Blind Man's Year

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CHAPTER ONE

The young man stopped to question a labourer who was mending a gap in a hedge.

"Am I right for Knoll Farm?"

The man in the field pointed with his billhook in the direction of a high wood of Scotch firs.

"Up there. First turning on your right."

The young man thanked him and walked on. He carried a rather dirty brown mackintosh slung over his left shoulder, and the face under the grey felt hat was both cheeky and worried. Authority had said to him: "Go down and get an interview with Douglas Gerard. Difficult? I know. It's up to you, my lad. She will never be interviewed or shot, and she's news. Go and get something."

The young man was not feeling happy about this adventure. He had a wife and two children and his position with the *Metropolis* was none too secure. Authority had been terse and sarcastic, and suggesting that editors judged you by the products of your pen. Miss Gerard's pen had been exceedingly productive, and her latest book "A Pilgrimage of Pain" had gone all over the world as a poignant human document whose success had been all the more singular in that it had both captured the masses and pleased the critics. But Miss Gerard was an exceedingly shy and separative person, and her elusiveness made her all the more interesting and mysterious. She had snubbed the Press and repulsed all camera men, and gossip had become so imaginative that it had begun to hint that Miss Gerard was not woman.

Authority had put it rather coarsely to young Trevor Jones.

"Find out what's under the skirts, my lad."

Sensation! Yes, always and everywhere headlines and a shout.

"Famous Novelist Unveiled." Yet, on this April morning, England was so very lovely that even a young man in search of an income and with a quarter's rent unpaid was moved to other-worldliness. The banks were pied with primroses and wild

violets. The gorse was ablaze, the green hillsides brilliant. "Polished plush," thought young Jones, and made a mental note of the phrase. That wood of Scotch firs was like a high masted ship sailing the blue welkin. And then, the young man came to the lane which climbed to this old Sussex farmstead between oak trees with buds of burnished gold. Scattered larches were infinitely green, and so were the young leaves of the thorns.

The lane ascended, curved across a grass field and was suddenly and uncompromisingly occluded by a faded blue gate hung on stone pillars, between high dense hedges of yew. Young Jones stood and stared at the gate. Masses of shrubs and trees hid everything beyond, save one red brick chimney-stack crowned by three red pots. It was impossible to trespass either to right or left, for the hedges were reinforced against such divergings by a close meshed wire fence. Miss Gerard's home was a veritable fortress.

The young man put a hand to the iron ring of the gate latch. The gate was bolted or padlocked on the inside, and the sudden consciousness of being thwarted after a three-mile tramp from Feldhurst village provoked in him qualms of fear and of irritation. Was he to return unprimed to the sarcastic and unsympathetic god in the chair and say: "The gate was locked"? Authority might reply: "You're not much bloody use to us if you can't gate-crash, my lad."

Editors, like landlords, can preach a harsh determinism, and inspired by the dread of finding himself superfluous in a highly competitive world, the journalist dared to be impudent. Why not climb the gate and defy Miss Gerard's defences? After all, Miss Gerard's annoyance might be less expensive than his editor's scorn. Moreover, was there not copy in the conception of penetrating the mystery of an eccentric woman's seclusion? With a little imagination a highly spiced article might be his. Trevor Jones slung his mackintosh over the gate, pulled himself up and, straddling the gate, paused there for a moment. He saw a gravelled drive disappearing between banks of shrubs, forsythia and ribes in flower, daffodils massed along a turf bank, a flush of peach blossom against a very blue sky. The place was secret and still and steeped in sunshine.

"Well, here goes!" he thought, dropping to earth, and recovering his mackintosh he ventured up the drive. It appeared to have been carefully plotted in a double curve so that the house and garden should remain concealed. Young Jones chose to walk on one of the grass verges, and this stealthiness brought him surreptitiously and abruptly into the presence of two large yew trees, and between them a brick porch.

But there was another presence here, a crisis couchant in the shape of a large Alsatian dozing in the sunlight, his nose between his paws. The journalist hesitated,

and the dog's eyes opened. A moment later the young man from London was speeding towards the gate with that rude beast savagely pursuing. Young Jones took a flying leap at the gate. He got his legs over it, but the dog's teeth snapped upon his trailing mackintosh and the thing was left as a sop to Cerberus.

Would that damned dog jump the gate? It could and might, and the scared intruder was about to resume his flight when he heard a voice calling the dog.

"Prince, Prince!"

It was a woman's voice, anxious and vibrant. It seemed to come drifting down between the flowering shrubs to the blue gate where the dog was worrying poor Trevor's mackintosh. "Prince, heel, heel." The young man hesitated. He was moved to react against that shameful, scrambling exit. One might lose a mackintosh and one's dignity, but might not opportunity be here?

Above the sound of the dog's growlings and the rending of material he heard footsteps on the gravel.

"Prince, come here. What have you got?"

The journalist was moved to answer that question.

"He's got my mackintosh."

The dog had turned with a dog's smirk to assure his mistress that he too had a sense of humour. She held him by the collar.

"Who is that?"

Mr. Jones was recovering his courage. He was extracting a card from his pocket-book, and he dropped it over the gate.

"I have come to interview Miss Gerard."

She had picked up his poor mackintosh, but she did not trouble to collect his card.

"Miss Gerard does not grant interviews."

"The editor of *Metropolis*—"

"I think you must have heard what I said."

"But the public is very interested in—"

His mackintosh flew over the gate.

"I'm afraid the dog has torn it. It was very indiscreet of you to trespass. Please assure your editor that Miss Gerard does not appreciate attacks upon her privacy."

"Excuse me, are you Miss Gerard?"

Two hands appeared on the top of the blue gate. He was inexcusably eager to seize this opportunity.

The dog growled.

Said the voice: "Please stay where you are, or I will let the dog loose."

The hands were withdrawn.

"You are not very kind to your admirers, Miss Gerard."

"Too much admiration can be embarrassing."

So it was Miss Gerard on the other side of the gate, and her voice was the voice of a woman. That would dispose of the absurd canard that she was more Douglas than her pseudonym.

"I quite understand," said he, "but couldn't you make an exception?"

"No."

"It really is rather important to me. You see, editors are rather touchy people, and I've got a wife and two kids."

She was stroking the dog's head.

"But don't you realize, Mr.—"

"Trevor Jones."

"Don't you realize that you are obtaining an interview?"

"You mean?"

"How old are the children?"

"Molly's three and Derek one."

"And how long have you been married?"

"Four years. Life's rather a struggle, you know."

Poor young thing! And that ruined mackintosh! Could she offer him money for it?

"I think you are obtaining some quite unusual material, Mr. Jones."

"You mean I may use it?"

"Perhaps."

His face was a shimmer of excitement.

"How splendid of you. May I say that I was chased out of your garden by your dog?"

"Certainly. It will discourage others, will it not?"

"I say, that's marvellous! And that I interviewed you through the gate?"

"Yes."

"Without seeing you?"

"Yes."

"Thanks most awfully, Miss Gerard. It's a real scoop. And would you mind telling me how you came to write 'A Pilgrimage of Pain'?"

"It wrote itself. It's the biography of a woman I know."

"A real person?"

"Yes."

The young man had his notebook out and was scribbling in it.

"A human document, what. And is it true, Miss Gerard, that the book has sold nearly a million copies in England and America?"

"I believe so."

"And been translated into every language?"

"With the exception of Russian and, I think, Chinese."

"And what was your reaction, Miss Gerard, over the gigantic success of this book?"

She hesitated.

"Oh, well, it enabled me to put radiators into my house."

His puzzled pencil remained poised.

"Radiators? But—"

"Yes, and buy the land right down to the sea, and plant millions of bulbs. You see, Mr. Jones, I am a very selfish person."

He was gallant.

"I don't accept that, Miss Gerard. I'm sure you must have done—"

"Nothing that has caused me any privation. There is one thing I must insist on."

"Yes."

"You will submit proofs. And you will make your article a warning to others."

"Of course, Miss Gerard. I quite understand."

"I'm so sorry about your mackintosh. Would you allow me to—"

"On no account, Miss Gerard. This interview is worth all sorts of things to me. I might almost call it a test case so far as my editor is concerned."

"I am glad. My love to the children, and my coldest compliments to your editor. Good morning, Mr. Jones. I must get back to my gardening."

"Thanks most awfully, Miss Gerard. I will make sure that the proofs are submitted. I do hope you will pass them."

"It's a promise."

"Thank you so much."

Instinctively he raised his hat to the blue gate, and picking up his forlorn mackintosh turned to go.

"My compliments to Prince, Miss Gerard, and tell him I regret that it could not have been my trousers."

"Prince has a nice sense of property, Mr. Jones."

"He has. I'll put that down."

With the dog at her heels she walked back to the Sussex farmhouse which she had converted into a secret sanctuary for her soul. Grey stone below, red brick and tile above, its patina softened by the wind and the sun and the rain, its windows looked down two green valleys to the sea. The place was set upon the saddle of a hill, the ridge rising in front of it to a belt of old Scotch firs, and falling again in a green glacis to the cliff edge. The two valleys were full of rolling gorse and sheltered above by oak woods, and from the window of the room in which she wrote her secret self could dwell upon all this loveliness of sea and wood and sky. In her dreaming moods she would call it "Tristan Country," though her Iseult might be but a dim and tragic shape.

A certain sound came to her ears as she reached the corner of the house, a sound that associated itself with the smell of hyacinths, and the yellow flutter of the wings of the Sulphur butterfly. Almost it was a nature sound, a stridulation of the spring. Her old gardener was cutting the grass. She saw him appear, bending over the handles of the machine, his very blue eyes set in an absorbed stare. His face and neck were like creased leather, his Saxon mustachios grizzled. On his head he wore an old grey cloth cap that was eternally incongruous. To her historic sense it should have been a helmet.

The blades ceased from whirring. The grass-box was full, and as he unhitched it to empty the contents into a barrow he became aware of her presence.

"Heavy going, Will."

Always she was conscious of the extraordinary straightness of his glance. He looked at her as a dog might look, not seeming to see that which she shrank from showing to the world.

"Plenty o' bottom to it, miss."

He was sixty-seven and she had offered him a motor-mower, and he had scorned it. "Foreign, new fangled things!"

"I suppose it is not quite safe yet to put out the Blue Lilies?"

No, it wasn't safe. Frosts in May. Besides, why be in a hurry? Your country man learns to wait upon the whims of Nature.

"I hope Mary's toothache is better?"

"I made she poultice it. Bust in the night, it did."

"We must send her to see a dentist."

Will did not altogether hold with dentists. When he had been afflicted with an aching tooth he had suffered the darned thing grimly, or dealt with it, if the tooth was at all loose, with ruthless finger and thumb.

She too worked with her hands, for such labour had become part of her

philosophy. To be all head was not wholesome, and though she had the world of her imagination to wander in, the world outside her windows insisted on being lived in. She had set herself to create beauty, without believing that it was possible to lose yourself in impersonal things. You just made your choice without craving the crowd's illusion of happiness. What was happiness? She had days of beautiful serenity, and days of sadness when some unsatisfied urge troubled her like the swell of the sea. Why this restlessness? And if you set out to interpret life, to be the medium of humanity's moods, it behoved you not to be too happy. No one would describe the violin as an instrument of crude, trumpeting complacency.

When Mr. Trevor Jones's intrusion had interrupted her she had been scuffling the caked soil of the herbaceous borders with a Dutch hoe. The oblong space in front of the farmhouse had, with its low stone wall, persuaded her to plan a beautiful formality, grass and stone, lead figures, a pool, flanking hedges of yew, and broad borders under the wall for a coloured setting. Two formal beds were a blaze of tulips, wallflower, polyanthus, red daisies and myosotis. She liked her colours rich and varied. The big borders were full of Darwin and May flowering tulips, and she had had to work carefully and deliberately so as not to injure them with her hoe.

But those few moments of contact with the outer world had altered the morning's rhythm for her. An anxious young man, a wife, children, the scramble to survive, the strange game of collecting what was known as news! Picking sensation like rank herbs to spice the stew of other people's dull lives! She felt that she wanted to go and look at the sea, and leaving the hoe standing in the soil, and followed by the dog, she took the paved path to the iron gate in the stone wall. It was a beautiful gate, if a reproduction, of Italian work, and through its scrolls she saw the green hillside rising to the sailing firs.

Will had pushed his cap back and was watching her before giving the mower's bearings a dose of oil. Will's brain was not all turnip and winter-wash. A man who has watched the ways of Nature for fifty years is no fool, though the mass-product mind might think him an old oaf in corduroys. Will was saying to himself as he had said before: "Well, be'nt that queer, that one side of her face should be like a white rose, and t'other blotched the colour o' beetroot! Nature made a mess o' that, I reckon. And she not much more than five and thirty!" That there could be bitterness in such a blemish was well within Will's understanding. Didn't he know that if a woman lost a front tooth, or had a spot on her forehead, she was shy of being stared at? Thin-skinned creatures, women. Miss Gerard had been born with that port-wine mark on the left side of her face, like a splodge of purple paint laid on flat, and the doctors had not been able to do anything about it.

Will squirted oil into the machine's bearings.

"Look at her one side and she's a pretty woman; look at her t'other—! Nature do play tricks on we mortals."

The patched seat of his trousers was turned to the windows when a voice hailed him.

"Will?"

"Hallo."

"Where is she?"

"Gone up to t'fir wood with t'dog."

The face of Jane saluted the sunlight. A plain, kind, crumpled face, it had made her just Jane to all humanity. She had hairs on her chin and brown eyes that are somehow doomed to devotion, be the object of it a cat or her kitchen range.

"I wanted to ask her if she'd remembered about something."

Will was again in action with the mower. If women liked to be vague, that was their business, not his.

"Well, if you've both forgot, I can't help 'ee."

Which was obvious, as obvious as the patch on William's rump, and Jane, knowing her Will, left it at that.

Meanwhile, Rosamund Gerard had climbed the green hill to the grove of firs, and from this high place she could look out over Sussex and the sea, and on this April day the spring woods were spun silk and the sea almost the sea of Greece. Leaning against one of the trees and looking up along its tall straight trunk, she could detect no movement of the green top. This stillness should have soothed her. Was not this little world all hers, with its burning gorse and burgeoning oaks, and that orchard in bloom beside Will Spray's cottage? Sea and sky and woods were hers, peace, security, the right to be utterly herself, and yet this ultimate restlessness pursued her.

Had she not made her choice? Had not this lonely life given her powers of self-expression, just because of the foolishly simple things that were denied her? The unshed tears of her loneliness! And then, feeling the dog's cold nose touching her hand, she looked down, met his asking eyes and understood him.

"Run, Prince."

Something broke loose in her. She ran like a long-legged girl down the grass slope to the cliff's edge, with the dog bounding beside her. She stood poised on a shelf of grey rock, her hands clasped behind her head, her eyes catching the sparkle of the sea. It lay far below, making wet murmurings against the rocks, and between her and the sea a great cliff smothered itself in scrub oak, wind-blown thorns,

bracken and ivy. She swayed a little in a kind of ecstasy. How easy it would be to throw oneself down!

The dog's nose touched her hand again, and she remembered, and suddenly bending she kissed his head.

"One must suffer in order to be able to say things, my dear."

And turning back she reclimbed the grass slope to the grove of firs, and sitting down among the trees sat brooding with the dog's head in her lap.

CHAPTER TWO

Launcelot Gerard and his wife had been dead for many years, and ever since she could remember, their youngest daughter had been trying to forgive her parents for that birth-mark, and her Christian name. Rosamund, Rose of the World! How ironical!

There had been no sons in the Gerard family, and she had been the last of three daughters, and always she had had the feeling that her father had regarded her disfigurement as a personal affront. She remembered him vividly for his vanity, and his Mincing Lane manners, for his love of display, and the perfect creasing of his trousers. As a child she had thought of him as possessing tin legs, and eyes that had regarded her as though kindness was, like his trousers, a very artificial product. He had left her ten thousand pounds on trust in Government stock, and the echoes of a conversation she had overheard: "It is one's duty to provide for Rosamund. The inevitable spinster, my dear sir. But one must take steps to insure that no cad will ever make a fool of her for her money."

Her memories of her mother were more happy, but Irene Gerard had died during Rosamund's first year at school, that dreadful school where her secret soul had suffered so many repressions and so much humiliation. Life had not allowed her to become unaware of her disfigurement. She could remember appealing to her father: "Must I go back to school?" and he, absorbed in the excitements of a middle-aged man's pursuit of a second marriage, had been irritated by her emotional sensitiveness. He had stood up and harangued her. Of course she must go back to school. She must learn to outgrow this absurd self-consciousness. She must try and forget that discoloration of her skin, which, after all, was not so obvious as she imagined, and she had gone back to school feeling bitter and frightened, to find there the one friend to whom her disfigurement was not a stigma.

"Why didn't it come in the middle of my back, Margaret?"

"For other reasons, perhaps. The beauty inside you."

It was Margaret Hayle who had helped her through those school years, beautiful Margaret, with her deep brown eyes and her serene forehead. She had never been jealous of Margaret or grudged her her beauty, for Margaret was lovely within as well as without, and to her over-sensitive friend she had uncovered a mystical mirror.

"Make your own world, Rose."

It was Margaret who had helped her to make it, Margaret the fastidious feminist, who, launched on her own career as a healer, had taken Rosamund into her little London flat and given her that precious, personal room where she could scribble. Margaret an M.D. London! How strange life was! Margaret doctoring other people's babies, and not caring, apparently, to possess one of her own. And Margaret was still with her, both in the spirit and the flesh. She would drive down to the Sussex farm for occasional week-ends, and Rosamund would let loose a tongue and a soul that had been dammed up through weeks of silence. Margaret remained her one live link with the outer world, the one live person who understood her.

But in other ways the outer world was intimately hers. She, the most uncommercial of creatures, had found her public pouring wealth into her lap, and sometimes she would smile and think of her father. She, the family failure, the inevitable spinster, was to be pensioned off, and she could suppose that the income she enjoyed from a world sale of her books was ten times that which her father had earned. How his mouth would have watered! What dinners he would have given had he been the recipient of such an income, how sumptuous would have been his triumphal chariot, and what Piccadilly adventures he would have purchased! Eros in tinplate trousers! Money. It had given her this beautiful retreat and an ironical consciousness of power, and a sense of compassion that was responsible.

People wrote to her for money, and for other things, and being human and somewhat lonely she preferred those who wrote to her for other things. Her correspondence, seriously accepted, filled two hours of her day. Wives wrote to her about their husbands and their sons, daughters about their lovers and their parents, worried women about their struggles and their fears. She, who was so profoundly understanding in her books, was made to listen to the confessions of her public. She was a kind of literary priestess and seer.

She had three gallant old ladies who were part pensioners upon her bounty. She intervened many times a year to turn the bitter edge of some desperate domestic crisis. She did nothing sentimentally or blindly. She employed a confidential agent, recommended by her London lawyers, to investigate tactfully the appeals that reached her. He had saved her from hundreds of ingenious spongers. She gave Margaret Hayle £100 a year to help send her convalescent children into the country. Nor did she congratulate herself on her charitable condescension. It was just a giving back to humanity something of what humanity gave to her. When she was feeling in a difficult mood and was tempted by self-pity, she reread some of the letters that other women had written her.

Then there were her sisters, Norah and Phœbe. Yes, Norah and Phœbe! Both

were married, both had families and ambitions and delicate bank balances, and both were of the opinion that a successful, odd, and unattached sister was a person to be exploited. Aunt Rosamund was rich. Absurd, but it was so. Rosamund had duties to perform. Rosamund was obviously the family wet-nurse and social godmother. Rosamund could write a cheque whenever bank balances were wilting. Her sisters could not ask her to come and nurse their children or mind their houses when they went for holidays, or take John or Dulcie when the other children had whooping-cough. Rosamund was too eccentric and too wealthy to be exploited like the Victorian unmarried aunt, but she was expected to understand that blood was thicker than water.

"What can she do with all her money?"

Miss Gerard disliked both her sisters with equal sincerity, and she kept them at a distance. Norah with her cold blue stare and hard-boiled egg of a chin, was married to a doctor who practised in a north-country town, and so was not too near a neighbour. Norah had evolved subtle methods of compulsion. She had concentrated that blue stare on the disfigured side of her younger sister's face. People should pay for their blemishes.

Phœbe was florid and fat and voluble, and as full of Phœbe as a ripe peach is full of juice. She had three children and a golfing husband, and a house at Oxshott in Surrey. Phœbe was inconveniently near. It had been very much her custom to crash down upon Rosamund in a voluble little car. Phœbe drove as she lived, with a delightfully jocund and florid disregard of other people's necessities. All the road was Phœbe's, but upon one of her speedings she had killed a cyclist, and with such characteristic indiscretion that her licence had been withdrawn for three years. Hence Phœbe was not quite so mobile and so prevalent.

Jane knocked gently at her mistress's door. Between the hours of eight-thirty a.m. and eleven Miss Gerard was not to be disturbed. This making of books might seem to Jane to be a mysterious business, but it fed the cat and paid Will's wages, and made life comfortable for an elderly woman whose philosophy was that of staying put.

"Sorry, miss. Telegram."

Miss Gerard rose from her chair. Her writing-desk stood in the window of an upper room, and from it she could look down the twin valleys to the sea.

"So sorry, miss. The boy came to Will's gate."

"I was only writing letters, Jane."

Miss Gerard opened and read the telegram.

"My dear, must see you. Expect me lunch. Phœbe."

Jane, waiting with the silver salver held naïvely against her tummy, watched Miss Gerard's face. It was a very sensitive face, and it had a trick of fluttering its lashes when it was troubled or worried.

"Mrs. Prodgers, Jane. Lunch. Can you manage?"

"Yes, miss. Will there be a chauffeur?"

"If there is, he can go to Feldhurst."

She was not feeling friendly towards her second sister. She was wise as to Phœbe's "Oh, my dear." Such exclamatory preludes promised exploitation. And somewhere in Sussex Phœbe was explaining to an idle young man whose car and person she had borrowed, the ridiculous sensitiveness of her sister.

"I don't think I can get you in, Archie."

"Why not?"

"Well, you see, she's not quite normal. One half of her face is all right, the other, half all nævus."

"What's that?"

"A port-wine mark, my dear. Born with it. Norah always says that nævus and genius must be synonymous."

"How woozy! Won't she see people?"

"No. Keeps a large Alsatian. And you'd frighten her to death, or the dog might bite you."

He was a very stupid but good-looking young man, save that his lower lip was too pendulous.

"What do I do?"

"Better drive down to Westbourn and lunch yourself. I've got the tea-basket, and we'll do a little picnic in Ashdown Forest going home."

The young man shot his lower lip at her.

Phœbe Prodgers had a provincial mind and her father's vanity, minus his Mincing Lane manners. People who liked her called her a good sort, though in what her goodness lay was not easy to define. She displayed her virtues, like her clothes, played a selfish and noisy hand at bridge, quarrelled with the tradespeople, left her bills unpaid for months on end, and said frankly that she knew just how to manage her husband and her children, though the success of the delicate manipulations was not very patent to the world. Her children were rowdy little exhibitionists; Tom Prodgers so little under her control that he ran away from her whenever he could find an excuse for doing it. Indeed, she belonged to a Victorian, Champagne Charlie

period, and might have functioned as the typically flavicomous Victorian barmaid confronting a cad's world with full bosom and flowery face, and a candour like unrefined sugar.

Miss Gerard heard the car climbing the steep lane. It was not a car that concealed its coming, nor was Phœbe's young man of the order of quietists. Miss Gerard, in a playful moment, had described him and his likes as "bowler-hatted bounders of the baser sort." The dog had been shut up in the kitchen and, accepting the inevitableness of Phœbe, Miss Gerard walked down to the gate. It was padlocked, and she had the key.

Conversation was in progress beyond the barrier.

