panting out its life in the heather, its gay plumage limp and dishevelled. The jewels and outrageous dress had become a jest that had turned against her. A shadow of the empty, good-humoured smile still lingered on a painted mouth palsied with fear. She was swaying slightly, rhythmically, backwards and forwards, and rubbing the palms of her hands on the carved arms of her chair, and he could hear her breath, short and broken like the shallow breathing of a sick animal. And yet he became aware that she was thinking—thinking very rapidly—calling up unexpected reserves.

"*Trois—mois—trois mois*. Well, but I don't feel so ill—I don't feel ill at all—per'aps for a leetle month—just a leetle month."

He had no clue to her thought. She looked about her rather vaguely as though everything had suddenly become unreal. There were tears on her cheeks, but they were the tears of her recent laughter. She rubbed them off on the back of her hand with the unconscious gesture of a street child.

"I suffer much?"

"I'm afraid so. Though, of course, anyone who attends on you will do his best."

"Death so ugly—so sad."

"Not always," he said.

It was true. She had been a beast of prey all her life. Now it was her turn to be overtaken and torn down. Only sentimentalists like Francey Wilmot could see in her a cause for pity or regret.

They sat opposite each other through a long silence. He gave her time. He showed her consideration. He thought of the pale-blue chauffeur waiting in the biting cold of a winter's afternoon. Well, he would be alive after she had become a loathsome fragment of corruption. He was revenged—they were all revenged on her now.

She fumbled with her gold and jewelled bag.

"What do I owe, *Monsieur le docteur*?"

"Three guineas."

She put the money on the table.

"That is ver' little for so much. I think—when I can't go on any more—I come to your 'ospital. You take me in, *hein*? I 'ave a fancy."

He made an unwilling movement. It revolted him—this obtuseness that would not see that he hated her.

"I can't prevent your coming if you want to. You would be more in your element in your own home. Even in their private rooms they don't allow the kind of things you're accustomed to. There are regulations. Your friends won't like them."

She looked up at him with a startled intentness.

"*Mes pauvres amis*—I 'ave so many. They won't understand. They say: 'That's one of Gyp's leetle jokes.' They won't believe it—they won't dare."

She gave him her hand, and he touched it perfunctorily.

"It's as you like, of course. You have only to let me know."

"You are ver' kind."

He showed her to the door, and rang the bell for the servant. From his vantage point he saw the pale-blue chauffeur hold open the door of the pale-blue limousine. A few loiterers gaped. By an ironical chance a barrel-organ in the next street began to grind out the riotous, familiar gallop. It sounded far-off like a jeering echo:

"I'm Gyp Labelle;
If you dance with me
You dance to my tune. . ."

A danse macabre. He wondered if she had brains or heart enough to appreciate the full bitterness of that chance. He could see her, in his mind's eye, cowering back among the pale-blue cushions.

The next morning he received a note from her and a ticket for the first night of "Mademoiselle Pantalonne"—"with her regards and thanks."

3

He went. In the morning he had tossed the ticket aside, scornful and outraged by such a poor gesture of bravado. But the night brought the old restlessness. He was driven by curiosity that he believed was professional and impersonal. It was natural enough that he should want to see how a woman of her stuff acted under sentence of death. But once in the theatre h e became aware of a black and solitary pride because he alone of all these people could taste the full flavour of her performance. He had become omniscient. He saw behind the scenes. Whilst the orchestra played its jaunty overture he watched her. He saw her stare into her glass and dab on the paint, thicker and thicker, knowing now why she needed so much more, shrinking from the skull that was beginning to peer through the thin mask of flesh and blood. He foresaw the moment, probably before the footlights, when the naked horror

of it all would leap out on her and tear her down. Even in that she would no doubt seek the consolation of notoriety. It would be in all the papers. If she had the nerve to carry on people would crowd to see her, as in the Roman days they had crowded to the circus (gloating and stroking themselves secretly, thinking: "It is not I who am dying"). Or she would seek dramatic refuge in her absurd palace and surround herself with tragic glamour, making use of her own death as she had used the death of that infatuated and unhappy prince.

And yet he was sick at heart. In flashes he saw his own attitude as something hideous and abnormal. Then again he justified it, as he had always justified it. He found himself arguing the whole matter out with Francey Wilmot—a cool and reasoned exposition such as he had been incapable of at the crisis of their relationship. ("This woman is a malignant growth. Nature destroys her. Do you pretend to feel regret or pity?") But though he imagined the whole scene—saw himself as authoritative and convincing—he could not re-create Francey Wilmot. She remained herself. Her eyes, fixed on him with that remembered look of candid and questioning tenderness, blazed up into an anger as unexpectedly fierce and uncompromising. And he was not so strong. He had overworked all his life. Starved too often. The ground slipped from under his feet.