"I say, does she keep that locked?"

"Yes, my dear."

"What a wooze! Then, I shall have to back all the way down this lane."

"You will."

"What time shall I come and pick you up?"

"About three. I expect we shall have bored each other sufficiently by then."

"Righto."

He proceeded to reverse the car down the lane, and Phœbe Prodgers stood outside the blue gate with a smile ready to break through her very natural sense of irritation. She understood the absurd ritual of the place. Her sister provided no means of communication. You either waited for the agreed moment to arrive, or you shouted until that old crab of a gardener heard you. What a place, what a life! And then, one leaf of the gate swung open unexpectedly, for the mechanical clamour of the small car had smothered the sound of Miss Gerard's footsteps.

The Phœbe smile was turned on like artificial sunlight.

"Oh, my dear, I simply couldn't give you longer notice."

She would have kissed Rosamund carefully on her undiscoloured cheek had not Miss Gerard long ago made it evident by a certain flinching coldness that she did not wish to be saluted. Phœbe might boast of her robust and affectionate frankness, but nothing was more transparent than her attempts to conceal ulterior motives. She could be so like a child on its best behaviour, trying not to look too patently at the cake dish.

"Have you sent your chauffeur away?"

It was important that Rosamund should not assume that Prodgers and Co. could afford a chauffeur.

"Oh, it's only young Archie Sugden. Such a nice lad. He had to come and see an aunt at Westbourn and he drove me down. Oh, my dear, isn't the garden lovely!"

They were in the drive, and the garden as a garden was not yet visible, but Phœbe, when once she had chosen her record and got it started, had to let it run. Why did women like Phœbe always lie, even when the plain issue needed no embroidery?

"I'm afraid there is only cold lunch."

"Oh, just anything will do for me, my dear. I never mind what I eat. Isn't Sussex just marvellous on a day like this? And how's dear Jane?"

Miss Gerard was trying not to be rendered inarticulate by her sister, for Phœbe had that effect upon her, of making her close every secret window and sit in a kind of cold fug of ruthless cynicism.

"Jane's just Jane."

"And where's the dear dog? You don't mean to say you have shut him up? He's such a darling. Oh, I simply must tell you what Rex said the other day. Rex is just five, you know, and of all the little bits of mischief—We were giving a bridge party, and he came in to say good night. And what do you think he asked Tom?"

Miss Gerard, perhaps with some inward waywardness, kept her disfigured cheek towards her sister.

"What did he ask Tom?"

"'Daddy, what is a har-lot?'"

Miss Gerard smiled faintly.

"And did Tom tell him?"

"My dear, how could he? My partner got giggles and we missed a grand slam. Oh, but the garden! It's simply a picture. I really want to look at it. You must have spent a fortune on bulbs. But then you can afford it. Simply marvellous, just by writing books. I can't think how you do it."

Miss Gerard was wondering just when the basic inspiration of Phœbe's visit would begin to display itself. Her sister's diplomacy was very much that of carnal woman. "Give a man a drink before you tell him the kitchen boiler's worn out." In all probability Phœbe would begin her pathetic story after lunch over coffee and a cigarette. And what would the particular plea prove to be on this occasion? Had Tom had to pay one of his many indigent sisters' nursing-home and doctor's bills, or had the family car suffered more damage, or the moment arrived when the whole interior of "The Cedars" had to be redecorated? "Oh, my dear, business, you know, is awful." Or had Phœbe been buying too many new clothes, and had Tom exploded?

Phœbe drank half a bottle of white wine for lunch and, as Miss Gerard had expected, her sister warmed to the crisis over her coffee. She had been telling Miss

Gerard how she had overheard someone at a dinner enthusing over Rosamund's latest book. "It really did make me feel proud, you know, to be able to say 'That's my sister.'" Miss Gerard sat on the sofa with her back to the light and supposed that the dénouement must be very near. It was, but its appearance was prepared by a description of how bad things were in the City, and how worried Tom was about the future, and the children's education. Almost Tom was proposing to give up golf.

"Of course, my dear, I oughtn't to worry you with our affairs, but it does seem rather hard that when you are trying to be bright and busy people should let you down. Really, people do such dreadful things."

And what was the dreadful thing that people had done to the Prodgers? Phœbe explained.

"Oh, Tom backed a bill or something for a friend in the City. Supposed to be quite a decent person and all that. Would you believe me, but Tom has been let in. It's only for two hundred pounds, but Tom had just paid his insurance premium and it makes it dreadfully awkward."

Miss Gerard made a most unsympathetic suggestion.

"Can't Tom go to his bank?"

"Of course, my dear, but they would charge him eight per cent., and then it isn't quite nice for a business man to go and cadge. Things get about so. And you know, my dear, it's so important to appear prosperous. People talk. It's really dreadful how men gossip in the train, and of course that sort of thing isn't good for business. Social position, prestige, do matter. People are such snobs."

Miss Gerard felt that the predestined moment had arrived, and she was wishing to get it over.

"Tom wants to borrow money without it being known?"

"Exactly. How quick of you to understand. Tom has written out a post-dated cheque. He wondered whether you could see your way to advance him something on it? Of course, it's only a loan for three months and Tom wishes to pay interest."

Phœbe's fingers were busy in her bag. A cigarette drooped from one corner of her mouth. Miss Gerard held out a hand.

"There you are, my dear. I do hate worrying relations, but, after all, there are occasions."

Miss Gerard scanned the cheque.

"Five hundred pounds! I thought you said two hundred?"

"Did I? Two, yes, but one must have a margin."

Miss Gerard laid the cheque on the sofa and appeared to reflect.

"Phœbe."

"Yes, dear?"

"Supposing I haven't five hundred pounds to my credit?"

She was aware of her sister's sudden suspicious stare.

"Oh, then, of course, you couldn't. But, perhaps three hundred?"

"Phœbe, I happen to have all kinds of commitments that you do not know of. No, I won't specify them in detail. Has Tom any security to offer me?"

"Security?"

"Yes, collateral, stocks or bonds. You see, if I am to act as a banker, this should be a business transaction."

"But you have that cheque."

"Just a promise to pay."

"My dear, do you mean to suggest—?"

But Miss Gerard had decided that it was time to suppress too much sensitiveness. There had been too many occasions when she had assisted her sister, and the thing was becoming a habit.

"Tom is a business man, and I prefer this to be a business transaction. If your husband will deposit the proper securities with me I will make the advance against them."

She folded up the cheque and, returning it to her sister, watched Phœbe's fat fingers thrusting it back into the bag. It was obvious to her that Phœbe was feeling hot and insulted.

"Yes, I'll have to tell Tom that you don't trust him."

"I should not tell him that, Phœbe. Explain that I should like him to approach me as he would approach another business man."

"I'm afraid Tom will be so hurt."

"Why?"

"Oh, you don't understand. You're so—so well off and safe. I'm sorry I ever mentioned the matter."

Miss Gerard glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. The hands stood at five minutes to three.

"I think Tom will understand, Phœbe. As a business man he may prefer me to be businesslike."

Her sister also had glanced at the clock.

"The car must be there. No, please don't bother to come to the gate."

Miss Gerard did not propose to go to the gate.

"Get Tom to write to me."

"I'm quite sure he will do nothing of the kind. After all, we're not spongers."

Miss Gerard did not argue the point, but she had a conviction that had she been able to listen in to "The Cedar's" conversation that evening she would have heard hard things said about herself. Which was true.

"It's a damned insult! Chucking my cheque back at me!"

"All right, all right, I did my best. Rosamund always was funny. It's her face, of course, and it has made her more so. And living all alone like that. People without children and that sort of thing always get mean. It's really horrible that money should make one so suspicious."

II

The blurtings of the vulgar, like the sayings of little children, may bruise the skin of some secretly cherished sin, and Miss Gerard could apply all the Prodgers' adjectives to her own separative soul. Mean, selfish, suspicious. Was the accusation true? Yes, in a sense it was, even as she could have been accused of possessing a heart, liver, kidneys. She had chosen to live this separative life, to inhabit a secret world in which she shared the lives of the creatures she created. She had walked up to the pinewood after her sister's departure, and let herself slip into one of those analytical and self-accusing moods that afflict those who are too sensitive. Sackcloth rubbing against silk! There would be no submergence of self in creative dreaming. Phœbe had left her feeling raw and elemental and restless.

All this loveliness of sea and landscape and of sky! Was she selfish in desiring to possess it and her soul in peace? Did she desire it and nothing else? Oh, intimate, inevitable flinchings of the flesh! She, too, had to contend with and suppress those elemental qualms and yearnings. It was so easy for a separative person to become—what was the word?—Funny? That, no doubt, was the word her relations used, and even in its vulgar implications it was adequate. Funny, faddy, abnormal. She was so wise as to her own hypersensitive reactions. She was quite absurdly intolerant of noise, the many mechanical noises of the modern world. She detested aeroplanes. A plane overhead made her feel almost like a bird crouching in a hedge with a kestrel poised up above. She had bought Knoll Farm because it did not lie near any of the new arteries of noise, in the air or on the earth. Her very work insisted upon silence, and even old Will had been educated into refraining from activities under her window when she worked.

"Am I growing funny?"

The firs were talking softly to each other, but such nature sounds never disturbed her. She loved them. No wind could be too strong, no seas too thunderous. But had

she not seen something in the eyes of Margaret, a kind of physician's look, deep, penetrating, troubled? Hyperæsthesia of the soul! Margaret had teased her gently.

"I believe you have only half a skin. Oh, yes, I know. If you lived next door to a school playground—"

She could laugh at herself with Margaret.

"Would you call it neurasthenia?"

"No, my dear."

"Or the selfishness of the hypersensitive?"

"I might. I'm going to be puckish, and prescribe one small child hammering a tea-tray under your window."

"But it wouldn't be my child."

"Why not consider it as a universal?"

She had smiled at Margaret.

"None of your symbolism. As if one did not know when one was being naughty! One does, and goes on being naughty. One even discovers a sort of pleasure in it."

"Spiting the Nanny in yourself! Aren't we strange creatures? Just because someone else in you says 'Don't'."

"You're so impartial, my dear. Tell me, do you see signs of incipient reclusomania?"

"I wish you would bother a little more about your clothes."

"My dear, to what purpose?"

"We moderns rather regard it as a sign of health."

"Physical and mental?"

"Both."

She let her head rest against the trunk of the tree, and looking up at its green branches she supposed that Margaret was right. She had no personal vanity, nor had Margaret for that matter, for Margaret's loveliness was so complete that she had no more need to be self-conscious about it than this stately tree. Though Margaret would have said that no beauty can transcend clothes, and that the skin and texture of life should be part of the ritual of a fastidious self-regard. But clothes? How could clothes concern a woman who lived the life of a recluse? She had done with mirrors, for mirrors had tortured her as a child. Did her dog care how she dressed? Was old Will Spray Molyneux minded?

She shopped by post, though once or twice a year she did permit Messrs. Timmer and Morse's of Westbourn to send a representative to call on her with a selection of frocks. Flowery fabrics and silks appealed to her because of their beauty, and she would buy a dress and perhaps wear it once or twice before hanging

it in a kind of Bluebeard cupboard among other discarded frocks. Often she passed them on to Margaret for her adaptation and use, or for distribution elsewhere. Apparently it had not occurred to her that you might dress to your garden if you loved it, and keep the flowers in countenance.

Yes, undoubtedly she was growing more and more separative and eccentric, and shy of all contacts with the outer world. Mr. Biederman of Messrs. Hacking and Squires, her publishers, came down to see her twice a year. She liked Mr. Biederman. He was large and restful and matronly, a man with a lap. His big blond face would have fitted admirably into a lilac sunbonnet.

Did this monastic life matter? She might qualify the no by saying that it concerned no one but Miss Gerard. She assured herself that she did not ask to be happy. She could sublimate all elemental urges into creative dreaming and give them expression in her work.

There was one question she had not asked herself. It had fluttered in at her window like a moth in the dusk of some lonely mood, and wilfully she had ignored it, perhaps because it had made her afraid. But both Margaret Hayle and Mr. Biederman had had that same question unuttered on their lips. Was it possible for a creative mind to continue to be creative while withdrawing itself from all human contacts? And even if it survived, might not its flowering be odd and unsymmetrical and bizarre, a little *macabre*? But who could say? Genius inhabits strange places, and its twilights and its dawns may belong to a world of other dimensions.

CHAPTER THREE

A still, serene and golden day.

She liked to wake early in such weather, dress and steal downstairs into the farmhouse kitchen to put a match to Jane's meticulously clean and odourless oil stove, and while the kettle was boiling for her early tea she would go into the garden. It was so much more beautiful in the slanting, early light, with dew on the grass, a little world possessed in secret by herself and the birds. At such a time she would be conscious of a thinning of the sensuous veil. The green and flowery bosom of the earth was but a garment, the trees strange shapes in the mirror of mysticism.

She was out early on this morning in April. There was a haze over the sea, and wisps of vapour trailing from the Scotch firs. The sun and the mist were weaving fantastic patterns, covering hillsides and woods in grey tissue and then snatching it aside. One valley was in the sunlight, the other blind, and even as she watched, the sea-wrack changed its drift. A billow of mist came pouring over the garden, not a complete wave, but a great white scroll broken into vapoury patches and fringes of fog. She could see clumps of daffodil brilliantly yellow in the young grass, and suddenly they were turned to silver. The cold mist played upon her face. It was as though some world was taking shape within this primordial cloud of vapour, flashing and disappearing, becoming and glowing, veiled in the gradualness of its lovely reality, a beginning of things beneath the beneficent and unseen face of a God.

Was not her own creative craft somewhat like this, mist, vagueness, and then the penetrating light of inspiration, something to be marvelled at and exulted over? The white page was like that sheet of fog. She would sit and gaze at it, and then her pen would begin to move and her world of words would take shape in a subtle pattern of shades and sounds and colours, for to her words had colour. This would be a morning upon which things poured from you, and returning to the kitchen she made her tea and carried it up to her working-room.

She sat down at her desk by the window. Yesterday she had been groping amid the implications of a complex situation. She had lost sight of her people, but to-day she felt that she would see them clearly. She had to see them and listen to them to know them and express them. She drank her tea, and lighting a cigarette picked up her pen.

Immediately she became conscious of a sound, a melancholy complaining like

that of some vast animal in pain. Had it been there before without her being aware of it, and had the added tension of her creative mood made her conscious of it? The siren of the Long Shoal Lightship! Fog at sea, and that great grey bleating sea-cow calling for its calf. Always this particular sound had a peculiar and unpleasant effect upon her. It was like the voice of some primordial creature in pain, calling to the deep sea and the sky. Something in her answered it, that unsatisfied, secret, human self which she suppressed and kept like some blind creature in a cave. And sometimes she was conscious of its struggles and complainings.

The fog was thickening. Wisps of it floated in at her window.

The siren's voice died away. How absurd of her to be affected by a mechanical cow! She willed herself to write. She was very conscious of the fountain pen as a black, hard object between thumb and forefinger. She scribbled a few words, and paused, confronted by yet another distraction. The pen was running dry; it needed refilling.

She was conscious of saying "Damn you." She opened a drawer on her left where the bottle of ink lived with brass clips, rubber bands, envelopes, sealing-wax. She refilled the pen, but dipping it too deeply into the inkpot she found ink upon her thumb and finger. Blotting paper. She closed the drawer, and with a sense of inward stress sat squarely to recover her concentration. The sheet of paper was like an unfriendly face.

An inward voice said "Relax." She tried to let the tension melt from her mood. Again that melancholy wailing. The sound might have been just outside her window. She set herself to ignore it, only to be distracted by yet another sound, the distant howling of a dog.

Prince! She remembered that Prince was affected almost as she was by this mournful noise. But he gave tongue; he protested. Prince passed the night in a kind of super-kennel in what had been the farmyard, a chained sentinel whose duty it was to rouse old Will should any strange sound suggest trespass. The dog was chained, because Miss Gerard had found that Prince's peregrinations could be disastrous in the garden. He could leap gates, and would come and whimper under her window. Originally she had allowed the dog to share her bedroom, but he had shown such a determined desire to share the bed with her that she had been compelled to banish him. Prince's size and weight and affection were not conducive to tranquil sleep.

She surrendered. She could not be held responsible for the lightship's bellowings, and had she been able to silence them men and ships might have suffered disaster, but for the dog she was responsible. She went down and into the farmyard which had been converted into a paved court with a sunk lily pool in the centre. The

old red brick buildings had been faced with treillage over which glycine and vines and clematis scrambled, and in this courtyard she had collected statues, an Italian well-head, vases, a Charles II lead cistern, the busts of Roman emperors upon freestone pillars. Marcus Aurelius, that stoic soul, wore on his head a gilded wreath and the blessings of perching robins.

The dog saw her, and standing rampant with the chain taut between kennel and collar made welcoming noises.

"You scoundrel, Prince. You and the lightship ruined my inspiration."

She went to let him off the chain, but he put his forepaws on her shoulder and licked her face, her poor undesired, blemished face.

"My dear, it doesn't matter to you."

She felt grateful to this creature, responsible for him. Prince, too, was a celibate, living a separative life, yet craving his share of affection. She slipped the catch of the chain, and he went bounding round the courtyard as though challenging her to share the joy of life. Barbarous things, chains.

"All right, my dear, we'll go and look at the sea."

But looking at the sea was a mere figure of speech. She could distinguish nothing but a great white sheet hanging above the dewy turf and the dim gorse bushes. It was not easy to tell where the hillside ended and the cliff began, and out of that mysterious, genetic haze came the sighings of the lightship.

"O woman, and those who sail the sea, beware! I suffer that you may be saved."

The dog was standing close beside her, staring into the fog as though he too divined in it the sinister inception of things unseen.

II

The blindness of the day continued, and so did Miss Gerard's own sightless mood. She did not go up to her working room after breakfast, but sat reading Gibson and Harper's "Riddle of Jutland," great ships groping for each other in the fog at sea. And perhaps it piqued her to read of the crowd's illusions, and of the officious strutting of Fleet Street, and the re-elevation of that quiet little man, Genius Unplacarded. Jellicoe and Jutland, newspaper magnates with swollen heads, fog, jealousies, ungenerous gossip, and then, in such a book as this the sun coming out and the truth floating upon the waters.

Sunlight. She looked out of the window and saw the garden suddenly alive. The firs were green upon their hill. Old Will had said that the day might clear about eleven, but that he would not promise her what the afternoon might be. Should she

go out and garden, or paint the garden frame that was waiting for her in the Knoll Farm workshop? No, she was not quite in the mood for work with either head or hands; she would take the dog out along the cliff track towards Beacon Hill.

She went. The sun was shining on the gorse, but over yonder a veil of vapour hung down to shroud the sea. The cliff path was the one solitary walk she could enjoy, for she was absurdly sensitive about meeting people, and would turn aside and disappear amid the gorse bushes to avoid the most casual contact. Even the dog had picked up her unsocial prejudices and would growl at any stranger, and fix them with fierce, amber eyes. She had to snap the leash to his collar if any human figure hove in sight.

She saw no one that morning but a farmer's son out with a gun, and the lad was so absorbed in his own affairs that he did not notice her, nor did Prince challenge him. She climbed Beacon Hill and saw Sussex and its coast hazed in momentary sunlight, but already the fog was beginning to advance again from the sea. There was a faint drift of cold air from the east. She returned, feeling soothed and far less restless, to one of Jane's omelette and rhubarb tart lunches. It had been one of Mary Spray's mornings in the house, and on such occasions Jane was apt to be heavy handed with the sugar.

Miss Gerard liked a long chair in the garden after lunch, half an hour's reading, half an hour's sleep, and then more work with hands or head. It was always possible for her to find a sheltered, draughtless spot under the stone wall or behind the banks of shrubs. To-day she arranged her chair and garden mattress and cushions in the little loggia she had had built. A glass screen sheltered it from the east, and here, on this April day, she drew the rug over her and felt at peace.

She read, she slept, to wake shortly after three to the sound of the lightship's complaining. The sea-wrack was drifting in again, and though the garden lay in the thin sunlight the firs on the hill stood like tall ships befogged. It occurred to her that if she climbed the hill she would be able to watch this game of hide and seek between the sea spirit and the land, and leaving her rug and cushions in a tangle, she went out by way of the gate in the stone wall. Half-way up the hillside she became involved in the drifting mist, and felt its cold breath upon her face.

She reached the trees, and stood there watching the landscape being blotted out. Soon she might have been in the middle of a cloud, and twenty yards away the trunks of the firs were scarcely visible. She was on the point of turning to retrace her steps when an unexpected sound came to her from over the sea.

An aeroplane, her particular blatant beast, but in listening to the drone of the machine's engine she found herself realizing what this fog might mean to the man in

the air. Moreover, the sound seemed peculiarly near and not coming from above. She would have said that the sound was travelling to her almost on the level of the trees. She had read of befogged airmen flying blindly into a hillside.

The sound came nearer. She was conscious of a peculiar and intuitive spasm of suspense. The thing must be very low, terribly and dangerously low. Almost she could feel the mist vibrating to that sound. It began to frighten her, rushing nearer like some winged and unseen menace. It seemed to be flying straight towards the trees with a swift and swelling sense of some impending horror. Her impulse was to crouch, but she just stood helplessly and stared into the fog, waiting to see the great shape come sweeping down or over.

A sudden impact, a crash! She felt the actual tremor of the earth. Even the trees seemed to quiver in the fog. She stood for a moment in shocked stillness. Some object whirled and struck one of the firs, and fell to earth close to her. She was conscious of a strange horror, and her impulse was to fly from it. She was half-way down the hillside and running towards the house when scorn of her own crass cowardice seemed to catch at her throat.

She paused, turned about, and with strange pantings reclimbed the hill.

"You miserable funk!"

Some inner voice seemed to be speaking to her as she passed again between the dim trunks of the trees. It was telling her with merciless ferocity that all her life had been cowardice, a shirking of all stark, human issues. She was conscious of replying passionately and yet piteously to that ruthless voice: "Be quiet, be quiet. Oh yes, I know." The fog and a kind of anguish of self revealment were sufficient for the moment. Where exactly had the aeroplane crashed? Where in this ghost world would she come upon the wreckage?

Her impression was that the machine had struck the ground somewhat below and to the left of the group of firs, and moving in that direction she came suddenly upon four oak trees which stood together with their branches interlocked. The aeroplane had crashed through the tops of these trees like a wasp into a spider's web, leaving the torn trees a tangle of wreckage. The machine had come to earth beyond the oaks, and she saw its wings dimly through the mist, like the great spread arms of a man lying prone. The ground was a litter of strange wreckage, but the thing that shocked her most vividly was the silence and the stillness of that fallen air bird. No movement, no sound, nothing but the drifting fog. She had ceased to be a creature of hypersensitive shirkings. She had read of smashed planes catching fire, and of the horror of such a human holocaust. She must look, help. The body of the machine discovered itself to her as a tangle of nameless wreckage, but it had a

shape. She saw something human there, an arm hanging down, a head in a leather helmet, a face that was all blood. She was conscious of forcing her way through the horror of these crowded impressions. She must get that figure out.

But the business was beyond her. There were straps, his inert and sagging weight, the hollow of the crumpled cockpit. She had tried to climb on the wreckage and get her hands under his arms. His head lolled back, and she had found herself looking into his bloody face. It appeared terribly injured, as though in tearing his way through the trees a splintered bough had struck him in the face. No, it was beyond her strength. She climbed down, stood a moment looking at the wreckage to assure herself that there was no sign of fire. Was that fog or smoke? She bent down, her head close to the trailing arm. No, only the fog. She must get help.

III

She ran, following the slope of the hill until it flattened out and began to descend. She had a momentary glimpse of three fir trees on her left, and so knew that the house lay down yonder. She was thinking clearly and quickly. The doctor at Feldhurst, 'phone Dr. Heberden. Four people to carry, Will, the two women and herself. Would Mary Spray become emotional? She must not be allowed to become emotional. Something to carry the man on or in, a door, a blanket. Yes, a blanket. She could remember an old picture of Moore being carried in a blanket from the battlefield of Corunna. The garden wall loomed up greyly. There were figures at the gate, old Will and Jane.

"An accident, an aeroplane, just over the hill. Quick, all of you. Someone terribly hurt."

Old Will stared at her stark face.

"I thought I 'eered some'at."

She swept past him.

"Jane, fetch Mary. We shall want everybody. I'm going to telephone to Feldhurst. And Jane, get a blanket. Will, have you a knife?"

"I have, miss."

"He's strapped in. Wait here for me, Will. We must all go together because of the fog."

The good Jane, without a superfluous word, had gone upon her errand. Thank heaven, Jane was strong. She could move heavy furniture almost like a man. Miss Gerard hurried into the house. The telephone was in the pantry passage. She got through at once to Feldhurst with the helpful sympathy of the exchange. Yes, Dr.

Heberden had just come in. Could she speak to Dr. Heberden at once? She did. She heard the familiar, deliberate, friendly voice, for Dr. Heberden was one of her few intimates.

"Were going to try and get him out of the wreckage. One's afraid of fire."

The voice said: "I'll be with you in twenty minutes."

She hurried back to the gate in the stone wall. Will was there, and Jane clasping a blanket and holding a protesting Mary by the arm.

"No, I can't come, I can't, reely. There'll be blood." Miss Gerard's voice surprised these three. "Mary, pull yourself together. All of us must help." The girl looked at Miss Gerard in the fog like a temperamental child that has been slapped, but the stimulus proved adequate. "I'm sorry, miss. I'm so soft hearted." The four of them went out into the fog.

CHAPTER FOUR

She remembered feeling grateful to Will and Jane for taking the rescue out of her hands. The virtue had gone out of her for a moment, perhaps because Mary had said to her in the midst of the fog: "Oh, miss, look at your hand." There was blood on her left hand. Had she noticed it before and forgotten it? She could not say. She had spread the blanket just clear of the wreckage, and stood listening to what sounded like the chattering of Mary's teeth. How strong and capable those two old people were. She heard Will say, "He's only a bit of a lad. I've got he. Take his legs, Mother."

They were carrying him between them to the spread blanket. She was aware of an arm hanging and a hand trailing along the grass. She did not want to look at that clotted face, and instead she looked at old Will's face. It made her think of one of those troubled and compassionate countenances in a "Descent from the Cross." They were laying him on the blanket. She bent down, and lifting that trailing arm tucked it in close to the body.

Old Will's blue eyes stared. He was breathing hard.

"Mary, you take t'corner there."

She placed herself opposite Mary.

"I guess we can manage, miss."

"Can you, Jane?"

"I can, miss."

"We must lift all together."

"Better skirt round t'hill, miss."

"We mustn't get lost, Will."

"Guess I know how t'ground goes."

The fog seemed to thicken about them, and half-way to the house she told them to rest. "Put him down gently." She was aware of Mary turning her face away, and of old Will's moustache grizzled with fog. They bent again to their work and, with the fall of the ground in their favour, the next carry brought them to the stone wall. Miss Gerard had remembered to leave the gate open and there was sufficient space between the pillars for them to squeeze through.

They came to the loggia and all four of them were panting.

"Where shall we put him, miss?"

Her long chair!

"Here, Will."

With one hand she managed to toss rug and cushion aside.

"Come this side, Jane. That's right."

The thing was lying on her chair. For to all four of them it had the qualities of an inert body which they had laboured to bring in out of the fog. It was both human, tragically so, and yet vaguely alien and frightening, as is something that is dead to those who are alive. Old Will was mopping his forehead with his cap. His daughter, with thin fingers pressed against her face, stood to look and could not look away.

"I'm sure he's dead, miss."

Miss Gerard seemed to wince. She gave Jane a glance which said, "Get the girl away." Jane's hand was laid on Mary's arm. "Come on, my girl. What you want is a cup of tea." Admirable, pragmatical Jane! But Miss Gerard remembered that the doctor would be here at any moment and that the gates were locked. She told Will to go and open them. There were two cars which were privileged to drive up to the house: Margaret's and Dr. Heberden's, both of whom were healers.

She was alone with that thing on the long chair. Who was he, what was he? Someone might care terribly whether he was dead or alive. What had Mary said? She turned and made herself look, not at the poor smashed face, but at the buttons of his leather coat. Was he breathing; was there any movement? She fancied that there was. And then her eyes came to rest upon the hand of that obviously broken arm. She had laid it carefully across his chest. The hand interested her; the fingers were long and fine and delicate, and so was the texture of the skin. It was a sensitive hand, not the pragmatical paw of some cheerful young cad to whom life was all noise and stunting.

Then she heard the doctor's car in the lane, and walked round the house to meet him. She had ceased to be shy of Tom Heberden, not merely because on sundry occasions she had been his patient, but because of the essential and sweet sanity of the man. He was big and brown and quiet, never flurried, rarely irritable, and he loved a garden as much as she did.

He got out of the car with a bag.

"Took longer than I thought. I had to crawl through the fog. Sorry you have had this tragedy."

She said: "We managed to carry him in. He is lying on my long chair in the loggia. I'm afraid he is terribly hurt."

He gave her an understanding glance.

"I see. What happened?"

"The fog. He was lost, I suppose, and flew into some trees on the hill."

They were walking round the house together. There seemed to be nothing more for her to do or say. The tragedy was in Heberden's hands, and probably he would prefer to have no interference.

"Shall I leave you alone? I shall be in the lower room."

"I'll call you."

She entered into the house and sat down on the sofa near the window in the room she called her parlour. Silence and the fog. She heard a clock ticking. And then she remembered the dog. She had left him shut up in her working room. Poor Prince, but with all these strange happenings he would be safer in his kennel. She went up and brought the dog down, and handed him over to Jane in the kitchen.

"Take him to his kennel, Jane. The doctor's here."

"Yes, miss. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Presently."

Returning to the front of the house she heard the voice of Dr. Heberden calling her.

"Miss Gerard."

"Yes, coming."

She joined him in the loggia. He was standing looking down at the figure on the chair. The leather coat had been unbuttoned, the helmet removed. The lad had fair hair.

"Rather hopeless, I'm afraid."

"Is he—?"

"Just alive; that's all. Two ribs broken, as far as I can judge, and the arm. And his poor face. I imagine that a branch must have hit him in the face."

She noticed that his bag lay unopened on the garden table. Was it as hopeless as that?

"I had better ring up an ambulance and get him down to Westbourn."

"Yes."

"I'm afraid he will die in the ambulance."

She was conscious of a spasm of pity. She looked at Heberden and their eyes met.

"Why move him? Doesn't it seem rather callous to send him away to die? I mean, wouldn't it be more human if it happened here?"

"Quite. I agree. But I was thinking—"

"I'm not quite so complete an egoist. And perhaps there might be just a chance?"

Heberden's eyes thanked her.

"I was feeling that way also. There is too much of the idea of rushing a carcase into a truck. But, you mean—?"

"Can't we do just something? What someone might like done for him. Not just anonymous scavenging. We are three women here. There is a ground-floor room."

He nodded at her.

"Thank you, Miss Gerard. There are certain human decencies, even to the dying."

She turned to enter the house.

"We will bring a bed down. And will you be wanting things? I mean, you'll try?"

Again he nodded at her.

"I'll try to patch him up."

II

She remembered thinking while she and Jane were producing a new order out of chaos, how strange it was that this young Icarus should have crashed on the particular hillside of a temperamental person who hated the thundering lorries of the air. Strange! Was anything strange in life? You created an artifice and when some circumstance pushed your decorative scheme into disorder, it was no more surprising than all the precious Queen Anne furniture which she and Jane had huddled into corners. She came downstairs clasping a mattress, to be confronted by Heberden in his shirtsleeves.

"I had better see to him out there. Rather a messy business. And not more than is absolutely necessary."

She understood him.

"Hot bottles in the bed?"

"Yes, that's the idea. And not dangerously hot."

"You'll want hot water."

"Please. Could you let me have Jane? She's a capable body." Jane and old Will were putting up a single bed in that room which was so intimately hers. Would Jane go and help Dr. Heberden? Jane would. So, Miss Gerard helped Will with the bed, and was surprised to find that her gardener knew more about the making of beds than she did, and that those crumpled hands of his could smooth and tuck in sheets and blankets. Well, he had been a widower for many years, and had had to do for himself and a child, before Mary had arrived at a relative maturity. Miss Gerard left Will to complete that bed, and went into the kitchen to see that the water was hot.

She found Mary there, sitting like a cataleptic in a chair, with the dog lying on the hearthrug, watching her.

"Has Jane taken the hot water?"

"I don't know, miss. I've come over funny."

Miss Gerard found that the big kettle had been refilled. Thank heaven, old Jane did not come over funny! She filled two smaller kettles and found room for one of them on the stove. And where did Jane keep the hot bottles? Mary, appealed to, waggled her head on its meagre stalk of a neck. "Reely, I don't know, miss." Miss Gerard discovered them hanging behind the pantry door, and removing the covers laid them on the kitchen table ready for filling. She saw her own tea-tray on the table, bread and butter cut, one of Jane's plum cakes on a dish. Tea? These little punctuation marks remained in the letterpress of life, though death was at the door. She would make the tea, but not yet. No doubt Dr. Heberden would be glad of tea when he had finished with the perfunctory patching of that poor body.

She sat down on a Windsor chair. Mary appeared glued to the one arm-chair, and the dog, strangely quiescent, lay and watched the two women. Why all this emotion and disorder in this usually serene and rhythmic house? Miss Gerard heard sounds of movement, a shuffling of feet. They were carrying the thing in to put it in the bed. She realized that she had been expecting Heberden to come to her in the kitchen and say: "No use. I'm afraid he's gone."

She rose from her chair and proceeded to fill the two bottles. Had she asked Mary to do it the girl would have scalded her fingers.

"Get me a towel, Mary."

"Yes, miss."

She dried the bottles, slipped on the covers and carried them down the passage. Old Will was coming out of the room as she reached the door.

"Thank you for helping, Will."

He gave her a characteristic blue stare. Why thank a man for doing what was natural and obvious?

"I've got my frames to water, miss."

"Yes, Will, go and water the frames."

She saw Dr. Heberden standing by the bed, with his fingers on the unconscious airman's pulse. The disfigured face and the fair hair had disappeared behind swathing bandages. The broken arm lay in a supporting cradle of cushions, cushions from her sofa, but she was not conscious of any inward protest. Miss Gerard stood at the foot of the bed, while Jane slipped away and back to her kitchen.

Heberden took the hot bottles from Miss Gerard, held one against his cheek,

and then tucked them into the bed.

"I've done as much as I dare. We shall have to leave it at that."

"Do you think he will live?"

"I'm afraid not."

"He may never recover consciousness?"

"No."

"So, it is just a question—?"

"Fractured skull, I expect, as well as the other things. I'll come along again later."

She said: "Jane has tea ready. You will have some before you go."

He followed her across the passage into the dining-room.

"I ought to try and get you a nurse."

"Is it necessary? I mean, if it is so inevitable, can't we manage?"

"You could, of course."

She stood by the window looking out at the fog.

"I'm just thinking that there must be people who ought to know, people to whom he must matter. And we know nothing, not even his name."

III

She remembered that she had a set of proofs to correct, and that she had promised her publisher that they should be returned corrected by the end of the week. She disliked the supervising of proofs, especially those ghastly "galleys" that trailed about like lengths of sanitary paper, for when a book was finished the mystery and the urge of it had been set alight in some successor. Her dilatoriness might be a source of irritation to those responsible for the producing of her books, but no curtness could be allowed to appear in her publisher's letters to the authoress who was their principal financial asset. Mr. Biederman employed pathos and humour.

> *Dear Miss Gerard*,
>
> *I looked in the glass this morning, and discovered that my hair has an added tinge of grey. Its cause, your very natural procrastination! But my dear lady—*

She had received just such a letter by the morning's post, and its appeal had to be humoured. Poor Mr. Biederman! He had a very public wife who dragged him about to social occasions and charitable parties. She was one of those uncomfortable women with a sore soul. Poor Mr. Biederman! Miss Gerard went

upstairs, sat down, lit a cigarette and prepared to deal with the proofs. It always seemed to her that a book creaked badly in the proof stage, and on this April evening she was conscious of her creation's mechanism. Rather dull, superior stuff! Or was it that she was more conscious of the unknown book whose pages were turning to their finis in the room below? She found herself sitting and listening and wondering. But what was it she expected to hear? The cessation of that almost inaudible breathing? But could one be conscious of a cessation when one could not hear the very sound that was doomed to die away?

Poor lad!

She found herself looking at the fog outside her window instead of at the printed strips. What a strange invasion she had suffered! It was, she supposed, a mere incident in her secluded life, and yet it seemed so much more significant than her world of words. Death was so real and ruthless that it provoked you to remember that life can be very lovely. How old was he? What was his name? Was he married? Had he been flying his own plane, or was he a professional pilot employed by some aerial transport company? It seemed strange that she might never come to know anything about him, not in any sense that mattered.

But what was that? Voices, footsteps, people in her garden. Her sensitive habit of resenting any invasion made her rise and go to the window. The footsteps and voices went round the house to the porch. She heard the clangour of an old-fashioned bracket-bell. She had installed an electric-light plant, but the modern bell had seemed to her so superfluous.

Jane was coming up the stairs.

"Are you there, miss?"

"Yes, Jane."

"The police, miss."

"The police!"

Had she lived so much apart from the world that she had forgotten that no one can die or be born without some official recognition of the fact?

"Do they want to see me, Jane?"

"Yes, miss, they do."

But why should they wish to see her? She went downstairs to find a large man in plain clothes and a police sergeant in uniform standing self-consciously just inside the dining-room doorway. The large man saluted her. He had a very red face and a florid and paternal manner.

"Inspector Harris, miss. We have just been to look at the wreckage. I'm sorry to trouble you, but I understand you witnessed the accident."

Miss Gerard said, "Won't you sit down?" but the two men remained standing and, as though to reinforce her suggestion, she seated herself in the Sheraton arm-chair on the left of the fireplace.

"I cannot say that I saw the accident, Inspector. I heard it. You see, the fog was very thick."

"Quite so, miss. And you and your staff rescued the pilot and carried him here."

She answered with a movement of the head.

"We've identified the plane, miss. It belongs to the Blue Hawk Company. We've 'phoned their aerodrome. They will send a representative along. Meanwhile, miss, I want to see the pilot."

"Is it necessary? He is unconscious, and I'm afraid dying."

"I'm afraid I consider it necessary. If I might just step into the room."

She rose, and going to the door indicated that other door on the farther side of the passage.

"Because it seemed so hopeless, Inspector, we thought that it would be rather callous to send him elsewhere."

"Very kind of you, miss. I'm afraid it has caused you a lot of trouble."

He crossed the passage, followed by the sergeant, and disappeared into the other room, while she stood at the dining-room window and saw that the fog was thinning. She could distinguish the fir trees on the brow of the hill. And then she heard the movement of feet. The two men had been less than half a minute in the room across the passage.

"Looks bad, miss, I'm afraid. Directly we can be of any assistance to you, if you'll 'phone the Westbourn head station—"

She looked at the florid, good-natured face.

"You mean?"

"We'll send up and have him taken to the mortuary."

She understood that he was being considerate and helpful, but his crude presentation of the inevitable shocked her.

"Thank you, Inspector. I understand."

She stood listening to their footfalls passing along the paved terrace in front of the house, and suddenly the sun broke through. She saw it shining upon the tops of the tall firs. It did not occur to her that it might be an omen, and she returned to her desk and her proofs. She had been at work on them for less than an hour, when the sudden strange beauty of the evening, and yet another invasion, affected her simultaneously. She had risen and was standing at the window to look out upon a world that had reappeared with a brilliant freshness out of its grey wrappings. It was

as though a sheath of white wool had been removed. The oblique light was shining upon the garden, picking out every point of colour. The green hill beyond had a gloss of gold. She heard a blackbird singing. How strange that anything should die on such an exquisite evening!

A car was coming up the lane. She heard it drive up to the house, and she supposed that the car was Dr. Heberden's. Voices, Jane's footsteps on the stairs, a deprecating knock.

"So sorry to trouble you, miss."

"Who is it, Jane?"

"A gentleman from the aerodrome."

Jane's gentleman belonged to a new dispensation, and Miss Gerard found him sitting on one of her Sheraton chairs, and wearing a leather coat and helmet. His face was large and white and obesely sinister, and out of it two little buttoned-up eyes looked at her. He stood up on a pair of short, stout legs, and introduced himself.

"My name's Cash. Blue Hawk Company. Sorry about young Strange. Got into my car and crashed down here directly the police 'phoned us."

He was a common little man, potently self-important. He seemed to spit his words at her like some high-powered and vigorous mechanism.

"This damned fog, of course. Can't do anything with fog. First nasty crash we've had. Bad business."

She said: "Won't you sit down?" She was wondering whether his use of the word business was sympathetic or objective.

"Not much hope, I hear. Pulped himself, poor devil. Lucky he was returning empty."

Mr. Cash sat down in his leather jacket.

"You see, I am the Blue Hawk Company. Seven years ago I was a motor mechanic."

His little eyes were little hard points of light. He seemed to swell in his leather jacket like some fat and efficient grub, and almost she could hear him saying: "Guts. Yes, I had the stuff in me." She was aware of his little eyes observing that blemish on her cheek, and she realized that she was the subject of inward comment.

"Got him in there, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Hospital case, surely?"

"It seemed so hopeless, Mr. Cash, that we—"

"I see. Very kind of you, I'm sure. You can take it from me that I'll pay the doctor's bill and all that. Insured, of course. I'm just going to look at the smash

before it gets dark. Preferred to come myself."

She saw the creases melt out of his leather coat as he rose, but even though he filled her with a cold, dispassionate repugnance, she knew that there were questions she wished to ask him.

"Just one moment, Mr. Cash. I think you said the name was Strange?"

"Yes, Strange."

"I have been wondering about his relations."

"You needn't. So far as I know he hasn't got any. Just as well perhaps."

"No relations at all?"

"Well, I believe he has a sister or something in South Africa. Common or garden orphan, miss, one of those lads who are left with just enough money to keep them in carnations. Don't know much about him beyond that. He's been with us about six months; quiet sort of lad, good pilot, never gave me any trouble. Yes, now you've dug into it, miss, it does raise a bit of a problem."

His stubby fingers were at work on the buttons of his leather coat.

"Excuse me; finding this rather hot. My bus cruises at fifty. Yes, as we were saying, this does raise a bit of a problem."

"You mean, what to do—?"

"With his insurance money. I suppose that's up to the Insurance Company. Next of kin, what? Just like the war."

She was conscious of wanting to be relieved of Mr. Cash's presence. He had removed his coat, and discovered to her a green and grey check sports jacket, a blue pullover, and a collar and tie whose colours clashed. More and more she was feeling him to be like some gross and greedily efficient maggot that would eat the green heart out of life.

She said: "I think I understand. Please don't let me detain you, Mr. Cash. No doubt you wish to examine the wreckage."

"That's quite O.K., miss. Bound to be an inquiry. He was flying back empty from Le Bourget. Special charter to take a big financial bug to Paris. Much obliged to you. I expect the police will notify me. Good day to you."

But in the doorway he turned and smiled at her.

"Well, that's silly. Just where is the wreckage? Forgot to ask."

"If you go through that gate and over the hill, you will see it just by four oak trees."

"Much obliged. I've got my technical chap in the car. I'll give him a shout. Good day."

She watched him go out into the garden, and heard him shout.

“Hi, Balders, round ’ere.”

And when silence returned to the garden she realized that the blackbird was still singing.

CHAPTER FIVE

She found herself in conflict with the assumption that death was inevitable for the lad in that other room. Perhaps she had been thrown into conflict with certain figures of symbolism, the Cash creature who had outraged her compassion, the male's crude acceptance of death as a mere entry on the debit side of the ledger. As a woman who had suffered much in her secret self, her reaction to violence and wounds was quick, poignant and rebellious. Inherent in her was the elemental urge to give life and to preserve it. She may not have been conscious of it as an intimate and personal issue, but she moved to resist man's more facile fatalism.

As she opened the door of the room in which he lay she was aware of the evening sunlight shining in, and of the blackbird singing, of the joy and the anguish of life woven together in the green world out yonder. The room was very still. The familiar furniture, huddled into corners, seemed to question her and to protest. Why this upheaval, this disorder? She closed the door very gently, and crossed to the bed. Was he breathing? She thought that she could detect a slight movement of the bedclothes. His bare forearm and hand lay in the trough of the supporting pillows. She put out a hand and ran her fingers along his wrist, and the contact seemed to send a tremor through the part of her which resisted. She, too, could feel pulses, try to divine the yea or nay of life. The tips of her fingers throbbed to the heart-beat beneath his skin. He was alive. She found herself looking at his hand. There was a smudge of oil or something on it. She remembered the reek of petrol that had hung about the wrecked machine, and her fear of fire. A quiet lad. Footsteps! She drew back quietly from the bed, almost as though she had been surprised in a moment of foolish tenderness. She saw Dr. Heberden's head and shoulders pass the window.

She met him in the passage. Was the doctor like those others, so ready to sign some document and surrender life to the official mortuary?

"I'm glad you've come. He is still alive."

Why did he look at her so sharply, as though she had said some unexpected thing?

"Yes, they linger sometimes. I remember a case in the war, an airman who was unconscious for weeks."

"And died?"

"No, as a matter of fact he recovered."

She had left the parlour door open, and she stood back to let him pass.

"Why not assume that there may be a chance?"

"Nothing would please me better."

He had crossed to the bed, and she moved round the foot of it and stood facing him.

"I have had people here."

"I'm afraid that was inevitable."

"So were they, and their prepossessions. A horrible little man from the aerodrome. And the police. They offered to relieve me at once of his dead body."

She seemed to repress herself. She was saying too much. She stood and watched Heberden's hand fasten on the inert wrist, and then her glance shifted to his face. He appeared to be counting those pulse beats, estimating their strength, rhythm and volume. What a pleasant and intelligent face he had, and the eyes of a man who understood that humanity asks you to be kind rather than clever. He raised his head, and with his fingers still on the pulse, looked across at her.

"He's got a better pulse, very distinctly better."

"Then there is a chance?"

"Perhaps a very faint one. It's so very difficult to say."

"I know it must be."

"I am glad we didn't move him. When a body is badly shocked, life is like a very feeble flame, so easily put out."

"Is there anything more that we can do?"

"I don't think so."

"You say that arm is broken. Oughtn't something to be done? Supposing he were to recover consciousness? But, forgive me, I am being meddlesome."

He smiled at her.

"Don't apologize for that. You see, he might be unconscious for days. You remember the case I was quoting to you. The lad had a broken leg, and the case seemed so hopeless that the German doctors did not bother about the leg, and during those weeks of unconsciousness the bones grew together. Months later the leg had to be rebroken and reset."

"Couldn't you put splints to that arm?"

"If it will give you any satisfaction I will."

"It may sound foolish to you, but it would."

Again he smiled at her.

"You may be right, you know. I hope you will be."

Afterwards he walked with Miss Gerard round her garden. He told her that he

would look in again about ten o'clock, and function both as nurse and doctor. But what of the night-watch? Oh, she could manage, she and Jane between them. A thrush had taken up the blackbird's song; they could see the bird on the topmost twig of a cherry tree, and outlined against the afterglow. The tree itself was in full blossom. The light was fading into an April twilight, but the green growth and floweriness of the young year were as poignant as the smell of the wallflowers.