It was a poor, vulgar show—a pantomime jerry-built to accommodate her particular talent. She walked through it—the dumb but irresistible model of a French atelier, who made fools of all her lovers, cheated them, sucked them dry and tossed them off with a merry cynicism. When the mood took her she danced and her victims danced behind her, a grotesque ballet, laughing and clapping their hands, as though their cruel sufferings were, after all, a good joke. Neither they nor the audience seemed to be aware that she could not dance at all, and that she was not even beautiful.

It was an old stunt, disguised with an insolent carelessness. The producers had surely grinned to themselves over it. "We know what the public likes. Rubbish, and the older the better. Give it 'em." She even made her familiar entry between the curtains at the back of the stage, standing in the favourite attitude of simple, triumphant expectation, and smiling with that rather foolish friendliness that until now had never shaken her audiences from their frigidity. To them she had always been a spectacle, a strange vital thing with a lurid past and a dubious future, shocking and stimulating. They would never have admitted that they liked her. But tonight they gave her a sort of ashamed welcome. Perhaps it was the dress she wore—the exaggerated peg-top trousers and bonnet of a conventional Quartier Latin which made her look frank and boyish. Perhaps it was something more subtle. Stonehouse himself felt it. But then, he knew. He saw her as God saw her. If there was a God He certainly had His amusing moments.

But he found himself clapping her with the rest, and that made him angry and afraid. It seemed that he could not control his actions any more than his thoughts. The whole business had got an unnatural hold over him. He half got up to go, and then realized that he was trying to escape.

It was jolly music too. That at any rate her producers had toiled at with some zeal. Incredibly stupid and artless and jolly. Anyone could have danced to it. And she was a gutter-urchin, flinging herself about in the sheer joy of life (with death capering at her heels). He watched her, leaning forward, waiting for some sign, the faltering gesture, a twitching grimace of realization. Or was it possible that she was too empty-hearted to feel even her own tragedy, too shallow to suffer, too stupid to foresee? At least he knew with certainty that in that heated, exhausted atmosphere pain had set in.

He became aware that the sweat of it was on his own face—that he himself was labouring under an intolerable physical burden. He knew too much. (If God had His amusing moments he had also to suffer, unless, as Mr. Ricardo had judged, he was a devil.) She was facing what every man and woman in that theatre would have to face sooner or later. How? She at any rate danced as though there were nothing in the world but life. With each act her gestures, her very dress became the clearer expression of an insatiable, uncurbed lust of living. At the end, the orchestra, as though it could not help itself, broke into the old doggerel tune that had helped to make her famous:

"I'm Gyp Labelle."

She waltzed and somersaulted round the stage, and as the curtain fell she stood before the footlights, panting, her thin arms raised triumphantly. He could see the tortured pulse leaping in her throat. He thought he read her lips as they moved in a voiceless exclamation:

"*Quand meme—quand meme*."

The audience melted away indifferently. They, at any rate, did not know what they had seen.

And the next day he had another little note from her, written in a great sprawling hand. She had

made all her arrangements, and she thought she had better reserve rooms in his hospital in about six weeks' time for about a month. After that, no doubt, she would require less accommodation.

A silly, fatuous effort, in execrable taste.

V

1

Robert Stonehouse took a second leave that he could not afford and went back to the grey cottage on the moors, and tramped the hills in haunted solitude. The spring ran beside him, a crude, bitter, young spring, gazing into the future with an earnest, passionate face, full of arrogance and hope, and self-distrust. His own frustrated youth rose in him like a painful sap. He was much younger than the Robert Stonehouse who, proud in his mature strength, had dragged an exhausted, secretively smiling Cosgrave on his relentless pursuit—young and insecure, with odd nameless rushes of emotion and desire and grief that had had no part in his ordered life.

The hills had changed too. They had been the background to his exploits. They had become brooding, mysterious partners whose purpose with him he had not fathomed. The things that ran across his path, the quaint furry hares and scurrying pheasants had ceased to be objects on which he could vent his strength and cunning. They were live things, deeply, secretly related to him and to a dying, very infamous woman, and his levelled gun sank time after time under the pressure of an inexplicable pity. He had stood resolutely aloof from life, and now it was dragging him down into its warmth with invisible, resistless hands. Its values, which he had learnt to judge coldly and dispassionately, weighing one against another, were shifting like sand. He seemed to stand, naked and alone, in a changing, terrifying world.

In those days the papers in their frivolous columns, were full of Gyp Labelle. Her press-agent was working frenziedly. It seemed that she had quarrelled with her manager, torn her contract into shreds, and slapped his face. There were gay doings nightly at the Kensington house—orgies. One paper hinted at a certain South African millionaire.

A last fling—the reckless gesture of a worthless panic-stricken soul, without dignity.

Or perhaps she had found that his diagnosis had been a mistake. Or she would not believe the truth. Or she was drugging herself into forgetfulness. Perhaps she might even have the courage to make an end before the time came when forgetfulness would be impossible.

He returned to town, drawn by an obsession of uncertainty. He found that she had arrived at her rooms in the hospital with the shrivelled old woman and the macaw and a gramophone.

She had signed the register as Marie Dubois.

"It is my real name," she explained, "but you couldn't have a good time with a name like that—*voyons*! Only one 'usband and 'eaps of babies."

She was much nearer the end than he had supposed possible. The last month had to be paid for. She lay very still under the gorgeous quilt which she had brought with her, and her hand, which she had stretched out to him in friendly welcome, was like the claw of a bird. "Everyone 'ere promise not to tell," she said. "I'm just Marie Dubois. Even ze undertaker—'e must not know. You put on ze stone: 'Marie Dubois, ze beloved daughter of Georges and Marianne Dubois, rag-pickers of Paris.' That will be a last leetle joke, hein?"

"It's as you wish," he said coldly.

He forced back the natural questions that came to him. He had a disordered conviction that he was fighting her for his sanity, for the very ground on which he had built his life, and that he dared not yield by so much as a kindly word. He did what lay in his power for her with a heart shut and barred.

She brought a little of her world and her whole outlook with her. On the last day that she was able to be up she dressed herself in a gay mandarin's coat with a Chinese woman's trousers, and tried to do her dance for the benefit of a shocked and fascinated matron. Every morning she wore a new cap to set off the deepening shadow of dissolution.

By the open fire the old woman embroidered ceaselessly.

"She is making—'ow you call it?—my shroud. You see—with ze blue ribbons. Blue—that's my colour—my lucky colour. As soon as I could speak I ask for blue ribbons in my pinafore."

"I should have thought your mind might be better occupied now," he retorted with brutal commonplaceness.

She winked at him.

"Oh, but I 'ave 'ad my leetle talk with *Monsieur le Cure*. 'E and I are ze best of friends, though I never met 'im before. 'E understand about ze blue ribbons. But Monsieur Robert is too clever."

"It seems so," he said scornfully.

She questioned him from out of the thickening cloud of morphia. "You don't believe in God?" And then as he shook his head she smiled sleepily. "Well, it is still possible 'e exist, *Monsieur—Monsieur le docteur*."

She lay quiet so that he thought she had fallen asleep, but the next moment her eyes had opened, widening on him with a startling wakefulness. It was as though her whole personality had leapt to arms, and bursting through the narcotic, stood free with a gay and laughing gesture. "As to God—I don't know about 'im, but I exist—I go on. You bet your 'at on that, my friend. I don't know where I go—but I go somewhere. And I dance. And if St. Peter sit at ze golden gates, like they say in ze fairybook, I say to 'im: ''Ave you ever seen ze Gyp Galop?' And then I dance for 'im and ze angels play for me"—she nodded wickedly—"not 'ymn tunes."

She was serious. She meant it. If she survived she survived as what she was or not at all. And looking down on her wasted, tortured body, Stonehouse had a momentary but extraordinarily vivid conviction that what she had said was true. She would persist. Whatever else happened, Gyp Labelle would go on having a good time. She could not be extinguished. There was in her some virtue altogether apart from the body—a blazing vitality, an unquenchable, burning spirit.

He felt his hatred of her wither before it.

"And 'e say: 'You dance ver' bad, Gyp, but you make me laugh. You go on and dance to ze others.' For 'e know who I am. My poor parents they make ze mistake. They think: ''Ere is such a ver' nice, good little *bebe*, and so they call me after my *Maman*, who is ver' nice and good too, and who love me ver' much—Marie—Marie Dubois."

She turned her head towards the old woman bending lower and lower over her fine work, and, smiling at her, fell asleep.