He said to her as they turned back after looking at the daffodils in the orchard: "I can never get used to the death-idea, especially when the earth is green with growth. And especially when the patient is like that lad. One's gentle agnosticism doesn't carry one very far." She repeated those two words of his: "Gentle agnosticism." As a physician he was familiar with death, but to her, life would still throb somewhere beyond the veil like the voice of that singing bird.

"You will come back about ten? Is there anything I can get ready for you?"

He paused to scribble in his notebook, and tearing at the page he passed it to her.

"Have you any of those things in the house? Just tick them off if you have. Then I can bring what is necessary."

She took his pencil and marked off one or two of the items.

"No, I'm afraid, only some old linen."

He took back the list and pencil.

"I shall know what to bring."

Leaving her by the porch, he was in the act of getting into his car when someone hailed him. Mr. Cash's car, a speed model in red, was still parked close to a grass verge.

"Hi, one moment; are you the doctor?"

Mr. Cash appeared out of the dusk. He had resumed his leather coat, and his great white face looked like the hairless face of the full moon.

"Yes."

"My name's Cash. I'm the Blue Hawk Company. Just been to look at the smash. He did it pretty thoroughly. I suppose you'll be at the inquest?"

Heberden's manner became austere.

"Aren't you being a little previous, sir?"

"Hopelessly smashed up, isn't he? Have to think of these things, Doctor. There'll be an inquiry. My machine was O.K. It was just the ruddy fog."

Heberden got into his car.

"I quite understand your position, Mr. Cash."

"I was going to say, Doc, that the damage is on me. Send your bill in to us when

the whole business is over. We insure, you know."

The doctor pressed the starter-button.

"I haven't yet begun to think of my bill, Mr. Cash."

"Well, I suppose you'll want your money, anyway. Most people do. My name's Cash, remember."

"I think I see the joke, sir. Good night."

II

Miss Gerard entered his room about twelve. A full moon was shining, and so still was the night that she could hear the wash of the sea at the foot of the cliffs. The moonlight lit up the room sufficiently for her to distinguish the shape of him in the bed, the splintered arm and bandaged head. Was the moonlight too bright? But how could it be, when he was sleeping like some prince in a fairy tale? Heberden had paid his last visit at ten o'clock and helped by Jane had played the nurse. The doctor had been more hopeful, but guardedly so. "Just a flicker. One can't say more." She stood by the bed, listening. She could hear the faint wash of the sea; on nights such as this the sound would travel up those twin valleys. But, surely, there was some other sound in the room, a faint sighing like a curtain drifting to and fro? His breathing? Yes, his breathing was audible, and as she listened to it this little sibilant sighing seemed to gain in strength. Was she imagining it? Was her sense of hearing concentrated sensitively on that sound and amplifying it? She bent nearer; she could see the bedclothes rising and falling.

The fluttering of a leaf! But life still clung to the tree, and very softly she slipped out of the room, and leaving the light burning in the passage she reclimbed the stairs. She was feeling extraordinarily wakeful, and sitting down in an arm-chair by her window, she suffered the day's happenings to drift across her consciousness. She had arranged to sit up till three o'clock and then to wake Jane.

But if she was so wakeful why should she not complete the correcting of those proofs? She had not troubled to undress, for she had no intention of going to bed until Jane took charge, and Jane had hinted that she was going to render the early hours useful by making marmalade. "I can keep looking in on him." Indefatigable old woman! Miss Gerard crossed the landing to her working-room, switched on the desk-light and sat down. The window was open, and so was the window of the room below. She unscrewed the cap of her fountain-pen and set to work. There was a somewhat unusual name in the book and the printer had managed to misspell it, and since the name occurred very frequently Miss Gerard's pen was kept busy. Why

had not the proof-reader spotted the error? But no doubt the proof-reader, like other mortals, preferred the excitement and the glory of hunting literary slips, or of catching the author bending.

Bother the name! She began to wish she had used a more obvious surname, but the character in question was an unpleasant one, and Miss Gerard had suffered from enterprising people who had attempted to inflict legal blackmail upon her because she happened to have used a particular name. Slushman, Slushman, Slushman, the wretched thing kept recurring. Slushman might be both apposite and descriptive, but it was too like Dickens and she kept on restoring the necessary vowel. Slashman. Would anyone pop up with the name of Slashman and accuse her of besmirching the family honour?

Her pen paused abruptly over the twentieth correction. What was that? For three seconds or so she sat listening, and then she was running down the stairs. She remembered saying to herself that even the wisest of physicians can misread a case. But she had been swept away by a sound, something between a moan and a whimper that became terribly and poignantly articulate, like the outcry of a child waking from a nightmare.

She switched on the light as she entered the room. She was aware of a hand groping and clutching at the bandages. Instantly she was by the bed and gently suppressing that wandering hand.

"You must keep quite still, Mr. Strange."

She felt the muscles in the arm relax. His mouth mumbled at her from amid the dressings.

"Where am I?—What—?"

"You must lie quite still. Please don't struggle. You have had an accident. You are in bed."

The dark terror had left him panting. She sat on the edge of the bed with one hand laid firmly but gently on his.

"Accident, crash?"

"Yes, in the fog. You don't remember. Don't try to remember. It doesn't matter."

"I don't remember."

"Just lie still."

She was aware of the fingers of his hand bending over and clasping hers. Like a child he wanted to grasp something, feel reassured by human contact.

"Where am I?"

"In my house, on the Sussex coast. There is nothing for you to worry about."

She was conscious of the grip of his fingers.

"Who is it? I can't see."

"Just the person who lives here. We brought you in."

"What's your name?"

"My name? Oh, Gerard, Rosamund Gerard."

She felt his fingers relax. He breathed out a little sigh.

"How funny! Everything's gone. What's happened to my left arm?"

"The doctor had to put it in splints, my dear. What you have to do is to lie still and not worry."

Her immediate urge was to run to the 'phone and ring up Dr. Heberden. What did one do when a man came back to life so suddenly? Poor Dr. Heberden! But she was very glad that she had continued to allow her house a telephone, even though her number was not in the directory. She made a movement to withdraw her hand, but instantly his fingers closed upon it.

"Please don't go away."

"I'm only going to the telephone. I want the doctor to know."

"You'll come back?"

"Of course. Tell me, does the arm hurt?"

"No, everything feels numb."

She patted his hand and slipped away, conscious of a sudden inward exultation, and of an emotion that she had not experienced before save in certain passages in her books. Poor Dr. Heberden, it seemed churlish to wake him at one in the morning, but she had the receiver in her hand and was listening to the voice of the night operator. "Dr. Heberden's of Feldhurst, please. Miss Gerard speaking from Knoll Farm." She stood tense yet trembling; waiting upon the night's silence, and then she was listening to Heberden's voice. "Hallo, who's that?" "Miss Gerard, Doctor, I'm so sorry to call you up." No, she wasn't sorry. "He's awake, and quite rational. No, I don't want to drag you here. I wondered what I ought to do. Make him keep perfectly quiet? Yes, it is rather amazing. You are coming? How very good of you."

Returning to the room she drew a chair up to the bed.

"The doctor's coming."

"I'm afraid I'm giving you an awful lot of trouble. What's all this on my head?"

"Bandages."

"How did it happen?"

"You were flying an aeroplane, and there was fog."

"I don't remember any fog. I don't remember. I ought to be able to remember."

She put her hand on his.

"Why? Why worry?"

"You are being awfully good to me. What's the time?"

"About one o'clock in the morning."

"One o'clock in the morning! And you're sitting up! There isn't any reason, is there? I'm quite all right."

"Yes, but you mustn't talk. I'm just going out to see that the gates are open for the doctor's car. It is a beautiful night and the moon is shining."

And then he said an unexpected thing to her.

"I do wish I could see you."

She withdrew her hand gently, but her conscious self flinched as she remembered.

"Well, you will do, quite soon."

"You'll come back, won't you?"

"Yes."

She went out into the moonlight and down to the blue gates. She was angry with herself and moved to self-mockery. Silly, sensitive fool, of course he would have to see her face. How could it matter to either of them? Youth had flown into her life for a moment, and just as swiftly and fortuitously it would fly out again. But he was going to live. Was she not glad of that? Of course, but somehow the crisis had suffered a sudden transformation, and like a ruthless mirror it confronted her. But why should she care? Had sentimentality and the name of Slushman got into her head? Idiot!

Heberden's car. She heard it coming up the lane and she went and stood in the gateway. The car's headlights glared at her. Was she afraid of the light?

She stepped on to the running-board as he slowed up.

"Thank you for coming."

"I had to, after being so utterly wrong."

"Oh, no."

"It is sometimes good to be wrong. I postulated a fractured base. Well, there may be. How did it happen?"

"He just woke up rather like a frightened child. I was correcting proofs and I heard him."

She stepped off the running-board as the car stopped by the porch.

"I'm so glad."

"So am I, even though my prognosis was so wrong. Shall I tell you what I'm going to do?"

"Yes."

"Put him gently to sleep again. That's the best anodyne for all shocks, both

mental and physical."

III

Miss Gerard was in the garden when Jane came to her. It was about eleven o'clock, and the sun was shining.

"Oh, miss, he's just woke up."

Miss Gerard was trimming the grass verges with long-handled shears.

"He wants you, miss."

Miss Gerard left the shears lying and drew off her gloves.

"Oh, keep Prince with you, Jane," for Prince, as though sensing some strangeness in the day, had followed his mistress like her shadow.

"Go with Jane, Prince, dear."

The dog gave her a dumb and troubled look and obeyed.

She found herself beside the bed. His right hand was being outstretched.

"Is that you?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. I felt—"

She put her hand on his.

"Strange, waking up?"

"Yes. Just like a silly kid. Who was that?"

"Oh, Jane, my treasure."

"It sounds silly, doesn't it, but I wanted you. You are young like I am."

She sat sideways on the bed, holding his hand.

"I'm not quite so old as Jane."

"I can tell that you're young by your hand."

CHAPTER SIX

Another day had passed, perhaps the most lyrical yet elusive day that could be written of in her book of April. Something sang in her, the spring, birds, youth, that blemished youth of hers that had been young bitterly and in secret. All sorts of things happened.

He had said to her: "Isn't it strange our coming together like this? I seem to have heard your voice before. And what's that I smell? Wallflowers?"

"Yes."

She had gone out and picked him a posy.

"Yes, I can smell them in spite of all the old doctor's wonderful dressings."

She had led Prince in by the collar and introduced the dog to the strange new thing in the bed. "Hallo, old chap. What is he? An Alsatian?" and Prince, after staring at the bandaged apparition, had licked its hand.

"He doesn't make friends easily."

The young man's hand fondled the dog.

"Prince won't quarrel with me."

Then, about twelve o'clock, Mr. Cash had arrived with a lorry and a breakdown gang from the aerodrome to salvage the wrecked plane. She had felt kind even to Mr. Cash, and had brought him to youth's window and suffered him to be briefly and facetiously friendly.

"Hallo, Wal, my lad, we thought you were for a halo."

"I'm afraid I don't know much about it, Mr. Cash."

"Haloes, what! Not much! We're collecting the bits of the old bus. Well, you look pretty comfortable."

"Miss Gerard's been—"

But Miss Gerard herself had been in charge of the interplay. She had been standing beside Mr. Cash, and she had dared to lay a hand on the leather-jacket's shoulder. Mr. Cash had been persuaded to remember the day's affairs and not to mangle the soft bud of an illusion.

"He's not allowed to talk."

Mr. Cash had nodded at her.

"Bye-bye, Wal. Glad there's not going to be an inquest."

Why did that particular word stick like a burr to her secret consciousness? Was

it that she knew that she would be driven to holding an inquest on her own reincarnation? She had watched Mr. Cash and his minions go over the hill, and she returned to youth's window.

"I hope you did not mind my letting him speak to you?"

He did not answer her immediately.

"I have seen Mr. Cash. I mean I know his face. It's somehow more vivid to me here in the darkness."

"Some things are."

"I oughtn't to say it, but it's like a thing hanging up in a butcher's shop."

She understood him instantly.

"Forget it."

"No need, Miss Gerard. I'm lying here and thinking that in a day or two I shall be seeing something that isn't like that."

"The window, and a green hill, and fir trees."

"No, please forgive me, you."

She remembered flinching from the window, and then making herself go back and answer him, lest he should think her silence snubbing and upon its dignity.

"You may find me quite an old woman!"

But problems seemed to arrive for her like the birds she fed in winter at her window. There were ministrations that were not for her hands, intimate things that had to be done for him by Heberden and the district nurse whom the doctor had co-opted into the affair. Also, she came by the impression that Heberden was worried about some aspect of the case, and was keeping details back from her. He had spoken vaguely of bruising about the eyes, even hinted that his prognosis was not yet complete. Also, he was suggesting that the lad could be moved in a day or two to the County Hospital at Westbourn. It was still very much a nursing case, and Miss Gerard's household was being subjected to too much disorganization.

"It's a nice lad. I want to do the best for him. And I'm afraid your work must be suffering."

Her work? Beyond completing the correcting of the proofs of her autumn book she had not put pen to paper since the thing had happened. The world of her imagination seemed to have given place to the world of actuality. Had youth read any of her books? And did it matter? Most certainly it mattered, for he might have gained from her book an impression of her that was not what she might wish it to be. Men are apt to be shy of clever women. Of much more significance was the suggestion that he should be transferred to the Westbourn General Hospital. Did she desire it? Yes, and no. And in confronting her own hesitancies she suddenly accused

herself of harbouring a preposterous illusion. What was he to her, and what could she be to him? In fact, she was on the edge of trying to create a sentimental situation, because compassion and the spring and wounded youth had tumbled out of the sky into her solitude.

She compelled herself to say to Heberden: "Of course, it is much better that he should be moved. My work? I have that always with me."

She retained the impression that Heberden was worried.

"I'll keep him here for another day or two, if I may. I'm not quite at the bottom of the case yet. One cannot always make a complete examination until certain things have settled down. I have arranged for Nurse Horrocks to come in and do all that is necessary."

"Thank you so much. Is it the question of the injury to his face?"

"Yes. You see, there was so much bruising, so much swelling. One could not make a complete examination."

"I understand."

"I think I shall be able to say more definitely to-morrow."

How absurd of her to shrink from the inevitable revelation, the withdrawing of that veil of darkness, yet for two or three days in her lonely life she had expressed herself as woman, not a creature juggling with words, but experiencing actual emotion. "You are young like I am." Had he found her hands and voice and unseen presence sweet and mysterious? And how he would be disillusioned when he saw her poor face! How brutal and ironical life could be! Self-pity! Cowardice! That a few square inches of discoloured skin should shame her into behaving like a sensitive, self-adoring girl! Would it not be much better for him to go before the veil was lifted?

She would speak to Heberden about it, suggest that he should be moved at once.

But would not that be to confess her cowardice? Heberden might divine her silly vanity.

She procrastinated.

II

Youth too was becoming inquisitive, but not blurting its questions like a child. What did she do with herself in the country—chicken farm, grow fruit, or was she sufficiently well off just to live as she pleased in the country? Of course he understood that, delight in pure country. And had she ever been up in a plane?

"No."

"You will have to let me take you up."

She understood from his questions that no one had gossiped to him about her, not even the genial Nurse Horrocks, and that he had not tried to pump them. She was glad of this reticence and its implied delicacy. So, no one had told him that she was a bookish person, a celebrity. How pleasant!

She asked him whether he would like to be read to. Yes, but was he not taking up too much of her time? No. She said that she spent two or three hours a day in reading, and that she might just as well read aloud as to herself.

Was there any author he preferred?

"There is one book I haven't read, and want to. 'A Pilgrimage of Pain,' by Douglas Gerard. By the way, it's your name. Is he any relation of yours?"

She held her breath over this coincidence.

"A rather distant cousin. I happen to have the book."

"You've read it before. It won't bore you?"

"No."

So she began on that very day to read her own book to him, and never had it seemed to her so inadequate and unconvincing. But he did not find it so. He said it was wonderful stuff, and so true to life, and how the chap must know women! She began to feel a little ashamed of her deception. If only her physical self were like her book?

"I think I hear the doctor's car."

She divined in him sudden excitement.

"He's going to take off all this stuff. I shall have my eyes back."

"Yes. You are sure you have had no pain in them?"

"Nothing. Only a sort of stiffness, as though they were glued up."

She laid the book aside on the window-shelf and went out to meet Heberden, and directly she saw the thing he was carrying she knew that her crisis was upon her. That black surgical bag. The rose-tinted glasses of an illusion were about to be broken.

"I have just been reading to him. One of my books. Please don't tell him I wrote it."

"Your book? I won't. Did he ask for it?"

"Yes."

"That's rather delightful."

But her feeling was that Heberden was not happy about something.

She took the dog with her and, climbing the hill, sat down on the seaward side at

the foot of a tree. It was another perfect day. There had been a light frost, but the sun had dried the grass and the world was rejoicing. The sea spun shot silk, the gorse was ablaze, a few white clouds were drifting. The green tops of the firs made never a murmur. Below her and to the left stood the four oak trees where his plane had crashed, and she could see the broken branches, some of them hanging twisted, others on the ground. Those poor trees had suffered just when their buds were swelling in the spring. The wreckage of the aeroplane had gone, but there were scars on the green turf.

How beautiful and solitary it was. Solitude! She had sought solitude, clasped it, but now somehow it filled her with a kind of fear. Yes, even on this serene and beneficent morning. There were other mornings, the normal and vile progeny of an English spring, when there was nothing for her to do but sit in her room and write, or put on thick shoes and go out and trudge. It had been widely said that a creative artist should not be happy, for happiness is too domestic and sociable, and associated with silly, simple things. She was neither silly nor simple, yet she had a feeling that she could be both.

Prince had his head on her knee. She caressed him and he gave a sigh of contentment. She was belonging to him this morning. Did dogs feel lonely? But of course. How long had she been sitting on this gentle hill? It was time for her to go back and face her crisis, and to become Miss Gerard, both celebrated and celibate, a rather austere and shy woman, who carried life in her books like strange fruit in a gilded dish, fruit that was forbidden to her.

"Up, my dear."

Descending the landward slope of the hill she could look down into the garden, and see them as hers, secret places in which her lonely self went to and fro. She came to the Italian gate, and through it saw the flowers and the grass, and the stone path going up to the house. She paused at the gate. Heberden was sitting in the loggia as though waiting for her. He was leaning forward, hands clasped, head slightly bowed. She walked up the path, her eyes fixed on the crown of the doctor's head. His attitude suggested—And then he raised his head, and she saw his face.

What was he going to tell her?

"I'm afraid I have kept you."

He stood up. He glanced at the particular window.

"I had to wait. Let's go this way, into the orchard."

So youth was not to hear what he had to say. She was conscious of inward tension.

"Something unexpected?"

"Yes. I was afraid of it. His eyes."

"Not—?"

"Rather terrible. Just as though a forked branch had caught him in the face. You see, there was so much bruising and swelling when I first examined him. One couldn't see what was behind the lids. I thought it wiser to wait."

Her voice came breathlessly.

"You mean, he can't see? He will be—?"

Heberden was staring down the green alleys of the orchard.

"Yes. I'm horribly afraid it is so."

"Does he realize?"

"No."

"Oh, my dear friend, can't we do something? Blind! It's too tragic."

"I'll get someone in at once. There is quite a good man on eyes in Westbourn. I'll 'phone. But I'm afraid it's rather hopeless. Both eyeballs are like so much pulp."

III

He was to be blind, and he did not know it.

Never was she to forget that moment of secret and selfish exultation, and her sudden horror of it as she thrust it away deep down like some evil thing that had escaped from the darkness. One's little shameful vanities! Nor was she to forget the bright and definite face of the doctor who came up from Westbourn. He was a mignon man, polished, efficient, final, even as to chin and glasses. They had called her into the dining-room, and with both doors closed had given her their verdict.

"But can nothing be done?"

Dr. Steel had explained to her why nothing could be done, and as she had listened to him she had seemed to see those two delicate organs as so much blood and jelly.

"Completely disorganized, Miss Gerard; ruptured. Terribly bad luck."

He had spread the first and middle fingers of his right hand.

"Imagine a broken bough with a fork like that catching him in the face. That's how it must have happened."

She had looked at those pointed fingers and shuddered.

"Please, don't. Yes, I think I understand. And you will not be able—?"

"Yes, I'm afraid we shall have to operate, remove both eyeballs. I will take him into hospital."

She had turned to the window, and looking up at the green hill and its trees

realized what blindness meant, no sky, no woods and hills, no sea, no faces.

"Have you told him?"

"No."

She had heard Heberden's quiet, deliberate voice.

"We wondered whether we would leave it for a day or two. We have put on new dressings. He doesn't realize—"

"Are you sure?"

"We told him that the lids—"

"You want to let the knowledge come gradually. But won't the shock be more bitter? I mean, days of hope, of concealment, and then—"

The two doctors had looked at each other.

"There is something in what you say, Miss Gerard. We had discussed it before you came in. Would you tell him?"

She stood rigid.

"I?"

"Yes, your touch might be lighter. I know it is not a pleasant thing to do."

She had turned and faced them.

"Very well, I will tell him."

CHAPTER SEVEN

How would she begin to tell him? How would she handle such a situation in a book? Books? This was no dispassionate and impersonal piece of word painting, the work of a woman sitting calmly in a chair. She felt herself involved in his tragedy, even as though his falling out of the skies into her life had been meant.

She remembered having read in a book written by a man who had become blind that the loss of sight was not to be accepted as a tragedy. One was to make a brave jest of it, regard it as a kind of game of perpetual blind-man's-buff in which one played hide-and-seek with the furniture and your food. No self-pity, no repinings, but courage and a re-education of yourself. Yes, it might be possible for a man who had reached middle age and to whom blindness had come gradually, to adapt his life and his philosophy to the fall of the curtain, but for the thing to happen suddenly and ruthlessly to a young man was indeed tragedy. How could a blind bird fly?

She went into the kitchen to speak to Jane, for Jane had all the kindness and common sense of her class.

"It is a very terrible thing, Jane, but the doctors say that Mr. Strange is to be blind."

Jane was rubbing something through a sieve.

"Poor young gentleman."

"They have asked me to tell him."

"The sooner the better, miss, I should say."

"Would you?"

"He'll only lie there and think about things that can't happen."

"Yes, that's true, Jane."

It might be more kind to tell him quickly. She went into the garden and picked a bunch of wallflowers and took them with her into his room. How did one speak in such a crisis, with a gentle cheerfulness, stressing the obvious compensations? It was lucky for him that he was alive. But would he welcome a life that was sightless?

She sat down beside the bed and laid the flowers close to his right hand.

"You have to guess what's there."

His face had been rebandaged, and the blank white mask seemed to question her.

"Not much guessing. I can smell them."

"It's good to be able to smell things, and to hear, and to touch."

He had groped for the flowers and found them.

"Nothing like seeing. When you are up in a plane it's marvellous to have eyes. But what did the doctors say?"

She was conscious of pausing, groping for her words as his fingers had felt for the flowers.

"They want you to go into hospital."

"Must I?"

"Yes."

"Of course I must. I can't stay here putting you to all this trouble."

"It isn't trouble, my dear. You see, there is something else."

"An operation?"

"Yes."

She was conscious of a significant stillness penetrated by his blind self, groping, questioning, feeling suddenly frightened.

"What for? Not something with my eyes?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"They are all right, aren't they?"

"No. You see—"

She saw him drop the flowers on the bed, and his hand reaching out to her.

"Miss Gerard."

"Yes, dear."

"I'm not going to be blind?"

For a moment she felt herself unable to speak to him.

"For God's sake tell me quickly."

She took his hand and held it.

"Yes, I'm afraid that is what they say. Oh, my dear, I wish I hadn't had to tell you."