He returned, one night, to the hospital in the hope of being able to work in the laboratory, and instead, coming to her room, he went in. The action was so unpremeditated and unmotivated that he had closed the door before he knew what he had done. But the excuse he framed in his confusion was never uttered, for he had the right to appear dumbfounded. She sat, propped up like a painted wraith against a pile of gorgeous cushions, and all about her was scattered a barbarous loot of rings and bracelets, of strings of pearls, of unset stones, diamonds and emeralds, heaped carelessly on the table at her side, and twinkling like little malevolent eyes out of the creases of her coverlet.

The old woman wrote toilingly on a slip of paper. "Sh! This is ver' solemn. I could not sleep, and so I make my testament." She put her finger to her lips as though her whisper were only a part of a playful mystery and beckoned him, and he went towards her, reluctant, yet unresisting like a man hypnotized. He had a childish longing to touch all that colour, to take up great handfuls of it and feel its warmth and let it drip through his fingers. The death that stared out of her painted face, the silence and grim austerity of her surroundings made that display of magnificence a fantastic parable. The stones were the life that was going from her. She picked up each one in turn and caressed it, and held it to the light, remembering who knew what escapade, what splendid, reckless days, what tragedy. And yet there was no regret and surely no remorse in her farewell of them.

"*Ma Vieille*—she make a list of all. They will be sold—for ze children of Paris—ze *gamins*—as I was—for a good time." She held out her hand: "*C'est joli, n'est ce pas*?"

He looked unwillingly. It was a black opal, and as she moved it it seemed to come to life, and a distant resentful fire gleamed out of its sullen depths.

"Yes. But you oughtn't to have all—all this stuff about. No one could be held responsible——"

"What does it matter? If someone take it—someone 'ave it. It won't worry me. 'Ere, I tell you something—a story, *hein*, to amuse you? You remember our leetle dinner and 'ow I would not tell about ze Grand Duke and ze black opal? Well, I tell you now. It don't matter any more."

"No. You're doing yourself harm. You ought to sleep."

"I don't want to—I can't. It is 'orrible to lie awake in ze dark and—— And you, too, Monsieur Robert, you don't feel you sleep much to-night, *hein*?"

"No."

"*Alors*—'ere we are—two poor fellows shipwrecked—we make a leetle feast together—a feast of good stories. You say you don't like me ver' much. But that is *ridicule* now. One only 'ates when one is afraid, and you aren't afraid any more of poor Gyp."

"Was I ever?" he demanded.

"A leetle—per'aps? You think to yourself: 'If I love 'er——!'
Bah, that is all finished. Come, I tell you my funny story."

He had laughed. He was incredulous of himself. He sat on the edge of her bed listening to her whisper, a tortured whisper which she made supremely funny—a mock-conspirator's whisper which drew them close to one another in an outrageous intimacy.

"At any rate you had made a good enemy that time," he said.

She panted.

"Ah no—no. 'E 'ave a fine sense of humour, Monsieur ze Grand Duke. 'E laugh too. 'E say—'Gyp—you are ze ver' devil 'erself!' 'Ere, but this ruby—I don't care much for rubies—but this one 'ave a real fine story."

And so one by one the stones were taken up and held a moment, some to be discarded with a name or a forgetful shrug, and some to linger a while longer whilst she recalled their little ribald histories. And it seemed to Robert Stonehouse that gradually the room filled with invisible personages who, as the jewels dropped from her waxen fingers into the gaping box, bowed to her and took their leave. And at last they were all gone but one. He seemed to hear them, their footsteps receding faintly along the corridors.

She held an unset pearl in her hand.

"This one 'ave a ver' nice leetle story. A brigand give it me when 'e 'old up ze train between Mexico City and ze coast. A fine fellow—with a sombrero and a manner!" (She looked past Stonehouse, smiling, as though she too saw the shadow twirling its black moustache and staring back at her with gallant admiration.) "And brave too, *nombre de Dios*! And 'e bow and say: 'One does not take ransom from Mademoiselle Labelle. One pays tribute.' And 'e give me this to remember 'im by—as I give it you, Monsieur Robert."

He stood up sharply.

"No—I—I don't care for that kind of thing."

"For your wife, then!"

"I am not married."

"But one day per'aps? You love someone, *hein*?" (Had she wilfully forgotten? She studied his face with a wicked curiosity. He could not answer her.) "Give it 'er then—Monsieur Robert—*pour me faire plaisir*."

"There is no one to give it to."

"But there was——"

He tried desperately to regain the old sarcastic inflection.

"No doubt it seems inevitable to you."

"Tell me about 'er. *Voyons*, if you can't keep me alive, *Monsieur mon docteur*, you might at least amuse me."

"There is nothing to tell. I will give you something that will make you sleep."

"I do not want to sleep. That is bad, ugly sleep that you give me. So you quarrel. What you quarrel about, Monsieur Robert? Another woman?"

The sheer, grotesque truth of it drove him to an ironical assent.

"As you say, another woman——"

"*Oh, la la*! So there was once upon a time a ver' serious young man who forget to be quite serious. *Voyons*—you 'ave to tell me all now—just as I tell you."

He turned on her then. In five brief, savage sentences he had told her of Frances and the woman in the hospital. And when he had done he read her face with its tolerant good-humour, and the full enormity of it all burst over him like a flood of crude light. He turned away from her stammering:

"I've no business here—I've no business to be your doctor—or anyone's doctor. I think I must be going mad."

She shook her head.

"No—no—only too serious, *mon pauvre jeune homme*. But I like your—your Francey. I think she and I be good friends some'ow. She would see things 'ow I see them."

(He thought crazily:

"Yes, she would sit by you and look over your shoulder at your rotten life, and say: 'So that's the way it seems to you? And you're right. It's been a splendid joke.'")

"One of these days you be friends again too. And then you give 'er my leetle pearl. Say it's from Gyp, who is sorry she made so much trouble. Why not? You think it make her sad? It is not for that I give it you. It is to give you pleasure too."

He was labouring under an almost physical distress. She was poking fun at him, at herself, at death. She was making him a partner of thieves and loose women. And yet:

"It must not make you sad at all. When you see it you laugh—just as you laugh when I dance because I dance so ver' bad. Look 'ere, I 'ave something that you give me too." She dived back into the box and brought out a shilling lying side by side with the pearl in the palm of her open hand. "You tell 'er—that was all poor Gyp was worth to you, Monsieur Robert."

He had taken it. She tried to laugh out loud, triumphantly, the famous laugh. And then grey agony had her by the throat. She turned her face from him to the wall.

He felt that the old woman had risen. She was moving towards them. He said quietly:

"At least I can relieve you."

She made a passionate, absolute gesture of refusal. An astonished nurse had entered. He gave brief instructions. He said good-night, not looking at the limp, quiet figure on the bed, and went out.

He knew that he had seemed competent, unhurried and unmoved as befitted a man to whom death was the most salient feature of life.

But he knew also that he had fled from her.

In the crowd that went with him that night were Francey Wilmot and Connie Edwards and Cosgrave and all the people who had made up his youth. There were little old women who were Christines, and even James Stonehouse was there, tragically and hopefully in search of something that he had never found. Any moment he might turn his face towards his son, and it would not be hideous, only perplexed and pitiful.

It was as though an ugly, monstrous mass had been smashed to fragments whose facets shone with extraordinary, undreamed-of colours.

Not only the bodies of the people drifted with him, but their lives touched his on every side. It became a sort of secret pressure. They were neither great nor beautiful. They were identical with the people he had always seen on the streets and in the hospitals, sickly or grossly commonplace, but he could no longer judge them as from a great distance. He was down in the thick of them. They concerned him—or he had no other concern. He was part of their strangely wandering procession. He

looked into their separate faces and thought: "This man says 'I' to himself. And one day he will say: 'I am dying' (as Marie Dubois said it)." And he recognized for the first time something common to them all that was not commonplace—an heroic quality. At least that stark fact remained that at their birth sentence of death had been passed upon them all. Before each one of them lay a black adventure, and they went towards it, questioning or inarticulate, not knowing why they should endure so much, but facing the utter loneliness of that final passage with patience and great courage.

It was not ridiculous that they should demand their immortality, the least and worst of them. Whether it was granted them or not, it was a just demand, and the answer to it more vital than any other form of knowledge. For it was conceivable that one day they would be too strong and too proud to play the part of tragic buffoons in a senseless farce.

In the meantime men might well be pitiful with one another.

"What was it she had said?"

"Nothing that you've gone through is of any use if it hasn't taught you pity."

("Oh, Francey, Francey, if I had told you that Christine was dead would it have helped? Would you have had more patience with me?")

The quiet and emptiness of his own street restored him in some measure to his aloof scepticism. But even then he knew there was a disruptive force secretly at work in him, tearing down stone by stone his confidence and courage. He was afraid of shadows. A bowed figure crouched against the railings of his house checked him as though a ghost had lain in wait for him. He passed it hurriedly, running up the stone steps. The sound of a thin, clear voice calling him made him turn again, his head thrown up in a sort of defiance.