She felt the grip of his fingers. He did not move or utter a sound, but lay there in a dry and dreadful anguish, and in a darkness that was to be for ever. It wrung her heart. What could she say or do? And then he was shaken by an agony that was not soundless, a terrible, tragic despair that was beyond control, convulsive sounds, a suggestion of his young and sightless self struggling with his horror of the realization of that darkness.

She must do something.

She held his hand between both of hers, but that did not seem sufficiently human, and slipping from the chair to the bed and with her back to the pillows she took his

head upon her shoulder. She remembered the man Cash telling her that he had no one to turn to. But had he no one? Surely there would be some girl? She did not care. Her mother-mood was importunate.

"Just let go, dear."

His head sank a little till it lay against her breast. He was sobbing and his man's grief harrowed her. She sat looking at the bunch of flowers lying on the quilt like a child's discarded toy.

"I'm—I'm so sorry, Miss Gerard."

"Why should you be sorry, dear?"

"For being such a beastly coward."

"Oh, no. I know how you must be feeling. Don't try to think of being in a dark room from which there is no escape. Try to say there are going to be all sorts of wonderful things in life. Forgive me, but there will be, other, other—"

She could say no more. Words seemed so futile. She sat and stroked his head, and felt her own heart beating near it. Her touch seemed to soothe him; his body relaxed.

"I am glad it was you who told me."

"I?"

"Yes. Don't take your hand away. It helps."

"Does it?"

"Yes. You're young; you can understand."

He lay breathing quietly. Her left arm was round him, her right hand gently stroking his swathed head. How dreadfully disturbing emotion could be, especially so in a life like hers when your creative and separative self asked for a dispassionate serenity.

"Aren't there things you want to tell me?"

"What things?"

"Aren't there people who ought to know?"

"No."

"No one?"

"No one to whom it can matter seriously. I have been rather a separative sort of kid. That's a little ironical. I didn't miss people till a moment ago, and then I suddenly seemed to realize—I wanted to shout for help like someone drowning. If you hadn't been here. You've been wonderful to me. Why should you trouble?"

She smiled poignantly.

"Oh, just nature, because I'm not absolutely granite."

"Granite! What an idea! With your hands. And when?"

"Yes?"

"Are they going to move me?"

She was silent for some seconds.

"Perhaps to-morrow."

"Where to?"

"Westbourn."

"It won't be far away?"

"No."

"You'll come and see me?"

"Of course."

He lay thinking.

"I suppose I shall feel rather like a lost soul, whatever that may mean. It's all going to be so strange and different. Like a high blank wall, rather terrifying."

"Try not to think of it as that. It will be like beginning all over again, but differently. You'll want—"

She felt him draw a deep breath.

"Yes, what shall I want? Impossible things. Someone to lead me about like a dog on a string? No, I won't be that. I'll fight against that sort of thing. I've got to, haven't I?"

"Yes, dear."

"I have a little money of my own. Blind men do learn to do things, don't they?"

"Of course. All sorts of things."

He lay still for a moment.

"Miss Gerard, there's one thing that does seem to loom up and frighten me, like fog when you're flying. Loneliness, feeling that you are shut in and helpless."

"My dear, I think you'll find people who will save life from being like that."

II

Dr. Heberden rang her up that afternoon to say that everything had been arranged and that the ambulance would call for Mr. Strange at ten o'clock to-morrow; Dr. Steel would operate on the following day, if Strange's general condition warranted it. And had she told him?

"Yes, I've told him. He was terribly upset, poor lad, but he has courage."

"I'm glad of that. He's young and he will have to be taught how to manage himself. By the way, he hasn't anything to take into hospital, has he?"

"You mean?"

"Kit."

"No, nothing, of course. And I am afraid I have nothing here. I suppose you couldn't—?"

"I'll get my wife to pack up a parcel."

"Could you? I will see that everything is replaced."

Later, she found herself confronted by Nurse Garnet, and Nurse Garnet was one of those very positive people with a "Now, my dear" smile and very capable and busy hands. Why should she suddenly mistrust Nurse Garnet and her rotund pragmatism? Was it because the other woman's glance seemed to have rested for a moment on the disfigured side of her face? The inwardness of things had changed for her. She was realizing that he would never see her face, but that some officious and bright person might tell him about it, someone like this genial woman who went about giving life playful and stimulating slaps.

"Oh, Nurse Garnet, I want to speak to you just for a moment before you go in."

Miss Garnet nodded at her.

"I've heard. Poor young man."

"Dr. Heberden told you."

"Yes."

"Oh, well, I needn't say anything. I was going to warn you. You see, he was—"

"A little hysterical. Can you wonder?"

"No, not exactly that, but broken down for the moment."

"Shock, Miss Gerard."

"Exactly."

How very foolish of her to be shy of leaving that other woman alone with him! Nurse Garnet had taken herself and her bag, and a jug of hot water and a clean towel into Mr. Strange's room, and Miss Gerard had carried out a chair and placed it not far from the particular window. She found herself listening to those two voices, and especially to Nurse Garnet's voice. Nurse Garnet might have been addressing a helpless and sensitive child. "Now then, Mr. Strange, just turn over like that. I'll take charge of your arm. That's splendid," and suddenly some inward shame flamed in Miss Gerard. She was eavesdropping, listening in to that other woman's voice in order to hear whether Nurse Garnet would gossip about the mistress of the house. How utterly contemptible one's self-love could be! She was up and out of her chair and walking quickly away towards the gate in the stone wall, but before she reached it she remembered poor Prince. She was neglecting her dog, being disloyal to her dog. She turned back, and calling to the Alsatian saw him come leaping out of the dining-room window.

"Come on, my dear, walk," and with the dog at her heels she took one of the valley paths leading to the sea.

Yet Nurse Garnet did produce her sensation, and quite innocently and unexpectedly so. It was her habit to chat cheerfully to patients, especially when she considered the subjects had to be rescued from too much introspection. Had Mr. Strange read any of Miss Gerard's books? Books? Gerard, Douglas Gerard? But did he not know that his hostess was the celebrated novelist?

"The author of 'A Pilgrimage of Pain'?"

"Authoress, Mr. Strange. I think it is the most wonderful book I have ever read."

"I didn't know. She has been reading to me. I asked for it."

"How tactful of you."

"Tactful. But she's quite young, Nurse."

Miss Garnet liked to be facetious.

"Not exactly a grandmother. You see she must have begun writing when she was a mere flapper. Of course, genius can be a little odd, Mr. Strange."

"Odd?"

"Well, Miss Gerard doesn't like publicity. Almost a recluse, you know, so sensitive."

And there the conversation as it concerned Miss Gerard ended, and youth was left in its new and terrible darkness to confront a future whose realities were like trees in a wood. He kept blundering against a succession of seemingly insoluble problems. Where would he live and how? His private income amounted to about a pound a week. How would he shave himself, tie his tie, find his clothes, feed himself? He supposed that he would be compelled to seek admission to some institution such as St. Dunstan's, where you were taught to manage yourself and your life, to read Braille, to learn some trade. The prospect appalled him. His life had been in the air, and he was to become like a blind bird in a cage. He could not even go and seek his food; it would have to be brought to him. Never again would he see a human face, the face of woman, or the green earth or shop windows, or his own hands. How did one know when one's hands were dirty? Did one care? Would anything matter seriously, whether you became a sloven, whether your habits—?

Terror returned to him, fear of his own blind self and its almost sinister implications. Why was it he had not liked the feel of the nurse's hands! They were not like Miss Gerard's hands. Rosamund. A celebrity, a tremendously clever woman! Almost he was afraid of her cleverness. But did it matter? He was going away; he was nothing to her; she had just been extraordinarily kind to him. Pity. Was she dark or fair? Oh, dark, of course, with one of those white skins, and deep

brown eyes. Inevitably, perhaps, he thought of her as being beautiful, for to him her voice and hands were beautiful. And she was young, a little older than he was, just a few years, but it seemed so right that she should be a little older than he was. Twenty-four and twenty-nine! Miserable, blind dreamer, why was he fooling himself with all this sentimental nonsense?

Fear possessed him. He could not bear life, or support its bewildering newness. He lay and listened. The house seemed so dead and silent. Better dead! He wanted sound, movement, some human presence near him, her, her voice, her hands. She understood. She—Oh, what a futile, whimpering child he was! As though his blindness could matter to a woman who had the whole world at her feet, who had work to do, and who was rich and famous.

He lay and listened. Where was she? He wanted to hear her voice. This horrible helplessness! He could not go and seek her and say—His broken arm ached, but that was as nothing compared with the ache of his soul. Had she gone out? But she was to go out of his life to-morrow. Hospital. She might come and see him, once, twice, and then his very blindness would descend between them like some impenetrable fog. He would be sent away somewhere to try to pick up the tangled threads in the darkness. He would not even be able to write to her.

A moment later he heard the barking of a dog. Prince was playing one of his games, leaping over a stick which his mistress held and challenging her to hold it higher. What a blessed thing it would be to be a dog, her dog, a creature that could run and leap and look.

"Miss Gerard."

She left the dog lying on her long chair in the loggia.

"Nurse Garnet gone? Oh, yes, I see she has. I have just been taking the dog out."

She was trying to be obviously and impersonally kind, a younger sister of Nurse Garnet's, with unemotional hands and starched cuffs.

"It is nearly tea-time."

"Is it? I have rather lost my sense of time. By the way, Nurse Garnet told me."

What had the wretched woman told him? She sat down on the sofa under the window.

"Nurse Garnet is, I expect, something of a gossip."

"Oh, it wasn't gossip. It couldn't be. I mean talking to a woman like that about you. I found out who you really are. Awfully *bête* of me."

He heard her laugh.

"That I write books? Don't let that make either of us self-conscious."

"But I ought to have known."

"Why? Because I am supposed to be a celebrity? That's one blessed thing about one's dog; it doesn't matter whether you are a highbrow or a fool."

"But you don't quite understand what I mean."

"How?"

"That book of yours you were reading to me. Anyone who could write a book like that isn't quite like other people. What I am trying to say is that I understand now why you are different."

"Do you think so? One does not court social popularity by being odd."

"Not odd, Miss Gerard. That's the very last word I should use. I mean you're so compassionate and quick. I want you to tell me, do you think blindness can make one a kind of selfish sot. I've been thinking. I'm still such a coward."

She rose, crossed the room, and sat down by the bed.

"No, my dear, surely blindness can still feel beauty. One has such a horror of being either priggish or sentimental. They call me sentimental in my books, but I'm not really. Tell me about the things that frighten you."

"May I?"

"Of course."

"But I'm just taking up your time. I expect I have been stopping you working."

"I haven't felt like working. You are worrying about all sorts of things."

"Everything. One is going to be so damned helpless. I have always been rather sensitive about worrying other people, asking them to do things. It's a horrible idea that one might become a sort of slobbering, helpless idiot."

"I'm sure you will never be that."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. It will mean months of adaptation. I think I should try to visualize it as a new adventure, exploring life in a new way."

"Even keeping oneself clean? Yes, physically clean. It needn't be just vanity, need it?"

She sat with folded hands, trying to feel herself into the darkness with him.

"Oh no, something finer than that. If one is fastidious and sensitive, does not one go on being fastidious and sensitive? And aren't you rather letting things rush at you? Oh, it's natural enough. One must feel overwhelmed, bewildered. I would just try and give in for a while and say: 'I've been ill, but I shall get stronger every day, and learn to do things by degrees. I can't expect to do everything at once. At first I shall only be able to walk across the room, but day by day I shall do more and more. I must be gradual, patient. There will be prides and exultations in learning to do things

differently. I must learn to see with the eyes of my inner self.'"

He put out a hand.

"That's wonderful, just what I needed. Inward eyes. Of course, one's mental life can go on."

He had been listening to her voice as much as to her words, for it was her voice that first made him understand that beauty can manifest itself in lineaments of sound.

"May I touch your hand?"

She placed her hand beside his.

"I'm beginning to realize. Hearing and touch and the smell of things. Other windows, even if one is closed. Is that the hand that writes the books?"

"Yes."

"Different. Soft and sensitive. But forgive me, I am being silly. Yet, I can't help wanting to grope. It makes me feel that I'm not shut in by a kind of cave wall."

His fingers were like the fingers of an infant but she divined the innocence of their movements.

"Even people who can see live so much in caves, my dear. There need be no cave."

"I'm not so frightened now. People will help me, won't they?"

"Of course."

III

In the night she was disturbed by some sound, and sitting up in bed she turned on the light, and sat listening.

The sound of something falling! Instantly she was out of bed and hurrying into her dressing-gown. He had asked her that no one should sit up on his account, and had assured her that he was going to sleep like a child. Surely he had given them sufficient trouble?

When she opened his door and turned on the light she saw a sight which was to be unforgettable. He was on his knees beside the bed, groping with one hand for objects on the floor. What had happened was obvious. He had got out of bed, blundered against the table that stood beside it and knocked the thing over.

"Oh, my dear, what are you doing? With that arm, too."

But he had recovered something, a vase into which the wallflowers had been put.

"So sorry, Miss Gerard. Do be careful. There must be some broken glass."

She stood spellbound for a moment watching him trying to place the vase upon

the bed.

"It's not broken, is it? So damned clumsy of me. And I've woken you up."

She was deeply moved, and more than moved, for behind those blind gropings she divined the courage of purpose. She swept across the room and gently took the vase from him.

"You haven't hurt yourself?"

"No. I didn't take a toss, only the poor old table. Have I broken anything?"

"Only the feeding-cup. It doesn't matter. I'll soon put things right."

"I'm awfully sorry. You see, I had to—"

She understood even what he was too shy to tell her.

"Did you manage?"

"Yes."

"Now, get back into bed, dear. I'll put everything straight. It's a good thing you had that arm in a sling."

She helped him back into bed, and picked up the overturned table and the debris.

"My first lesson, Miss Gerard. One's got to learn where the furniture is and not to knock things over."

She was putting the flowers back into the vase. They would need fresh water.

"That's rather great of you, Walter."

"Great?"

"Yes, no doubt about it. Wait, you want covering up properly. The quilt's all crooked."

She was pulling the quilt straight when he asked her that question.

"I wonder if you would mind not calling me Walter?"

"Why, dear?"

"It's such a damned silly name. Old Cash would turn it into Wal. I've got another name."

"What is it?"

"Clive."

"I like that better."

"It's not so good as yours."

"Rosamund," and she gave a little laugh; "so flowery."

"I think it's just right."

"Well, you can use it if you care to."

"May I?"

"Yes."

"Thanks awfully. I say, do forgive me for waking you up. I'll be more careful in the future. But, of course, to-morrow you'll be rid of me."

"I haven't thought of it as a release."

"Haven't you? It's awfully nice of you to say that. But you will come and see me?"

"Of course."

"I shall—Well, never mind. Please go back to bed. I'm quite all right now."

"Good night, Clive."

She was by the door when she heard him say: "Good night, Rosamund."

CHAPTER EIGHT

There had been many occasions in her life when she had longed to die, just to go to sleep and never to wake up, but sometimes there had been anger in her revolt against the business of living. She had felt fierce towards her own wretched body. She could have slashed it, defaced it, let it fall and destroy itself on the rocks at the foot of the cliff. She could remember one night when she had felt bitter and lonely and futile, and she had unlocked the little safe she kept in her bedroom and taken out a box in which she had secreted a tube of white powder. Deliberately she had dissolved some of it, and placing the glass on the table beside her bed, she had covered herself with the quilt and reached out her hand for the glass.

Something had failed in her. Or was it that some part of her had refused to acknowledge that such an escape was anything but cowardly. She could remember getting up, and going down the passage and emptying the glass. But the little hoard of white powder still lived in her safe. She liked to be able to tell herself that it was there, and to know that instant death was always possible.

Heberden had come up to tell her that the operation had been successfully performed and that all was well.

"Steel is quite satisfied. The excision was inevitable. The pathetic thing is that he won't be disfigured."

"Only the eyes?"

"Yes, a house with the blinds down. I saw him before he went into the anæsthetist's room. He asked me to give you a message."

"Yes?"

"Tell Miss Gerard that I shall never forget and ask her not to forget."

"Poor lad, he was very brave about it."

"Yes, a nice lad. The real problem of life is only beginning for him. You'll go and see him?"

"Do you think it will help?"

"More than you know."

He had left her to one of those moods of bitter self depreciation. These emotional storms were too harrowing. She was afraid of life, and the adventure of feeling and caring and losing. She had shrunk from the big and burning issues because she had been so sure that she would have emerged scorched and ridiculous.

She had put these pangs and despairs into her books, for it can be so much easier to write about life than to live it. In your quiet and secret cell, emotion did not rush in and mock you like some little giggling wench to whom sex was as easy as sucking an orange.

She said to herself: "It is much better that I should not see him. Let it end like this."

Also she found herself saying: "Someone will tell him that you are repulsively disfigured, and that you look nearer forty than thirty. What idiotic dream is this? That any man should need you. Surely you have conquered such crudities?"

No, she would not go. She would write him a kind and friendly letter and confess that she was not as other women, that she was odd, almost morbidly separative.

But someone, a nurse, some anonymous stranger, would be obliged to read that letter to him!

She would have broken her promise.

Yes, but in a week or a month he would have forgotten both her and her promise.

Inevitably there was a part of her that resented all his distracting emotion. She was like a woman who did not wish to have children, and was finding life trying to force one upon her, and to thrust into her creative and mental world a little raw, exacting egoist. She had escaped from the mere elementals, planted them out, erected her walls and her hedges. Lonely she might be at times, but she knew just how lonely her own self could be, and how work gave her escape and expression. She loved her work. There were many days in the year when she was completely and blessedly absorbed in it.

A telegram from Margaret. It arrived just as she was sitting down to lunch.

"*Can I come for the week-end. M.*"

Oh, happy intervention! It meant that Margaret would be with her on Saturday. The boy was sent off with her whole-hearted yes, and Jane was told to prepare for her mistress's friend. "I'll get the room ready myself, Jane. Do you think you can manage after all the trouble you have had?" Jane's answer was that Miss Hayle was never any trouble; she did everybody good, especially mooning Mary.

"Besides, she's so lovely to look at."

Miss Gerard winced. She had never been jealous of Margaret. It would have been just as ridiculous to feel jealous of a cherry-tree in full blossom. Margaret's

loveliness transcended sex; it was so complete and unadvertised and exquisite. And Margaret was interested in impersonal things, life's disharmonies and the assuaging of discords and pains. Moreover, in spite of her passion to better things, Margaret had such a lovely sense of fun.

Jane would have said that Miss Hayle was good for Miss Gerard. She took her out of herself, away from her books, and made her talk like a live woman. She even made Miss Gerard laugh, and laughter is good for lonely people.

Miss Gerard joined Will in the garden.

"Miss Hayle's coming, Will."

Which meant that the garden was to be as good as it could be, grass cut, edges trimmed, the vases full of flowers, and the old coach-house cleared of all encumbrance to accept Miss Hayle's small car.

"Will you be picking the flowers, miss?"

"Yes, Will."

"There be some jonquils and polyanthus left in t'orchard. Smell sweet, they do. I might get a few head of 'sparagus. Six a piece."

"Six each. Splendid."

She felt herself soothed and reassured by the near presence of her friend. She could put her own personal problem away, and give herself to a comradeship that was made up of pure understanding and affection. Margaret made her feel serene, and perhaps a little proud of friendship with a woman whose texture was so exquisite both in temperament and in the flesh. Margaret could laugh at her own looks. "My dear, I believe I actually frighten men," which was true. Most of the poor trouser-proud creatures found her so inexorably flawless.

Miss Gerard prayed for fine weather. Saturday opened with quiet and grey eyes. It was not one of your flashing, fascinating vamps of a morning. By ten o'clock the sun would be out and the sky cloudless. So said old Will. Miss Gerard's gardener still believed in a dim and distant sort of deity, and in the secrecy of his gardener's soul he said terse things about that malicious old gentleman, for it was obvious to any gardener that God must be full of mischief and malice.

Sunlight on the grass and the flowers, and the apple blossom out in patches to take the place of the pear that was falling. The firs on the hill playing softly upon golden lyres. Margaret would be at Knoll Farm for tea, and tea could be set in the loggia.

"It really is going to be fine, Will."

Yet Miss Gerard was not quite happy with herself, in spite of her conviction that she was being so supremely sane. The parlour had resumed its ordered and pleasant

beauty, lacquered cabinet and walnut chairs and bureau occupying their accustomed places, but she could not forget its temporary tenant, and his tears and that overturned table. Might there not be moments when sanity, or what passed for sanity, was the mere solacing of self? And what a platitude! Jane had failed to replace one of the Persian rugs just where Miss Gerard liked it to be, and she was rearranging it when Jane came down the passage.

"The telephone, miss."

"Not Miss Hayle?"

"No, miss, the hospital."

Miss Gerard put a hand to the disfigured cheek, a habit of hers when she was bothered.

"You might take the message, Jane. Who is it speaking?"

"The Sister, miss. She asked to speak to you."

"Oh, very well."

Miss Gerard went to the telephone with her hand still laid against her cheek. She was conscious of accusing herself of cowardice, and of being irritated by the inward voice. The hand that had screened her cheek picked up the receiver.

"Hallo."

"Is that Knoll Farm?"

"Yes, Miss Gerard speaking."

"Oh, Miss Gerard, I hope you will forgive me."

"Who is that?"

"Sister Brown. I wanted to speak to you about Mr. Strange."

"Oh, yes, of course. How is Mr. Strange?"

"Being rather difficult, Miss Gerard. That's why I have rung up. We have him in a private ward. He's most terribly depressed. He keeps asking—"

"Yes."

"When you are coming to see him."

There was a pause, and then Miss Gerard's voice suggested both hesitation and haste.

"Oh, yes, I said I would. But I have had a lot of urgent work, and I have a friend here for the week-end. Yes, perhaps I might manage to come on Monday. I'll ring you up. Please give Mr. Strange my best wishes. Yes, I quite understand that it must be—Quite so, Sister. Try and explain to him."

"May I tell him you will come on Monday, Miss Gerard?"

"Oh, yes, I'll try to, if my friend has gone. Good morning, Sister. Thank you for ringing up."

"Do try and come, Miss Gerard. I believe it will help him. You see, he is suffering now from the mental shock."

"I'm so sorry. Yes, I'll try to come. Good morning, Sister."

II

She came away from the telephone feeling hurt and agitated. An interfering and persistent person that Sister! And for the last ten years Miss Gerard had been eliminating all interference, and being a celebrity and unusual she considered that she had a right to resent it. The artist must be allowed a certain ruthlessness, for the inspiration that possesses the creative mind can be ruthless. She had said: "Nothing must be allowed to interfere with my work," and all impertinent intrusions had been castigated.

And here was this emotional situation demanding some solution. She knew that she had given way to more emotion than was good for her and her work, and the creative self had rebelled. It bade her shut doors and be ruthless, intelligently ruthless, and pass a cool, cold hand over those scribblings on the slate. Let them be ignored and effaced. Such a solution would be more merciful to both parties.

But what of her promise to go and see him? Was she not hiding behind her craft, and pretending that in order to protect it she was justified in being pitiless? Was that her real reason? When she examined herself with an artist's sincerity was not the ultimate cause selfish, shrinking fear? Socially, her disfigured face had made her a coward. She was afraid to take her sore and secret self-love to the hospital and exhibit it to those other women, and to come away knowing that one of them would say to him: "What a pity Miss Gerard has that mark on her face. Such bad luck. She might have been quite a good-looking woman."

Yes, that was her real reason for wishing to break her promise, and with a spasm of shame and of bitterness she admitted it. Her self-love was stronger than her compassion.

She went up to her high place among the firs, and sitting down at the foot of a tree confessed herself to the impersonal sea and sky. She was not capable of caring for any human creature as she cared for herself. Was that the rather humiliating truth? Had she not preached courage and compassion in her books, and when life put her to the supreme test she played the coward.

Should she tell Margaret, ask Margaret to judge? Margaret would understand; Margaret had a lucid and impartial outlook; Margaret was wise to the woman's point of view, and an idealist with regard to woman's work. Why should the woman

always surrender, leave her brush or her pen or her piano to play the mother or wet-nurse to some fool man? Why should it be assumed that woman's work did not matter, when primitive male sentiment became rhetorical about birthrights and babies? Had not she and Margaret talked the social superstition to threads, and burned the vestiges on the vestal fire?

Yes, she would appeal to Margaret. She would say: "You understand me. My work's so sensitive and delicately balanced. The least thing puts it out of temper. It may sound absurd, but even a worrying letter is like so much grit in my consciousness. One has to be so calm and aloof and impersonal. One dreads all emotional exactions. One resents their intrusion into one's life."

The locked gates were open for Margaret, and Miss Gerard sat in the garden and listened for her friend's car. Margaret would arrive looking serene and cool and lovely, even after seventy miles on a road that was infested by all the week-end cads and crocks. She would smile and say: "Hallo, my dear, your week-end rush to the sea becomes more and more Gadara," and would slip out of the green sheath of her speed-model and kiss Miss Gerard with lips that were firm and fresh. And that was just how it happened, save that Margaret's front off wing showed the scars of battle, and her brown eyes had a brittle brightness.

"Sorry. Afraid I'm late. I had a little clash the other side of Helsham."

"Your mudguard."

"Exactly. A fellow cut in on me and then tried to get away with it."

"And didn't?"

"No. I caught him, and made him stop. It's one's duty to be a little candid to nasty people."

The car was put away in the coach-house, and Margaret and her suit-case shepherded to the room whose window overlooked the orchard. "Tea in the loggia, dear." Margaret was at the window, taking off her hat and contemplating the apple blossom and the white narcissi in the very green grass. "My dear, how silly of one to be peeved by a cad in a car!" Miss Gerard left her friend at the window, and went down to tell Jane to make the tea. Prince was waiting for her at the foot of the stairs and the dog's eyes were gentle.

Miss Gerard bent down and kissed the top of his head.

"Teach me not to be jealous, Prince. Gods and dogs are supposed to be jealous people, and sometimes you shame me."

For in contemplating her friend's perfect profile Miss Gerard had been conscious of a sudden pang. Nature had given Margaret so much. But was she jealous of her friend? Surely the reaction was not so trivial and crude as the emotion she had

experienced? No, Margaret's loveliness made her a little sad, and more conscious of her own disfigurement. Margaret had nothing to fear from the eyes and tongues of other men and women.

"Tea, Jane?"

"Yes, miss."

Jane had put out the blue Spode tea service. Jane had produced hot buttered scones. She and Miss Hayle met in the passage and Miss Gerard heard their two voices.

"How are you, Jane?"

"The better for seeing you, miss."

"Then it's mutual. I always feel all smoothed out here, no creases."

Jane crumpled up her face at Margaret.

"I shouldn't have thought, miss, you ever had any creases."

"Oh, haven't I! But you and Miss Gerard iron them out."

It was the serene friend who sat down in a basket-chair and snuggled into the cushions, and looked at Miss Gerard and the Spode china and the garden with eyes of affection. But Margaret was not a person whose eyes dwelt only on surfaces; her glances touched things, explored them and their inwardness. There was no blemish anywhere in this sweet and secret place, with the cuckoo calling and the whole world in flower. Nor was Margaret conscious of her friend's disfigurement. It had become for her like some trivial stigma, a mere shadow lying across the cheek of an exquisite friendship, a thread that had woven itself into the texture of this other personality and become familiar and almost unobserved.

How was the new book going? Miss Gerard, having poured out the tea, sat with her hand laid along her cheek. Why had Margaret asked that question? Margaret was not an asker of questions, especially such direct ones, but Miss Gerard had never watched her friend disentangling a difficult case, distracting a patient's attention by asking questions while her own hands and eyes were busy.

"I'm rather stuck for the moment."

"Some character being peevish?"

Miss Gerard made her decision.

"No. We have been a little upset here. An unexpected visitor."

So something had happened to explain why Rosamund was not herself. Voices can be so significant, and Miss Gerard's voice seemed to be pitched a tone higher than usual, as though some string in her was under tension.

"Dear old Biederman?"

"Much more sensational. An aeroplane crashed in the fog just over the hill, and

we had the pilot on our hands for several days."

Miss Hayle's lashes flickered. She realized that she was looking too intently and curiously at her friend's face.

"Was he badly hurt?"

"Yes. They thought it a hopeless case. I wanted to tell you about it. He is going to recover. They moved him into Westbourn hospital for an operation."

"Successful?"

"Yes. It was for his eyes. He is going to be blind."

Miss Hayle reached for the cigarette-box and helped herself.

"Jane's scones need repose. Was there no hope of saving his sight?"

"None."

"Quite a youngster?"

"Oh, about twenty-five, I suppose. I may as well be candid about it. The thing upset me. I had to tell him that he was going to be blind. All rather harrowing and tragic."

"I've had blind children, my dear. It's much harder to be blind when you have known what sight is. But why did you have to tell him?"

"It seemed that it might come easier from me."

"For him?"

"I suppose so. And it was so unlike anything in a book. I'm used to my emotion in books."

Miss Hayle sat smoking and looking at the sunlight on a bed of tulips. Miss Gerard was lighting a cigarette, and the flame of the match seemed to gather a slight tremor from Miss Gerard's fingers.

"If you don't want to tell me any more I shall understand."

Miss Gerard turned her face away.

"But I do. I'm bothered. You may as well have the whole of the analysis. I promised to go and see him. And I don't want to."

"Interference."

"Yes. One may have experiences that readjust one's sense of value. One's work is the most exacting thing in one's life, work like mine and yours. It's far more jealous than a man. Then, there is the assumption—"

"That a man child has only to whimper and woman must leave everything and rush to comfort him."

"Yes, and the silly creature does."

"Well, don't go, my dear. Where is the obligation?"

"A promise to go. Besides, the hospital rang up yesterday."

"For hospital interpolate Matron, Sister, or nurse."

"It was the Sister-in-charge. Would I come and see him? He was dreadfully depressed and difficult, and was asking for me."

Miss Hayle was looking very grave. Possibly she had begun to divine the profundities of her friend's crisis, and that an intelligent egoism could not fish in such deep waters.

"I'm feeling rather shy, Munda. One's never quite so casual and cynical as one sounds."

"Is that how I sound?"

"You know, one gets painfully sensitive in one's doctoring. People have to tell one everything and sometimes one feels—"

Miss Gerard made a sudden movement in her chair.

"Margaret, you have me. Be merciful to me, my dear. I'm being an awful humbug."

"My dear!"

"Let's have the shameful thing out in the light. It's my wretched face. He has never seen it. And somehow I don't want him ever to know. You see, some kind person will be sure to tell him. One's damned self-love! I knew I loved myself, but not so badly as that."

Margaret sat forward in her chair. Her face had a sudden softness. She put her cigarette aside and, rising, bent over her friend and kissed her.

"Doesn't it occur to you that some of us never notice it? Why should anybody tell him? Besides, do you think that it would matter?"

"I have been such a coward, always."

"Hardly that, my dear. Tell me, but for that, would you go?"

"Yes."

Margaret bent down again and kissed the crown of her friend's head.

"Well, I should go."

CHAPTER NINE

If Miss Gerard's moods fluctuated, so did the temper of the English spring. The forecast might be fair, and April sending her children to bed with treacherous kisses, but she woke them next morning with a north-east wind and a sky of grey and dirty flannel. Miss Gerard, waking rather like a child on her birthday morning, yet full of secret fearfulness and strange tremors, saw the dead blind and felt winter in the room. Why when one decided to let out the furnace and dispense with the radiators did this thing always happen? She rose, went to the window and drew up the blind. The illusion of spring had vanished in the night. It was a grim and dastardly day, with the young leaves shivering and the tulips' heads down, blossom blowing from the trees.

She went shivering back to bed. Poor Margaret, poor Rosamund! Her mood swung round to match this depressing day. It had been arranged that Margaret should drive her into Westbourn, but again she was shrinking from her crisis. She lay and listened to the north-east wind making a melancholy soughing in the chimney. Did women with children to care for and floors to scrub pay much attention to the weather?

Jane brought in her early morning tea. She was glad that Jane had brought it, and not Mary Spray.

"What a beast of a day, Jane."

"Oh, just April, miss."

"I wish we hadn't let out the furnace."

"Will's lighting it, miss."

"Splendid. Will you tell Miss Hayle that the bath is hers?"

"I think she's in it, miss."

Miss Gerard drank her tea and, feeling better for it, was encouraged to call herself a very selfish woman. She could lie in bed and whimper while other people worked in order that her world might be warm and smooth and comfortable. What did she do for other people but write books for them to read? And that was her own pleasure. It was not a mere question of ethics but of elementary ecology, the case of the protected and too sensitive plant pampered in a conservatory. Conservatory! Horrid word! Why feel afraid of a north-east wind, and lose your courage because April was being April?

She got out of bed and went to her mirror. She was conscious of compelling herself to look at her reflection in the mirror. How she hated her own face! But was not that because she loved herself too well?

Sudden sunlight shining on the Scotch firs and the green hill. She looked out of her window like a surprised child. So the day was not to be so grey and dismal as she had feared. Bright intervals. And then she heard the voice of her friend.

"Munda, hallo!"

"Hallo, out already?"

"Just going to see that none of my tyres are flat."

"I'm sorry it's such a beast of a day."

"Oh, it's not so bad as that. Have I time to run down to the sea before breakfast?"

"Plenty."

"Right ho."

Miss Gerard brought with her into the breakfast room a sweet perfume that was not of the English spring. It floated to Miss Hayle and pleased her, so much so that its exotic flavour had for her an esoteric meaning. Her friend was wearing a pretty jade blue frock, and the hands that floated over the cups were rather like fluttering birds. Margaret Hayle had a feeling that Rosamund Gerard was emotionally agitated, and that the scent she had used was intended to be delicately and significantly personal.

"You're smelling sweet, my dear. What is it?"

"Barbara Gould, Numéro Quarante."

"Very pleasant after iodoform."

"I don't reek, Margaret, do I?"

"Of course not. Shall I share out the buttered eggs?"

"Please."

"What sort of time would you like the car?"

"Won't it bore you?"

"No. Do you think we can crowd Prince in?"

"He's rather large."

"You can share the whole back seat with him."

"Will they admit visitors on a Sunday morning?"

"'Phone the Sister and tell her you are coming."

Miss Gerard had forgotten to sugar the tea.

"How silly of me. Will eleven suit you?"

"Twenty minutes in, half an hour there, and back for lunch. I do like my Sunday

laze after lunch."

"That's understood."

Miss Gerard's restlessness was only too evident. She sat down after breakfast to smoke a cigarette, but leaving half of it unsmoked she entered the house for a basket and scissors. Miss Hayle, watching her friend snipping wallflowers and laying them in her basket, divined both the spiritual and sensuous meaning of Miss Gerard's use of the world's sweet savours. Narcissi were added to the wallflowers, but for these white flowers Miss Gerard wandered off into the orchard where she was beyond the gaze of Margaret's brown eyes, and Miss Hayle, left alone with her own reflections, for Prince had gone off with his mistress, confronted a woman's problem. Supposing—? But was not the situation as delicate as perfume Numéro Quarante, and so intimately her friend's that any exploration of it seemed rather like prying into some other woman's love letters. And yet Margaret could not help wondering whether the very sensitive world in which Miss Gerard lived was not too fine and ethereal for experiments in sex.

II

The County Hospital at Westbourn was like Westbourn itself, very red and hygienic and new. Westbourn was a modern growth, or rather a town without traditions which had been perpetuated by the propertied classes, and whose spacious sea-front was completely a parade. Miss Gerard had described Westbourn as "An experiment in Segregated Gentility." Such places, with their hundreds of red villas and little gardens, and oak fences, clean streets and white lamp-posts were to her both depressing and terrifying. There was no shabby, jocund, old town smelling of tar and fish and the salt sea.

Miss Gerard, sitting beside her friend in the sports coupé, saw Westbourn on that Sunday morning as a conglomeration of red roofs like a sore spot on the coast's profile. The sea was very blue and seamed with white horses. Church bells were ringing. The north-east wind strode over this centre of segregated gentility like an impatient giant who hurried to wet his great feet in the sea.

"It looks just particularly horrible this morning," said Miss Gerard.

Margaret Hayle was conscious of her friend's tension. She was sitting beside her as though this was her first drive in a car, and the balance of it had to be preserved. Her knees were pressed together, her hands locked in her lap.

"Infinitely respectable, my dear. A place in which dustbins are not mentioned. But the sea's almost Mediterranean."

"Strange creature, man."

"He creates a livid splodge and calls it culture."

Instinctively Miss Gerard's left hand went to her cheek. It was as though Westbourn made her conscious of her own disfigurement, and caused her to shrink the more from a town whose stare might be so self-complacent and uncomprehending. Miss Hayle happened to know the County Hospital, having once visited a sick child there, and she drove along the sea-front to Victoria Gardens. A statue of the great queen stood here, looking starily seaward and evidently not amused. The hospital had been built on the crown of a hill and overlooking Victoria Gardens, and it was approached by a broad sweep of tarmac. A notice said: "Visitors' cars park here." Miss Hayle backed her coupé skilfully between two other cars and switched off the engine, but Miss Gerard was still sitting with her knees pressed together and her hands locked in her lap.

"Come in with me, Margaret."

Miss Gerard seemed unable to make up her mind to leave the car, and her friend, leaning across and opening the near door, was moved by this other woman's irresolution.

"Why be afraid of being kind, my dear?"

Miss Gerard's eyelids flickered.

"Thank you, Margaret. I needed that."

"The flowers, Munda."

Miss Gerard was forgetting her flowers. She smiled faintly at her friend, and said, "How silly of me," and turning to confront that large red building she seemed to stand hesitant and mute like a shy creature overwhelmed by some public occasion.

"I shan't be long."

"I'll stroll down and look at the sea."

Miss Gerard was speaking to a porter in the vestibule.

"Good morning. My name is Gerard. I've come to see a patient."

"I'm sorry, madam, it's not visiting time."

He had stared for a moment at her face.

"Sister Brown expects me. I rang her up."

"Then, it's all right, madam. Edward Ward. First floor. Along the corridor to the right and up the stairs."

She passed along the corridor with its high, bright windows. There seemed so much light here, too much light, and need the man have stared at her in that particular way when she was feeling so acutely conscious of her face? At the foot of the stairs her courage came near to failing her. She paused on the first step, clutching her

flowers and wishing that Margaret were with her. Strange eyes might have been attracted by Margaret's face, and she would have felt reassured and put in countenance by Margaret's beauty. "See, I have a friend who is lovely. It does not matter to her that I am such a freak."

She put the flowers to her face, and drawing courage and some elemental comfort from them, she began to climb the stairs, and half-way up she was aware of a woman hurrying down, a big creature in a blue uniform, a woman with a large, plain, pleasant face.

"Miss Gerard?"

"Yes."

"I'm Sister Brown. The porter gave me a ring."

This woman's eyes were kind. They looked down at Miss Gerard's face as though they saw nothing there that was abnormal. She put out a hand and touched the flowers.

"How lovely! It is good of you to come. Mr. Strange expects you."

She turned and walked with Miss Gerard up the stairs.

"You know, it is really quite wonderful, Miss Gerard, your coming to see us. I imagine you get sick of hearing about your books."

Miss Gerard's face was faintly flushed.

"Oh, I don't know."

"Your books have meant quite a lot to me. Yes, really they have. You do so understand. It must be great to be able to help people."

Miss Gerard's eyes looked round into the other woman's face.

"So do you, Sister. And perhaps you understand why I may understand."

Sister Brown was thinking to herself: "Yes, your poor face. What hard luck!" and since even the most practical of women can be romanticists, Sister Brown was suddenly discovering unexpected subtleties in the situation. Her mental picture of the celebrated Douglas Gerard had been that of a mature and middle-aged woman, a little dowdy perhaps, but jocund and self-assured, and Miss Gerard was almost a girl and as shy as some gentle old lady.

"I think I ought to tell you one or two things about Mr. Strange."

"Yes, Sister."

"Come into my room."

There was one arm-chair in the Sister's room, and beside it a lacquer table, and on this table Miss Gerard saw three little books. Such books came to her often through the post and she recognized the genus. Sister Brown, planting herself upon the bed, saw and smiled.

"Yes, autograph books. Would you mind? Three of our nurses. You can use my pen."

Miss Gerard was feeling comforted. She had expected strange and unfriendly faces, and was finding herself among friends. "I'm afraid my signature is rather a scrawl."

"I expect you have to do so much writing. Do you really write all your books by hand?"

"Yes."

"And they are in Braille too?"

"Most of them."

"Mr. Strange was asking. You won't think it crude of me, Miss Gerard, but he is terribly grateful to you."

Miss Gerard was scribbling her name on a pink page.

"Really, I did very little. It seemed such a tragic thing. One just did what one could. And he has been very—?"

"Terribly depressed. What seems to worry him most, Miss Gerard, is the future."

"Yes, I can understand."

"What I mean is he seems to have a horror of being helpless and dependent upon other people."

"A question of pride?"

"Yes, I suppose it is. If you could suggest something, insist on him realizing that he need not be a parasite."

"Parasite?"

"That's the word he is always using. People are so different, you know, in their make-up. I have had men in my wards who would be content to lie there and be waited on for the rest of their lives. But this lad is so horribly sensitive about giving trouble."

Miss Gerard had signed the last book. She placed it and the pen on the lacquer table.

"That's how one would like him to be. Does that sound terribly priggish, Sister?"

The big woman smiled at her.

"I don't think you could be priggish, Miss Gerard."

III

The man in the bed heard a door opening and a voice saying, "Miss Gerard, Mr.

Strange."

They had put him in a private room, a little, oblong white box whose windows seemed to fill the whole of one wall. There was just room for the bed, the bed-table and two chairs. Sunlight was pouring in. The red coverlet on the bed contrasted with the white austerity of this cell.

Miss Gerard sat down beside the bed with her back to the very bright window. Sister Brown had closed the door and for some seconds there was silence, and so intimate and urgent was this silence that it seemed to paralyse Miss Gerard's lips. She sat contemplating his fair hair and lightly bandaged face, and her voicelessness was as complete as his blindness.

Nor during those first moments could he find anything to say to her. He, too, seemed paralysed by the poignancy of her presence. She was not even sound to him as yet, only a drift of sweet perfume like some pale flower scenting the night. And then his right hand made a movement and came to lie palm upwards in the hollow of his splintered arm.

"Are you really there?"

Her response was a sudden, shy and almost austere bending towards the bed. She placed the flowers in the upturned hand.

"I brought you these."

He put the flowers to his face.

"Wallflowers and something else. Out of your garden?"

"Yes. Wallflowers and narcissi."

He laid the flowers on the bed and his hand returned to the same position. He wanted her to hold that hand, to feel the consoling, satisfying touch of her fingers. She was a voice to him, and a strange sweet perfume that was other than the scent of the flowers, but his sensitiveness was as shy and inarticulate as hers, for what right had he to exact anything or to count upon her compassion?

"They are being awfully kind to me here."

"I'm glad. Sister Brown seems a dear."

"Oh, yes, she's a good sort. They are all great admirers of yours."

"That's very nice of them."

Again there was silence. She was looking at his fair hair and finding the texture of it delicate and fine. She could see his mouth and nostrils, and they were of the same quality as his hair. She could not find the right words to describe them. Her glance shifted to his hand; the blue and white pyjama sleeve had slipped half-way up his forearm, and the skin was soft and almost feminine.

"How's the arm?"

"Oh, quite comfortable."

The fingers of that hand were making little restless movements, a kind of mute and subconscious appeal to this invisible presence.

"I've been so longing for you to come."

She watched the movement of his lips, and saw them stiffen into a kind of frightened silence, and suddenly she understood. She was conscious of an emotional spasm that was almost pain. He was afraid, as fearful as she was of the impulse that had forced those words from him, and instantly she knew that he was waiting, listening. The answering touch was inevitably and urgently hers.

Her hand went out and touched his. "Yes, Clive," and she felt his fingers fold themselves over hers. He lay silently, with his blind face turned towards her.

"Do you mind? Just for a little while?"

"Why should I mind, dear?"

"Oh, well, it just helps me, and it can't hurt you."

She sat holding his hand, and feeling that something in herself that had long been secret and hidden and afraid was being compelled to rise as from the dead, and come forth into the light.

"Have you been very frightened, dear?"

"I'm afraid I have."

"Tell me."

"I don't want to make a song about myself."

"It is the future that frightens you?"

"Have you ever lain awake at night before an exam and felt that you are bound to fail? Or those nights when all the rotten and futile things in yourself seem to come and sit beside your bed?"

"I think I know."

"But how could you ever feel like that?"

"My dear, my soul has often gone begging its bread. There are times when one hates and despises one's wretched ineffectual self."

"You, feeling like that?"

"Oh, yes."

"But how is it possible? You who have made such a success of life."

"My dear, in some ways I'm a dreadful failure."

He seemed to turn slightly in the bed.

"You, a failure! No, that doesn't seem possible to me. Anyone with a voice like yours, anyone who can understand as you do."

"In some ways I have been a very selfish woman, my dear."

"I don't believe it. You have given so much to people in your books."

She was not conscious of her head bending with a kind of passionate humility over their clasped hands.

"Why talk about me? It is your future—"

"May I tell you?"

"Of course."

"I'm so horribly afraid of self pity, of becoming a sort of parasite, a slimy thing that lives in the dark. Something inside me keeps saying: 'You must do something, do something.' You see, one's got to feel necessary, a person, a part of things, or go mad. It's the prospect of sitting alone in a dark corner like an idiot child that frightens me. I know that in a way I have to begin all over again, learn things, teach myself, but it's the idea of being alone in a dark corner—"

She bent down and put her lips to the bandages over his forehead.

"I understand."

He lay very still for a moment as though the touch of her lips in his dark world had come as some profound and mysterious revelation.

"Did you really kiss me?"

"Yes, my dear. I'm sorry, I—"

"Sorry! Yes, I know, I must seem a rather pitiful thing. I—"

"Not pitiful, my dear, rather splendid. I would be so very proud if you would let me try to help you a little."

She was conscious of the pressure of his fingers.

"Is that really true? Something to hold to, you, even if it is only now and again? I —I promise you I won't be greedy, I won't ask you—Just now and again."

"Yes, dear."

"I can't believe it."

"You may."

"It's very wonderful."

Before she had realized what he was doing he had drawn her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers.

"If I could see you just once a week. How one clings to a habit of speech! I can't see you, but I can listen and feel."

There were other reasons why Miss Gerard was glad that he could not see her face.

"Once a week, yes, Clive. And now I must go, my dear. A friend drove me in and she is waiting. Try not to feel afraid of the future."

He let her hand go.

"I'm not so afraid now."

She found herself in the corridor at the head of the stairs. They were empty and she was glad. She was not conscious of descending the stairs, or of the high windows and the glare of light upon the white walls and her face. Dr. Margaret Hayle, sitting waiting in the car, saw her friend appear on the hospital steps. Miss Gerard seemed to hesitate for a moment like some creature emerging from some dim place into a brilliant and almost bewildering atmosphere. Miss Hayle had a map on her knee; she had been studying it, and she made a pretence of being absorbed in her map.

"Sorry I have been so long, Margaret."

Miss Hayle, glancing at her friend's face, discovered upon it a kind of inward sheen.

"Hallo. Just been looking at the map. I thought we might run over to Bodiam this afternoon."

Miss Gerard got into the car, and Dr. Hayle folded up the map and slipped it into a door-pocket.