"Monsieur—excuse—excuse—I wait 'ere so long. They tell me you come
back 'ere perhaps. But they don't know I 'ave come. I creep out——
Monsieur she cannot sleep—she cannot sleep. They don't do nothing.
It is not right. I cannot 'ave it—that she suffer so."

He came back down the steps. He was conscious of having sighed deeply. He looked into the shrivelled, up-turned face, and saw the tears that filled the furrows with a slow moving stream. He had hardly noticed her before. Now she hurt him. A very little old woman. He said briefly, hiding a shaken voice:

"They do all they can. I can do no more."

She reiterated with a peasant's obstinacy.

"I will not 'ave it—I will not—not 'ave it—I cannot bear it."

"Dr. Rutherford is there. I tell you he can do all that can be done.
I offered her an injection—she would not have it."

"She pretend—all ze time she pretend. Even before me, 'er mother, she pretend. But I know."

"Her mother!"

He stepped back against the railings, freeing himself fretfully from the hand that clutched his arm.

"If you are her mother she treats you strangely. She treats you like a servant."

"Before others, Monsieur. She is different—of different stuff. We 'ave always understood. If I am to be with 'er it must be as 'er servant. That is our affair. But you are not kind. You let 'er suffer too much. I will not 'ave it."

She drew herself up. She almost menaced him. He saw that she knew. As a physician he had done what lay in his power, but as a human being he had failed utterly and deliberately. Had always failed. And he was aware of an incredible fear of her.

"I will come now," he stammered.

He gave her such sleep that night that it seemed unlikely that she would ever wake again. He knew that he had exceeded the limits of mercy set down by his profession and that the nurse had looked strangely at him. But he was indifferent. It was as though he, too, had been momentarily released.

Nor did he leave her again until the morning, but watched over her, whilst on the other side of the bed the old woman knelt, her face pressed against a still hand, a battered, sullen effigy of grief.

3

From the beginning she had defied the regulations of the hospital, as she had defied the rules of life, with an absolute success. The inelastic, military system bent and stretched itself beneath her good-humoured inability to believe that there could be any wilful opposition, to her desires. The macaw had been a case in point, the gramophone another. After tea the old woman set the instrument going for her, and when the authorities protested, ostensibly on behalf of neighbouring patients, it transpired that the patients rather liked it than otherwise, and there were regular concerts, with the macaw shrieking its occasional appreciation.

She inquired interestedly into her neighbours. She seemed less concerned with their complaints than with their ages, their appearance, and the time when they would return to the outside world. With a young man on her right hand she became intimate. It began with an exchange of compliments and progressed through little folded notes which caused her infinite amusement to a system of code-tapping on the intervening wall, sufficiently scandalous in import, if her expression were significant.

The nurses became her allies in this last grim flirtation, unaware apparently of its grimness.

"Don't you let 'im know I am so bad," she adjured them. "I tell 'im I 'ave a leetle nothing at all, and that I am going 'ome next week to my dear 'usband. I think that make 'im laugh ver' much. 'E is ver' bored, that young man. 'E say if I 'ave supper with 'im, the first night 'e come out 'e won't—'ow you say?—grouse so much. I say my 'usband ver' jealous, but that I fix it some'ow. 'E like that. Promise you won't tell?"

They promised.

She was almost voiceless now. That she suffered hideously, Stonehouse knew, but not from her. He believed—in the turmoil of his mind he almost hoped—that when she was alone she broke down, but before them all she bore herself with an unflagging gallantry. It was that gallantry of hers that dogged him, that would not let him rest or forget. It demanded of him something that he could not, and dared not, yield.

And she was pitifully alone. The woman in the hospital had not been more forsaken by her world. As to Gyp Labelle she went her way, and the gossip columns cautiously recorded the more startling items of that progress. It was as though some clever hand were building up a fantastic figure that should pass at last into the mists of legend.

Men laughed together over her.

"What poor devil of a millionaire has the woman hobbled now?"

It was the matron who showed Stonehouse an illustrated paper which produced her full-length portrait. She sat on the edge of her absurd fountain and her hand was raised in a laughing gesture of farewell. Over the top was written: "Gyp off to Pastures new," and underneath a message which all the daily papers were to reproduce.

"I want this way to thank all the friends who have been so very kind to me. We have had good times together. I miss you very much. I am going to find new friends now, but one day, I think, I dance for you again. I love you all. I kiss my hands to you. *Au revoir*, Gyp."