"How do you feel about Bodiam?"

"I should love to go."

"After tea, perhaps. Or we could get tea somewhere."

"Yes."

Miss Hayle started the engine. She had more than a feeling that her friend did not wish to be looked at too closely, and that intimate questions would be both tactless and unnecessary, for Miss Gerard had the air of a woman who was carrying some precious liquid in a fragile bowl and no drop of it was to be spilled.

CHAPTER TEN

There were many people who would have been ready to warn Miss Gerard that she was in danger of behaving like a sentimental fool, and that when your cultured spinster becomes emotional she can be the silliest of creatures, but Miss Gerard was not quite the old maid her sisters thought her. The vulgar world might laugh and say: "She's never had a lover or a child, and with a face like that she'd only be kissed in the dark." In fact, Phœbe Prodgers was to refer to Rosamund's romance with a candour and a coarseness that suffered from no illusions.

"She had to catch a blind one, my dear!"

Bodiam was looking very black on this April day, and the moat was no magic mirror, and if Dr. Margaret Hayle was fond of saying that you could never be sure how people would react to normal stimuli, she too might have been as talkative as the jackdaws who dwelt in Bodiam Castle. But it was an occasion when you said just nothing or next to nothing, for there were profundities that were like the wind and the water. The setting sun was making an effort to shine upon the grey black walls and the ruffled steel of the moat. They had climbed one of the towers, and Miss Gerard, standing by the battlements and looking out across the green valley of the Rother, made that most surprising confession.

"Margaret, I am going to adopt a child."

Her friend refrained from the obvious question. What child? And Miss Gerard was grateful.

"Don't ask me anything for a moment. I am being the conventional humbug, and yet not completely so. One may know that one is doing a thing wilfully."

Miss Hayle looked at her with troubled affection.

"Wilfulness may be quite a good reason. But your work, Munda?"

"Oh, my work, yes! I was becoming a little bored with it. What one might call living on paper. I might not want to work, or I might want to work differently. It all arises from the urge towards self expression. I haven't expressed myself as an actual woman."

So it was this blind, obscure and almost nameless boy who was wrecking her celibate serenity. And Rosamund of all people!

"It may hurt, my dear."

Miss Gerard put her hand to her cheek.

"I want to be hurt. I want to feel things for myself. It may sound terribly crude and physiological, but I want to take the risks any ordinary woman accepts. I've been frightened of life, scared of my own silly face. Probably I shall go on being frightened, just as a mother dreads what a child may do and say."

Her friend looked down at the water and listened to it lapping against the stones.

"Do you mean, Munda, that you are going to take him to live with you?"

"Yes."

"As a child?"

"A blind child, a thing that will have to be helped to learn a new sort of life."

"I'm not being cynical, dear, but is that all?"

"Can I answer that yet?"

"I see. I think I understand. Of course, I know you realize what this other personality may do to your creative self."

Miss Gerard seemed to smile.

"My creative self! Yes. What is it exactly? A kind of mediumship. It seems to give pleasures to thousands of people, and often it has given great pleasure to me. But aren't there other forms of creativeness, Margaret? No, I'm not being sentimental and sottish. There are things I have craved for and never had, things I have wanted to give and never been able to give. May I leave it at that, and still be your friend?"

Miss Hayle was not a demonstrative person, but she put her arm round Miss Gerard.

"My dear, what a question to ask me."

"Thank you, Margaret. I'm so terribly scared."

Sister Brown could have told Miss Gerard that there were other people in the world who might be afraid of being emotionally foolish, and that some men are just like sensitive children. This particular patient had been a solitary child. He had not been brought up in a big family and taught to shout and swagger, and to assume that when he put on a white waistcoat the chosen virgin knelt at his feet. Sister Brown had written letters for him, one to his landlady enclosing two pound notes, and yet another to Mr. Cash of the Blue Hawk Company. There had been no reply from Mr. Cash, but a good woman in a London suburb had packed two suit-cases and dispatched them to Westbourn hospital.

"I can get up, Sister, now, can't I?"

"Dr. Steel says yes. For an hour or two."

"I want to try and dress myself."

"On your own?"

"Of course. I must learn to do these things. And shave myself. I can manage with a safety razor."

She patted his shoulder.

"That's the spirit, my dear, but you are forgetting that arm. You might manage the razor."

"Put me in front of the basin, Sister, and I'll try."

She humoured him, for such courage was to be applauded, but he did not know that she left the door ajar and stood in the corridor to watch him. She had filled the basin for him, put out sponge and brush and razor, and helped him out of bed. Compassionately she watched his groping hand, and how force of habit made him raise his face as to some imaginary mirror. She saw him stand for a moment as though holding his breath in the darkness. He lathered and scraped, and washed chin and cheeks and upper lip with the face glove, and then, for a moment, he could not find the towel. It hung on a rail attached to the basin, and after some gropings he found it. She did not interfere, but stood observing him. She saw him running his fingers over his chin to explore the thoroughness of the job.

She opened the door and walked in.

"Managed? That's splendid."

"Have I missed anything, Sister?"

She examined his chin.

"Just one little place. No bigger than a postage stamp. Sit down on the bed. I'll finish it for you."

They had to help him to dress because of that broken arm, nor did he realize how kindly and closely these women observed his moods as well as his body. Would the psyche wish to take flight from the darkened shell? Sudden hysteria, acute and agonizing depression, and an open window! Sister Brown had known one such case and had never forgotten it, for she was a woman who was moved to regard such a tragedy as an accusation of failure. She made it her affair to be in and out of Clive's room very often during those early days, and the night-nurse had orders to open his door gently from time to time and satisfy herself that he was sleeping.

Later, on that particular day, she found him sitting at the open window with his right hand lying on the sill. He had learnt to distinguish her footsteps from those of the nurse.

"It's a lovely day, Sister."

"Yes, my dear."

"I can feel the sun on my hand."

Good lad! He was not shaping like one who would become a figure of self pity.

"A real May day. Wanting anything?"

"Yes, I want to ask you something."

"Go ahead."

"I take up an awful lot of your time, Sister."

"My business, my dear."

"Shall I be, I mean am I, very disfigured?"

"Not at all."

"Just no eyes. I suppose I shall always look as though I was asleep?"

"Not quite like that. Your mouth and muscles won't be asleep. Nor your ears, nor your voice."

"Thank you, Sister. One's just a bit vain still, you see!"

"Quite right."

"And, Sister?"

"Yes."

"This is Miss Gerard's day, isn't it?"

"She said she would come."

"Could I have the bandage off?"

"I think you might, my dear."

II

In an age of increasing social interference and of official fuss Miss Gerard had with a quiet ruthlessness contrived to free herself from interference.

Possibly it did occur to her on this May morning, when the car that she had hired from Feldhurst carried her out through the blue gates and down the lane, that she who resented official grit in the smooth wheels of the day's work was behaving most unreasonably.

She looked at the solid red neck of the driver. A simple soul, this, who had not been introduced to his own subconscious, and knew not Dr. Inhibition or Professor Complex. He had spread a rug over her knees and taken her face much as he might take the weather. Oak woods turning gold; patches of wild hyacinth. She saw the sea and the red roofs of Westbourn. She found herself observing a girl coming out of a villa gate, piquant hat, perfect legs, a creamy face. How the cult of the body had been elaborated! New woman and her quite exquisite pride. And she? A moment of sharp sadness possessed her. If only she could have changed her physical self for the unblemished body of that girl?

The hospital confronted her. The driver was out and opening the door.

"Lovely day, miss."

"Perfect. I expect I shall be about half an hour."

She gathered up her flowers and got out. Three steps, the vestibule, a porter who had become affable.

"Lovely day, miss."

"Perfect. Is Sister Brown in?"

"Yes, miss. I'll give her a ring for you."

Sister Brown met her with a face that was welcoming and yet somehow mysterious. "Come into my room for a moment." Miss Gerard's lips seemed to tighten. What was behind this other woman's intimate yet mysterious manner? Sister Brown, putting her face to Miss Gerard's flowers, and then sitting down broad-beamed on her bed, crinkled up her kind eyes.

"He's dressed and up. I thought I had better warn you."

Miss Gerard was conscious of relief. Was that all Sister Brown had to tell her?

"The first time?"

"Yes. And the dressings are off. He was just a little worried about being disfigured."

"Is he?"

"Hardly at all. Just the face of a blind man."

Miss Gerard sat very still, with her eyes looking down at the flowers in her lap. Her disfigurement might be an ever present wound in her consciousness, but it had provoked in her a sensitive and fastidious reticence that was seldom broken. It was there for her few and rare friends to see and to forget, but on this morning in May she was moved to uncover herself to this new friend. "Sister, you have been kind to me. You have never looked at me as some people look. And yet it may have occurred to you how I must feel. You say he was a little worried about being disfigured."

"Yes, Miss Gerard."

"And yet he cannot see that I am so much more disfigured. I have had it with me all my life."

"But he doesn't know."

Miss Gerard's eyes looked at her quickly.

"Thank you. I rather thought you were that sort of woman."

"My dear, he need not know. And would it matter?"

"I think he will have to know, some day. I would rather tell him than have some officious person blurt it to him."

There was silence for a moment, and then the Sister said: "None of my nurses

are like that, thank God. Why tell him? And then, even if he were told—"

Their eyes met and held.

"He may have some illusion."

"Probably he has. But aren't you magnifying your trouble, my dear? Some things are more than skin deep. I'm trying to express—"

"Just what?"

"How he must be conscious of you. It's not easy. Just as flowers must smell to him. And you have such a lovely voice."

"I?"

"Yes. If I were blind I think my sensing of people would be different. I should not be worried about a face, but the voice and the touch, and the thing we call soul."

Miss Gerard rose slowly from her chair.

"Thank you, Sister. You are so much more good than I am. I think I will go in and see him now."

III

When Miss Gerard opened the door she saw him sitting in a chair by the window with the sunlight shining on his cornstalk hair. She was aware of his face turning to her quickly, and of those dropped lids that made him appear asleep, but the lower part of his face was swiftly and sensitively vital.

"You see I'm up and dressed."

He was on his feet and trying to place the arm-chair for her, but the other and very ordinary chair was in the way. She went quickly round the bed and removed the obstacle.

"This will do for me, Clive."

"No, this one. Is it all right now?"

"Yes."

"There's another chair somewhere."

"Here."

She held it out to him and his hand touched the back-rail.

"Splendid. I can manage."

She watched him place the chair on the left of the window, grope his way round it with his legs and sit down.

"I'm beginning to get the hang of some things. If the backs of your legs touch the chair you know you won't be sitting down on nothing."

She was still standing in the narrow space between bed and window. She had

put her flowers on the bed, and she recovered them and placed them on his knees.

"The sun has brought out the scent."

She watched his fingers exploring the posy on his knees. They touched the petals, found their way to the sheaf of stalks and rested there. His face, in spite of the closed lids, had a luminous look. He raised the flowers and smelt them.

"Wallflowers."

But he seemed to be savouring some other scent, the perfume of her invisible presence. She sat down with her hands in her lap, conscious of experiencing other revelations. She had entered his room feeling that she was to see the face of a stranger, and to be challenged by all the perils of a personality that might become alien and unfamiliar. Almost she had heard Margaret Hayle's unuttered but divined warnings. "Some raw boy." And while watching his face and his handling of those flowers she had realized with an exquisite inward sob of relief that this blind creature was not crude clay, that the fine hair and those sensitive fingers, and the play of emotion about his lips were of a texture that was not common and obvious.

She asked him whether he had heard anything from the Blue Hawk Company and Mr. Cash, and he understood that she was wondering whether he was short of money. He was sensitive about money. He said that Sister Brown had written for him to Mr. Cash, but that Mr. Cash's motto had always been: "When a thing begins to be a nuisance, scrap it."

"But, my dear, he has insured his pilots."

"Oh, yes. I'm not worrying. The insurance people will pay up. I think I told you that I had a little private income. I shall be able to manage. What is much more important I have managed to shave myself."

He seemed on the edge of laughter, and she was touched by his courage.

"That is important. But, Clive, I think someone ought to take up the matter officially with the Company."

"Lawyers?"

"Yes. Why not let my London lawyers act for you? Shall I write to them?"

How good of her to trouble. His blind face was turned to the sunlight.

"Why should you bother?"

She said gently: "Why should one bother about anything? There are other necessities besides that of earning one's living. Your future matters to you."

He was silent for a moment.

"I do nothing but think about it."

"Not frightened now?"

"Yes, a little. When one wakes up in the middle of the night. Everything so still

and dark. One does feel rather like a frightened kid. One has to realize that one mustn't let go."

"No, you mustn't do that."

"One has to accept the fact that lots of things are going to be denied one."

"What things, my dear?"

He hesitated.

"Oh, what the ordinary man can count on. I've got to adapt. The one thing I have a horror of is becoming peculiar, abnormal, a parasite."

"Please don't use that word."

"But isn't it adequate? I have been considering the things a blind man can do. Sister Brown's been reading me some literature on the subject. Massage, piano tuning, music, some forms of handicraft. I suppose I ought to get into some training centre for the blind."

"Do any of those things appeal to you?"

"Not much. Pianos are rather out of date, aren't they? I shouldn't mind being a masseur. I should feel I was doing a job that helped people."

She put a hand to her cheek.

"And where would you live?"

"That is rather a problem, isn't it? I suppose I should have to live in a Hostel for the Blind, or find a corner where someone would suffer my gropings. And supposing one grew exacting and querulous and funny?"

"You'll never be that. Clive, I'm going to say a terrible thing to you. I've been a very selfish woman. There are moments in one's life when one feels quite naked. I wish you would let me help you."

His blind face was turned to her.

"No one is helping me as you are. I think I should have gone potty but for your voice and your—"

"Wait. You don't quite understand. It is quite terrible that I should have to say this to you. I want to help you in a way that the world would think silly and sentimental. If you had a mother—What I mean is, someone ought to take care of you while you are learning to adapt."

His lips trembled.

"I don't quite understand. I mean, I can't think that anyone like you—"

She felt smothered, inarticulate. And suddenly she stood up, bent over him, and put her lips to his forehead.

"I can't tell you, Clive, I simply can't. Try not to think of me as just a damned fool. Good-bye."

And she left him sitting there staring with blind eye-lids at the closed door.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When he understood what had happened to him he was so moved by the revelation that he knelt down by the bed and pressed his face against the pillow. His darkness seemed to fill with unbelievable and beautiful things. Had she really put her lips to his forehead, and then suddenly felt afraid, just as he was afraid of that sinister thing called love? Giggles and louts' laughter! He pressed his blind face against the pillow.

Was there any other voice in the world like hers? What was it that she feared? Sentimentality, falseness of feeling, the slime into which physical things are apt to sink? It was as though blindness had made him more profoundly intuitive and inwardly alive, even as the thing that he had hidden was not a mere exuberance of the flesh. She was a voice, a perfume, a delicate troubling of the darkness. But he must tell her. He must say: "I think I loved you directly I heard your voice. I was like a terrified child, and it came to me out of the darkness and touched my fear and it was healed. But I know what you are and what I can never be."

Yes, she must know. It was right that she should know how he felt about this wonderful thing. He must write to her. Write! But he could not write, and to no one else could he dictate a letter to her. He was on his feet and groping for the bell beside the bed. A passing nurse heard it ringing in the corridor. "Who's that? Number Seven?" The ringing of bells can be an impertinence when certain restless and selfish fingers are concerned, but for this blind man women hurried to do things.

"Yes, Mr. Strange?"

He was standing with his back to the window.

"Nurse, I'm so sorry to be a nuisance, but could Sister come to me for a moment?"

"I thought Miss Gerard was here."

"She has gone. Please ask Sister to come."

He heard her close the door, and the sound of its closing made him realize how shut in he was, how dependent upon the tolerant kindness of others. He had to have his meat cut up for him, and was learning to feed himself like a young child. Here was the bed, there a chair, the chair she had been sitting in. And the flowers? They were on the bed. He felt for them, and touched them as though they could give him counsel and comfort in this crisis. What should he say to Sister Brown?

She sailed in to him with her cheerful, maternal voice.

"Hallo, my dear, what is it?"

He stood rigid.

"Please shut the door, Sister. I, I want a car."

"A car?"

"Yes. I must go out. I'm quite fit to go out for a little while. It will do me good, Sister."

She had watched his lips moving. What had Miss Gerard said to him, or failed to say? The woman in Sister Brown was feeling that something had happened between them to cause this crisis, and that this was no sudden, restless whim. And why refuse, why be official?

"Do you really feel fit?"

"Absolutely, Sister."

"Dr. Steel's in the hospital. I'll go and ask him."

"Need you, Sister? It's such a little thing."

"Yes, I must do that, my dear."

He heard the door close, and her footsteps passing down the corridor. Oh, damn! How bitter and balking blindness could be! He was at the mercy of anyone with eyes and a little authority. He began to walk up and down in that narrow space between bed and window like some creature in a cage, three short steps, a turn, and three short steps back again. He knew that there was just so much room for the restless youth in him. One, two, three, turn. And once or twice a slightly lengthened step brought him up against one of the chairs.

How long had she been gone? Even time was shrouded from him, the familiar face of his watch. He could only listen for some clock striking. And then he heard her footsteps returning. Had she found Dr. Steel, or had the doctor left the hospital?

"All right, my dear."

"I can go?"

"Dr. Steel would like you to have someone with you."

"I don't want anyone, Sister. I'm not going to jump out or do anything silly."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Just out into the country."

She asked him no more questions.

"All right. I'll 'phone up a garage. It is nearly twelve o'clock now. You can go this afternoon."

His blind face seemed to light up at the lips.

"Sister, you are a dear. How much money have I?"

"It can be put down to you."

"The silly thing is I have some money in the bank and I can't even write a cheque. What does one do? I might try and scribble if you guided my hand."

She came and stood by him and laid a hand against his arm.

"All in good time. I'll order the car for half-past two. I'll take you down in the lift. Wait, you haven't an overcoat."

"I shan't want one."

"No, it's quite warm, and I'll tell them to send a closed car."

He turned his blind face to hers.

"Sister, you do understand. You're a wonderful person. I wish you'd let me kiss you."

"Of course you can, my dear."

"I don't know why you are all so good to me."

II

Strange anger.

The dog had come running out to meet her and almost she had thrust him off, and then, reproached by his poor, puzzled eyes, she had bent down and taken his head between her hands. She was alone with the dog, for she had stopped the car at the gates. "I'm an utter fool, my dear, a wretched and futile fool."

Yes, strange anger, shame, self-scorn. She was not fit to cope with life, or to satisfy it in any other creature. She was one of those odd women whom little wenches can giggle at, a grotesque whose psyche was that of some awkward, ugly, pale-eyed girl in whom emotion, produced inco-ordinate and choreic movements. Idiot! Gawk! Sentimentalist! She wanted to wound herself, to sting and slash the face of her soul.

Lunch. The dog lying by her chair, and Mary Spray in attendance because Jane had one of her headaches.

"I do hope poor Mr. Strange is getting on nicely, miss."

"Quite, Mary."

"It does seem so sad."

"Yes, very."

She could have slapped the girl's silly face. But, good heavens, was not she herself somewhat the sister of Will's moron of a daughter? It behoved her to recover her grip upon life, to be logical and ruthless in her self-scorn. "You scarecrow, go up to your room and write. Keep to the cold impersonal dreaming for which you are

fitted."

She was in no mood for the house or garden, or for the month of May and its succulent sweetness, gilly flowers, singing birds. After all, her garden was a mere piece of floral egoism, part of her passion to express herself. Did one ever cease from being a child? "Come and look at my garden. Yes, I have done all this." She took the dog with her to the firs on the hill, only to find that the trees and the sun-polished slopes were too gentle for her mood. She desired the sea, cliffs, things that remained elementally strong and ruthless, and defied man's public garden mind. She went down to the cliff-edge and sat herself on a queer ledge of rock that jutted out like a shelf. Below her, rocks and scrub rushed shouting to the sea, and she became conscious of the tumultuous impulse in herself, the temptation of this high place. The ecstasy of taking your wretched, ineffectual self and hurling it to nothingness!

She sat and stared at the little fringe of foam below, one hand laid against the stain upon her face. Beside her the dog seemed restless, troubled. Was it that the vast void frightened him, or did he divine in his mistress an inward trembling? He lay close, his muzzle resting on his paws.

Something in her said: "Why not? I'll do it."

She became aware of the dog's body pressing against hers. He sat up on his haunches, his muzzle on her shoulder. Her right arm went round him. He licked her ear.

And suddenly her mood changed; she could not say how or why. The cliff below her was not a challenge to her whimpering body, but to some elemental and ruthless urge within her. The inexorable, inevitable Eve! Why sit and dabble with cynical, self-degrading hands in the little puddle of an over-refined self-consciousness? Why be so ridiculously and morbidly sensitive? What did she desire? The live fruit of the tree of knowledge, not the desiccated and cultured stuff of her literary cupboard. And in her was conceived a swift, exultant recklessness.

III

She heard someone calling her: "Oh, Miss Gerard, Miss Gerard."

It was Mary's voice coming from the clump of firs, and when Mary Spray became excited about anything she made as much fuss about it as a little frightened hen. Miss Gerard, standing upon her shelf of rock, saw Mary among the firs, all arms and apron, and obviously excited. It was not easy to keep Mary from reverting to her schooling days when conversation was carried on in hysterical screams across field or playground.

Miss Gerard and the dog began to ascend the hill, and Mary, running half-way to meet them, shrilled her message.

"Oh, miss, Mr. Strange is here."

Miss Gerard so lost her colour that the wine-coloured patch on her left cheek seemed to flare.

"Mr. Strange?"

"Yes, he's come in a car, miss. He's waiting in the car outside the gate."

She did not say to herself, "This is fate," for fate is no more calculable than the English weather, and if one felt suicidal in the sunlight, February frost might find one resigned and reading by the fire. Mary Spray was waiting for her mistress, and that was the very thing Miss Gerard did not want the girl to do. She breasted the slope, and with an air of casual austerity sent Mary about her business.

"Did you say Mr. Strange?"

"Yes, miss."

"Take Prince in with you, Mary. He is not very accustomed to visitors."

Mary's lower lip dropped from her rabbit teeth. Coo, but Miss Gerard was an odd one, so cold and unsensational. Anyone would think that poor Mr. Strange was one of those newspaper gentlemen from London whom Miss Gerard snubbed with such severity. But Mary got hold of Prince's collar, a thing that the dog disliked, perhaps because he was so much more a person than Mary.

"Come along with Mary, Prince, dear."

The dog stood stone-still and looked at his mistress.

"You need not take him by the collar. Yes, Prince, go with Mary."

When his mistress spoke to him in this way the dog's docility matched his dignity. That fool girl had withdrawn her hand from his collar, and Prince, with another glance at Miss Gerard, walked solemnly down the hill. His mistress loitered, not because her spirit continued to prevaricate, but because she wished to be alone for those few seconds and to take the day and its implications into her bosom. She was not very conscious of passing through the Italian gate, or of the wallflowers and the tall speared tulips. She felt the warm sun on her face, and within her a quiet tumult of ruthless recklessness.

She followed the stone path round the house, and walked slowly down between the flowering shrubs. The lilacs and laburnums were out, a young Snowy Mespilus silver-white beside a red-budded Judas Tree. The blue gates were open. She remembered closing them, and someone had opened them. Was that a symbol? She saw the nose of a car, and a man in a dark blue mackintosh and peaked cap standing by the near front mud-guard. She smiled at him vaguely and he saluted her.

"Good afternoon, miss." The near door of the closed car was hanging open, and she approached it with a feeling that everything on this spring day was meant.

He said to her: "Please don't scold me."

As if she would. Moreover, the chauffeur was behind her, a paternal and beefy person ever ready for the day's good deed.

"Can I help the gentleman out, miss?"