It was her vanity, that insatiable desire to figure impudently and triumphantly in the public eye. He brought the paper to her. But at the moment she was busy tapping feebly on the wall. She winked at him.

"Sh! I tell 'im I go to-day. I make an appointment—next week—ze Carlton Grill—seven o'clock—'e 'ave to wait a long time, ze poor young man. There, it is finished."

He showed her the picture without comment. He had to hold it for her—hold it very close—for she had exhausted herself with that last gesture of bravado. And then, as she smiled, a protest born of gathering distress and doubt burst from him.

"Why do you allow—this—hideous, impossible pretence?"

He could feel the old woman turn towards him like a wild beast preparing to spring. But she herself lay still, with closed eyes. He had to bend down to catch the remote suffering whisper.

"*C'est vrai*. We 'ave—such good times. And they come 'ere—all those kind people—who 'ave laughed so much—and bring flowers—and pretend it is not true. And they won't believe—and when they see it they won't believe—they won't dare—–" She tried to speak more clearly, clinging to his hand for the first time, whilst a sweat of agony broke out upon her face and made ghastly channels through its paint and powder. "*Vous voyez*—for them—I am—ze good times. They come to me—for good times. When they are too sad—when things too 'ard for them and they cannot believe any more—that ze good times come again—they think of me. '*Voyons, la* Gyp, she 'ave a good time always—she dance at 'er own funeral!' But if they see me 'ere—like this—they go away—and think in their 'earts: '*Grand Dieu, c'est comme ca avec nous tous—avec nous tous*,' and they not laugh with me—any more."

Her hand let go its hold—suddenly.

They sent for him that night. Haemorrhage had set in. There was a light burning by her bedside, for she had complained of the darkness. She wore a lace cap trimmed with blue ribbons, but she had not had strength to paint her lips and cheeks again, and the old woman's efforts had ended pitifully. She had grown very small in the last few hours, and with her thin, daubed face and blood-stained lips, she looked like a sorrowful travesty of the little circus clown who had ridden the fat pony and shouted "*Oh la—la*!" and blown kisses to the people.

She smiled vaguely in Stonehouse's direction, but she was only half conscious. Her hand strayed over the gorgeous quilt, stroking it with a kind of simple pleasure.

(She was like that, too, he thought—a dash of gay, unashamed colour in the sad scheme of things.)

Towards midnight she motioned to him and whispered something that he could not understand. But the old woman rose heavily from her knees and went over to the gramophone, thrusting aside with savage resolution the nurse who tried to intercept her. Stonehouse himself made an involuntary gesture.

"Why not?" he said. "Let her alone."

He stood close to her and waited. He felt that some part of him was dying with her, that he stood with her before a black partition which was thinning slowly, and that presently they would both know whatever lay beyond.

The macaw fidgeted on its golden perch, craning towards the light and blinking uneasily as though a strange thing had come into the room. The needle scratched under a shaking hand.

"I'm Gyp Labelle;
Come dance with me. . ."

He bent over her so that his face almost touched hers.

"I'm sorry—I'm sorry, Gyp."

She turned her head a little, her lips moving. It was evident that she had not really heard. But he knew that she had never borne him malice.

And then suddenly it was over. He had broken through. Beyond were understanding and peace and strange and difficult tears. He loved her, as beneath the fret and heat of passion Cosgrave and all those others had loved her, for what she sincerely was and for the brave, gay thing she had to give. He loved her more simply still as in rare moments of their lives men love one another, saying: "This is my brother—this is my sister." From his lonely arrogance his spirit flung itself down, grieving, beside her mysterious, incalculable good.

He could hear the jolly bang-bang of the drum and the whoop of a trumpet. He could see her catherine-wheeling round the stage, and the man with the bloated face and tragic, intelligent eyes.

"Life itself, my dear fellow, life itself."

And she was dead.

EPILOGUE

For a moment they stared at one another. He did not at once recognize Connie Edwards, in the puritanical serge frock and with her air of rather conscious sobriety, and he himself stood in the shadow. He thought:

"She's wondering if I'm a tramp." He felt like one, broken and shabby.

"Dr. Wilmot?" he muttered.

She leant closer.

"Oh, hallo—Robert." She corrected herself severely, and held the door wide open. "Dr. Stonehouse—to be sure. Francey's upstairs."

She led the way. It was almost as though she had been expecting him. At any rate, she was not surprised at all. But half-way up the stairs she glanced back over her shoulder.

"I don't usually open the door. I'm her secretary. And a damn good one too. Rather a jest, eh, what?"

"Rather," he said.

And it was really the same room—a fire burning and the faun dancing in the midst of its moving shadows. There was a faint, warm scent of cigarette smoke and a solemn pile of books beside her deep chair. It wouldn't be like Francey to rest under her laurels.

She held both his hands in hers. She wore a loose, golden-brown wrapper such as she had always worn when she had been working hard. She had changed very little and a great deal. If something of the whimsical mysteriousness of her youth had faded she had broadened and deepened into a woman warm and generous as the earth. Her thick hair swept back from her face with the old wind-blown look, and her eyes were candid and steadfast as they had ever been. But some sort of mist had been brushed away from them so that they saw more clearly and profoundly. He thought: "She has seen a great many people suffer. She doesn't go away so often into herself."

He had tried hard, over and over again, to imagine their meeting, but he had never imagined that it would be so simple or that she would say to him, as though the eight years had not happened:

"Why didn't you tell me about Christine, Robert?"

He said:

"It wouldn't have made any difference."

"I've been waiting for you to tell me."

He tried to smile.

"You don't know how difficult it has been to come. I've been prowling past—night after night—trying to think what you'd say to me, if I turned up."

"You might have known."

"I didn't—I don't know even now."

She had made him sit down by the fire and she sat opposite him, bending towards him, with her slim, beautiful hands to the blaze. He felt that she knew, for all the outward signs of his prosperity, that he was destitute. He felt that his real self with which she had always been so much concerned had been stripped naked, and that she was trying to warm and console him. She was wrapping him round with that unchanged tenderness.

"It's—it's the old room!" he said.

But his enmity was dead. He was at peace with it. He had been initiated. He had heard, very faintly it is true, but loud enough to understand, the music to which the faun danced. He was not the outsider any more.

"I wanted it to be the same."

"And the house——"

"I took it as soon as I could get it. I made up my mind to live here, whatever it cost. You see, I was quite sure that you would go past one of these days to have a look at it, and that you would say to yourself: 'Why, there's Francey, after all! I'll go in——'"

But they both drew back instinctively. He blundered into a hurried question. The Gang? What had happened to them all? It seemed that Gertie still lived, defying medical opinion and apparently feeding her starved spirit on the treasures of the Vatican. Howard, who had become a very bad artist and lived on selling copies of the masterpieces to tourists, looked after her.

"But they're not married," Francey said. "Just friends."

He said humbly:

"Well, he's been awfully decent to her."

As to the rest, no one knew what had become of them.

"And you've done splendidly, Robert, better than any of us."

"I've been a failure," he answered, "a rotten failure!"

She accepted the statement gravely, without protest, and that sincerity was like a skilled hand on a wound. It brought comfort where a fumbling kindness would have been unendurable. It made him strangely, deeply happy to know that she would see too that he had failed. "I've never had pity on anyone—not even myself—I've learnt nothing that matters."

For a while they sat silent, looking into the fire, like people who are waiting and preparing themselves for some great event. And presently, without moving, in an undertone he began to tell her about the Marie Dubois who had died, and how he had seen her long ago at the Circus, his first and only circus. He told her about the Circus itself. He did not choose his words, but stammered and fumbled and jumped from one thing to another. He opened his heart and took out whatever he found there, and showed it to her very humbly, just as it was. It seemed certain and imperative that after a little while they should both see the pattern of it all. He told her about his love for his dead mother, and how his father had died and had come back, haunting him in his sleep.

Then he remembered something he had never thought of before—how he had looked up at the window of the room where his father was lying dead, and had wanted to run—run fast.

"But I think I've lived in that dark house all my life," he said, "and I've gone about in it, blustering and swaggering and being hard and strong because I was so desperately afraid—of life, of caring too much, of failing. And now—I've come out."

And then he began to tremble all over and suddenly he was crying helplessly.

She knelt beside him. She drew him into her arms. It was their moment in the green forest over again, but now there was no antagonism in their love. She was the warm, good spirit of the life to which he had become reconciled. They had belonged to one another from the beginning. His fear had stood between them. But she had gone on loving him, steadfastly, because nothing else was possible to her.

"Francey—do you remember—that time we fought one another—over an idiotic stick? I was such a young rotter—I wouldn't own up—that you were stronger than I was."

She took his wet hands and kissed them. It was as though she had said aloud, smiling to herself:

"It's all right now, anyhow, you odd, sad little boy."

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