"Please. I'll get into the car, if you will help at the door."

She slipped in and sat down beside him.

"Do you think you can manage to walk up the drive?"

"Of course."

"We must be careful of that arm."

The chauffeur was a man of understanding. He laid hold of Clive's left ankle and guided his foot to the running-board. "That's it, sir. Just wait a moment. Put your arm over my shoulder." Her touches were not needed until she followed him from the car, and placed herself beside him.

"Take my arm."

She smiled at the chauffeur. "Please go up to the house and they will give you tea."

"May I drive up and turn, miss?"

"Yes."

Holding to her arm, Clive seemed to be waiting for the inspiration of her body. The live link between them tightened as she took the first step of a pilgrimage that filled her with a secret and exultant sense of possession. She walked slowly, conscious of the slightly tentative spacing of his steps and of the drag of his arm on hers.

"Are we alone?"

"Yes, dear."

She was aware of the blind and infinite seriousness of his face.

"You are going to forgive me?"

"I?"

"Yes."

"If you will forgive me."

"What have I to forgive?"

"Much. Cowardice, and shamelessness. I left you just when I should have—"

They were close to the house now, and the house might have ears, and she was almost fiercely conscious of wanting him where no one could hear.

"Do you think you could walk a little way?"

"Miles, like this."

"I have a little hill set with trees, high above the sea. One can just hear the sea to-day."

"Let's go there."

"You're strong enough?"

"Oh, yes."

But, if her passion was to possess him, it was instinct with understanding, and a divining that his blindness might welcome other eyes, and a word picture of the things he could not see, and as a painter of word pictures she had few equals. It should be delicately done, of course, not like the sententious stuff that is poured out during a cinema travelogue. Could he feel the stones under his feet? Yes, this was her garden, and it was in full spring flower; she liked her colours rich and multitudinous with knots of blue to set off the shades of red and of gold and of purple. Also the grass must be very green and sleek and, if one was meticulous, without a weed in it.

"Feel this gate, Clive. It is Italian."

She stood while he put out his hand and felt the iron scroll work.

"All curves and little cusps."

"Yes, rather lovely."

She opened the gate and led him through, and they went up the slope of the hill holding hands like a pair of children. He could feel the sun on his face, and a light breeze coming from over the sea. Presently the shadows of the trees touched them as the hill spread into a little plateau.

"Trees?"

"Yes, old Scotch firs. Very splendid and tall."

"I can smell them and hear them."

"Sometimes they sing, my dear, like old Norse rovers at sea. But to-day they are just sighing in their sleep. Would you like to sit in the sun?"

"Yes."

"Here. Can you manage?"

"Oh, yes."

She had let go of his hand. The short turf was dry and warm, and the shadows of the trees patterning it behind them. There was silence between them for a moment, a consciousness that was separate and subtle. His hand rested on the grass, palm downwards and close to her.

"It's quite wonderful here."

"Nothing but sea and sky. Both are very blue. And each side of us is a valley full of oak trees just coming into leaf. Gold and green. And below them masses of

gorse."

"Is it all yours?"

"Yes. Frightfully selfish of me to like it to be all mine."

"I don't think so. Isn't it what you need for your work?"

"I tell myself so."

Again he was silent, and she sat watching his face.

"Rosamund."

"Yes, dear?"

"Will you tell me the truth? Am I rather terrible to look at?"

"My dear, no."

"Don't be too compassionate."

"No one would know. Just as though you had your eyes shut. That's all."

He wanted to say to her that it was very wonderful sitting on this hill among the trees, with the sun shining upon your face and the sea making a kind of shimmering sound upon the rocks below. It would be tranquil and good so long as she was near him, or not too far away, but that the things he had meant to say to her somehow would not be said. And she, strangely wise as to his silence, and tasting the sweet irony of his fear of her, overcame the palsy of her own particular fear. But if her desire to possess and to be possessed was ruthless, and she could sit and watch herself laying a tender trap for him, she knew just how the thing should be made to happen. She might despise herself a little, and realize that she was no better than the ordinary inveigling Eve, but his blindness had made him feel so poignantly inferior, and the audacity must needs be hers.

She took that hand of his and drew it into her lap.

"Why are we so afraid of each other?"

"How do you know that?"

"My dear, how does one know? I think I knew it at once when you came so strangely into my life."

His blind face quivered.

"You don't mean—? It can't be possible. I mean, it's natural for me to care. But you!"

"My dear, I do care. Is that shameless of me? Well, it's true."

His sudden emotion both shocked and profoundly moved her. She held his blind face against her bosom and was conscious only of the need for caresses. He was blurting out all his sensitive dreads and doubts to her. It wasn't possible. He could not take so much and give so little.

"I can't, Rosamund, I can't."

She had ceased to watch herself and to listen to her own voice. That wretched, analytical other self seemed to be submerged in the exquisite innocence of pure feeling. She was just woman to her blind love.

"Think of me, Clive. Isn't it the sort of job a woman might ask for? Something in me can be fulfilled in you."

"It's too wonderful."

"Well, that's as it should be, isn't it? We are going to make life new and lovely for each other."

"But your work?"

"Oh, damn my work! Do you think it is going to suffer? I know now that I want you more than I want my work. And you?"

He put up his blind face to hers.

"My God, of course I do. I shall want you, always and everywhere. That's what makes me so afraid. But I'll not be a wretched sponger, Munda. I'll learn to do things. I know I can do things if you help me."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sister Brown had come by some of her knowledge of life as a nursing sister during the war. Out there in France she had experienced the patience and the courage and the unselfishness of thousands of simple men, poor devils to whom the war had done monstrous things, and who yet could say: "I'm sorry I'm giving so much trouble." But she had seen men break down and weep when the hero business had become too bitter to be borne. "What am I going to do, Sister? How am I going to keep a wife and kids?" In certain cases she had watched and waited for these emotional shocks, these moments of despair and of self-depreciation. "I'm done for, Sister. I shall only be a ruddy nuisance to everybody." How often she had sat by such beds, and spoken gently and consolingly.

She had been watching for some such storm in Clive. He, too, had been so like the boys in France, wearing a brittle courage, suffering inward and sensitive strains, and she had waited for the reaction. It would come probably when he was more physically fit and so more alive to the limitations of his fitness. Some emotional experience might touch off the explosion.

After that visit to Knoll Farm she had gone in to find him sitting at his window.

"Had a good drive, my dear?"

His face puzzled her. It was inert, almost apathetic, though it would never become the sleepy, soapy countenance so characteristic of many of the blind. Life was to be too quick in him for that.

"Yes."

"Which way did you go?"

He seemed to hesitate.

"I wanted to see Miss Gerard," and Sister Brown, moved by the meaning behind those words, was also moved to traverse a rather difficult silence by giving voice to what might be obvious to her and helpful to him.

"What a charming woman, and so good looking."

"Yes, Sister, more than that."

His reticence made her understand that he did not wish to talk about Miss Gerard, and Sister Brown was not a woman who splurged. His visit to Knoll Farm seemed to have depressed him. Well, no doubt, life could be very tantalizing when precious things seemed to hang just out of reach.

"We have had a letter about you, my dear."

"Oh! What about me?"

"The doctor employed by the insurance company is coming to see you to-morrow."

"Must I see him?"

"Of course. It's just a formality. It will mean that you won't have to worry about money."

She saw his lips move as though repeating the word. Money! There were other things that were worrying him far more desperately.

"All right, Sister. You'll be with me, won't you?"

"If you want me to be."

"Yes, it's silly, but I have a sort of horror of strangers."

"My dear, there is no need for that."

"I know. One's so like a silly kid in the dark."

The strange doctor had only to look at those empty sockets to be able to report upon the finality of the case. He came. He was a rather flaccidly complacent and obvious person, a professional humanist in platitudinous trousers. Almost he had the artificial voice of the cleric or the purveyor of charity. He was stupidly superior to the sick and the disabled. He spoke kindly and patronizingly over Clive like a eugenist labelling an idiot child.

"Yes, yes, quite obvious. Deplorable luck. Well, my lad, we must make the best of things."

He had patted Clive's shoulder. He had anointed him with facile and unfelt pity, and Sister Brown had seen the blind man wince. She returned to his room when the doctor had gone and found him significantly silent.

"Rather a pompous old ass, my dear."

"I suppose he was, Sister, but he made me feel so damned inferior, such a dud creature. Pity! Oh, damn his pity!"

"Don't worry about such a thing."

"I can't help it, Sister. The inference is so obvious. I may manage to mess along and be a sort of shadow man, but always I shall be at the mercy of other people. They will have to remember to be kind to me."

"It may not be so difficult."

"But for me, yes. Always to receive, and never to be able to give as you wish to give."

"Fudge, my dear," said she, "it needn't be like that. You are quite right to resent pity, but you are going to have a life of your own, of that I am sure."

She went and kissed him.

"That's not quite part of my duty. It might be described as what we called in the war a Medical Comfort!"

"You are rather a wonderful person, Sister."

"Oh, no, I'm awfully normal."

But she was worried about him. She had had so much experience of sick souls, and she warned the night-nurse concerning him. There was to be no fussy prying, but a careful and delicate supervision. "I want you to try and find out how he sleeps." The night-nurse, slithering in soft slippers to his door in the early hours of the morning, heard movement in the room. He had turned the light on, which was a queer thing for a blind man to do. She could see the yellow slit under the door. Also he heard her; his hearing was becoming more sensitive to all sounds.

"Who's that?"

"Only Nurse James, Mr. Strange. Do you want anything?"

"No, Nurse. Please don't trouble."

Before going off duty next morning she reported the incident to the Sister. Mr. Strange had been restless and had had his light on.

"His light on?"

"Yes."

Sister Brown looked sceptical.

"Are you sure?"

"Quite. He was moving about. He heard me and seemed annoyed."

Yes, undoubtedly the turning on of the light was an odd thing for a blind man to do.

Sister Brown found him quiet and subdued, nor did she mention the incident of the light. Some sensitive natures are best left unfretted. It was Dr. Steel's visiting day and she did contrive to warn the doctor that No. 7 was restless and depressed. Dr. Steel was a rather irritable and abrupt little man, who suffered so much from dyspeptic moods of his own that he found it somewhat difficult to tolerate them in others. He was a surgeon, not a psychologist.

"Bound to be a bit moody, Sister. Don't humour him too much. He must get used to things."

Dr. Steel, like his name, had acquired professional polish. He was precise, efficient, meticulously thorough, a professional purist, more concerned with dissecting the flesh than comprehending the spirit. Some people called him a hard little man. You could visualize him bathing and shaving and conducting all the details of personal hygiene with conscientious and rigid niceness. The nursing staff knew that

if any technical point had been neglected Dr. Steel would detect it and remark upon it, perhaps with acerbity.

"Any discharge, Sister?"

"Just a little in the morning, sir."

"That is one of the things you will have to remember, young man."

"Yes," said Clive.

He did not mind Steel's abruptness, or his caustic manner. He did not want to be pitied, but the doctor's passion for detail was to produce a trivial incident that would have an effect upon the blind man that might appear out of all proportion to its results. Clive felt his right wrist grasped by the doctor's fingers.

"You see, Sister?"

She did see. She gave Dr. Steel a warning, and almost hostile look.

"Teach him to attend to these details."

Clive's blind face was turned to the doctor.

"Anything the matter, sir?"

"Your finger-nails, young man. Quite filthy."

Sister Brown saw the blind face go poignant.

"I'm sorry. One doesn't realize."

Dr. Steel replaced the patient's hand on the bed.

"Quite so. That will have to be part of your education. A trifle, but significant."

Out in the corridor Dr. Steel was surprised and perhaps a little piqued by the Sister's candour.

"It was my fault really. I don't think you need have told him that."

"Discipline, Sister. Self-regard, especially in the blind, is built up on such details."

She wanted to say to him, "You little prig," but one could not be so frank to a senior member of the staff, nor would the impertinence have produced any helpful effect, but when she had shed her duties to Dr. Steel she hurried back to No. 7. He was lying with his face half-hidden in the pillow, the fingers of the offending hand tucked in, clenched.

"Would you like to get up now, my dear?"

"What's the use, Sister?"

He was so like a hurt and miserable child that she went and sat on the edge of his bed.

"Not worrying about what that little prig said, are you?"

"Yes."

"Oh, come now, it's nothing."

He turned his blind face to her.

"He was so horribly right, Sister. I shan't ever know when my hands are filthy. And everything can be like that."

"Nonsense, my dear. A nail-brush and soap and water, t.d.s., and Dr. Steel can go to blazes. You shall have your own manicure set. Don't you see the joke?"

II

So devoid was he for the time being of a sense of humour that he lay and brooded over Dr. Steel's school-marm attitude to life, and especially to the young. Dr. Steel could assert with cold seriousness that contemporary youth was effete and futile, that it did not know the meaning of discipline, and that its self-complacency was catastrophic. In fact, youth, like the month of May, was seasonably a swindle, and though much of Dr. Steel's contempt for the young might be justified, it was not helpful to the few whose gods did not career round dirt-tracks.

Love may be blind, but it can desire to be clean and comely even in its blindness, a gentle and princely person, and Dr. Steel's mirror was showing to Clive a creature that could be helplessly squalid. It might have pus upon its eyelashes, a dribbling nose, unclean teeth, stubble on its chin, black finger-nails, an air of lousy unloveliness. Its very handkerchief might be a dirty rag, its clothes stained with food. And the spirit of Clive Strange revolted against this uncleanliness. It was as though Dr. Steel had jabbed a scalpel into an abscess and let out reality.

Nurse James was scared, so scared that she went and woke Miss Brown.

"I'm so sorry, Sister, but Number Seven's quite hysterical. I've tried to quiet him. He keeps saying: 'I want to get out of this.'"

Sister Brown was up and slipping into her dressing-gown.

"An emotional breakdown."

"Rather worse, I'm afraid. I shut and latched the window and took away his safety razor."

"Good Lord!" said the Sister. "Should you have left him?"

"I said I'd fetch you. That seemed to sober him. He asked me not to. He kept on saying that he was a nuisance to everybody."

Sister Brown had put on her slippers and was out of the room.

"Better leave him to me."

But her scolding was relative, in that the emotional storm had passed and she found him terribly calm and quiet. She had experienced this deathly calmness in some of her war cases, and she knew its danger and its significance. "I'm sorry, Sister. Nurse James shouldn't have dragged you up. I've had a sort of nightmare and

it's over." She sat by the bed and held his hand. "That's all right, my dear." But she was wise as to the thing not being over.

"Mustn't give up, you know, my dear."

"Is it worth while, Sister? I have been thinking it out."

She scolded him.

"All this just because you happened to have dirty finger-nails!"

"It's a silly thing like that which makes one realize, Sister."

"What, my dear?"

"That one's going to be an eternal tax upon other people's patience. Dirty finger-nails and spilt food on your clothes. I can't face it. And sitting and listening for someone's kindness to grow perfunctory and peevish."

"Need it?"

"Be honest with me, Sister. If you cared for someone, would you want to subject that someone to a kind of lifelong boredom?"

"My dear, I have been nursing for nearly twenty-five years, people who in a way were nothing to me. And I'm not yet bored with it."

"But that's your job."

"Quite so. And it may satisfy one. It may sound absurd in this tired age, but some people do love their jobs and go on loving them."

"But isn't that different?"

"Women can be persistent creatures. It's really a very kind world, Clive, much kinder than we will allow. Besides, you may not realize what such a job may mean to someone."

"I can't risk it, Sister, I daren't risk it, for the other person's sake. My life may be messed up, but that's no reason why I should mess up someone else's."

She patted his hand.

"You are all wrong to-night. You have an attack of what I call self-nausea. I'm going to give you a dose of innocent dope, and you will go to sleep and wake up feeling that the world loves you. It will do if you'll let it."

III

Jane could not fail to observe that Miss Gerard's desk had been re-dedicated to Books upon the Blind. Her latest manuscript had disappeared, thrust away into a drawer, and if Jane drew her own conclusions she did not pass them on to Mary Spray. In fact, Miss Gerard had written to her booksellers in London and instructed them to send her all the known books upon the blind, and for days she had been

living with such literature. She had read from cover to cover the League of Nations Report on the Welfare of the Blind, and a complex treatise by a sightless French savant, but the piece of evidential writing which she found most helpful was Sir Arthur Pearson's little book. It was so full of courage and sweet philosophy, insisting that for the blind life can be good and full of self-expression, and that pity should be regarded as false medicine.

Miss Gerard discovered that there were persons known as Home Teachers, and Dr. Heberden was able to tell her that Westbourn possessed one such instructor who travelled round in a baby car visiting his pupils. An institution was not essential. A blind man could be taught Braille in his own home, and to use a typewriter and take down dictation. Also he could learn certain crafts, such as basket-making and weaving; he could be taught gardening and poultry-keeping. He could dance, he could row, he could swim.

Moreover, both Jane and Dr. Heberden detected in Miss Gerard a change of posture in her confrontation of the world. She was shedding her shell, and tempering her hypersensitive self to human contacts.

"I'm thinking of buying a car and driving myself. Can you recommend me a local agent?"

"Campbells of Westbourn are good people."

"They could teach me?"

"Of course. If you will take my advice buy a 'Bristol.' Not a stunt machine. Campbells are agents for Bristols. The Bristol 'Fourteen' is an excellent job, synchro-mesh, and all that."

Miss Gerard rang up Messrs. Campbell, and the particular car and a demonstrator arrived the same afternoon. She liked the look and the performance of the car; it was a pretty peacock blue saloon with fawn upholstery. Yes, this particular car was for sale. She arranged to buy it and to be given driving lessons, and to apply at once for a driving licence.

"How long will it take me to learn?"

"Six lessons, Miss Gerard."

But she was mistress of the machine in three. She had "hands," and that feeling for speed, poise and position that is described as road sense. Prince, promoted to one of the back seats, would, to begin with, lick the back of her neck until she was able to persuade him that such attentions were not quite gentlemanly.

It was during this process of self-re-education that Sister Brown rang up Miss Gerard. No, she could not say what she had to say on the telephone.

"We haven't seen you for several days."

"I've been rather busy. No, my dear, I'm not being elusive."

"Can I come over and see you? It is my afternoon off to-morrow."

"I'll send a car for you, Sister."

"Oh, you needn't do that."

"Yes, I will. About three?"

"Yes."

"Splendid."

Miss Gerard did not drive down in person to pick up Sister Brown, for she was not yet sure of herself in traffic, and the Westbourn traffic could be very temperamental. So was the weather. May had fallen into one of its raw, bleak moods with a north-east wind raging, and a gloomy sky depositing upon the heads of the flowers occasional showers of sleet. Old Will had a blue nose and his eyes were the angry eyes of a sea-king. His early potatoes had been frosted and the fruit crop damaged. Will had "never knowed such weather," and Miss Gerard sat Sister Brown down to buttered toast in front of a winter fire.

"It always does this when you let out the furnace."

Sister Brown in mufti and without her hat was somehow different, a more spreading person, vaguely shy, and asking for her hands to be given occupation. She had been rehearsing her part in opposition to Miss Gerard, but in Miss Gerard's presence she found herself "drying up." The things she had proposed to say would not be said. She was conscious of feeling undressed and impertinent, a woman whose touch became hesitant and uncertain when she was removed from the familiar surroundings of her authority and put into party clothes. Her shyness might have reacted unhappily on Miss Gerard had not she divined the complexities of the occasion, and felt herself inevitably, if strangely, at ease with it.

Possibly Sister Brown would have wandered round and round the subject, looking for some discreet and happy opening, had not Miss Gerard made the first encouraging gesture.

"I have just bought a car. I was beginning to realize that I was shutting myself up too much."

"Going to drive it yourself?"

"Yes, Campbells are giving me lessons. I would have fetched you to-day if I had felt myself quite safe in traffic."

"Yes, I suppose with your work the tendency is to be rather separative."

"And my face, my dear."

Sister Brown looked shocked.

"Surely that doesn't worry you?"

"It did, and does, but I think I am getting over it. Help yourself to toast."

Sister Brown took both toast and courage.

"Your telling me that makes me feel that you do think of me as a friend."

"Of course I do, my dear."

"That makes it easier. I wanted to talk to you about Clive. You see, you are the one person—"

She looked a little anxiously at Miss Gerard, but Miss Gerard's face was douce and tranquil.

"He has had rather a bad patch. Acute depression."

"Afraid of the future?"

"Not only that, but so afraid of being a clog on other people."

Miss Gerard put out her hand for Sister Brown's cup.

"More tea. Somehow I am not afraid of you, Sister. I have come to the conclusion that self-expression cannot be consummated on paper. When he leaves you I want him to come to me."

The Sister's face was infinitely serious.

"For good?"

"For my good, if you like. So you understand. I find that he could be taught here to learn the things that the blind must know, to read and to use his hands. And then, you will understand, that I can teach him many things and that he can teach me even more."

"Yes, I understand, my dear. There is only one difficulty."

"And that?"

"He might refuse. He is not the ordinary sort of man."

"I think I know. And perhaps I'm not the ordinary sort of woman. I know how difficult and delicate some books can be for the person who has to interpret them. One needs humility, tenderness, so much understanding. I feel that he would be rather like a live book to me."

"It would be a very blessed thing for him."

"And for me. I think, Sister, it will have to be a kind of conspiracy. I am arranging everything here and when I am ready I shall want you to help me."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

He had not seen her for five days.

He sat and brooded over her silence. He was both glad and sorry; glad, because his self-wounding seemed so right; sorry, because the darkness without her was so complete.

Also the month of May had continued in a harsh mood, and the sun upon his window had been a thin and glacial gleam, but with the first warm day Sister Brown's presence brought him a new and exquisite pain.

"Miss Gerard's coming this morning. She is going to take you out in her car."

"Her car?"

"Yes, she has bought one, and been taught to drive."

Sister Brown divined his inward tumult.

"Are my nails clean, Sister?"

"Yes, dear, perfect. Let's look at the chin. You are quite clever now with that razor."

"Hair all right?"

"Like God's good boy."

At half-past ten he went down the stairs on Sister Brown's arm. He was both strung up and a little tremulous. "I haven't had much practice at steps, Sister. One fumbles with one's feet." She pressed his arm. "No hurry, my dear. All these things will come to you." Miss Gerard and her car were out there in the sunlight, and both the sky and the sea were blue. Clive felt the sunlight on his face, and heard Sister Brown's voice saying, "Just two steps here." Miss Gerard was sitting in her car. She opened the door, got out, came towards them and suddenly stood still, for without being able to see her he had somehow divined her nearness and seemed to know where she was standing. Both of them were dumb, so absurdly dumb that Sister Brown had to make cheerful noises like an orchestra when things go wrong upon the stage.

"Well, here we are. What a pet of a car. Just your colour, Miss Gerard."

Clive Strange had taken off his hat and was holding it against his chest.

"What colour is it?"

"Peacock blue and cream."

Miss Gerard smiled at him with eyes that seemed to close and conceal secret

glimmers. She may have been saying to herself, "Don't be sloppy." She left the shepherding of him to Sister Brown. Where was he to sit? In the front seat beside her. Miss Gerard took her place; doors were slammed, and with care and an air of complete concentration she drove the car out of the hospital courtyard and on to the high road.

"Do you mind if I attend to business for five minutes?"

His arm was touching hers.

"Traffic?"

"Yes. My driving isn't quite subconscious yet. I thought we would take the coast road."

"Yes. I won't talk."

"There is a rather pleasant spot between here and Shingleford. One can park on the grass and go down to the sea."

"I'd love that."

"It's such a very gentle sea to-day, flat and blue and all crinkled with light."

He said: "Yes, I can see it just like that."

At the place she had chosen, the sea had receded from the cliff, leaving an arc of meadow, dyke and sand, and the texture of it was still untarnished. No bungalows could be built here, and the great world had not rushed to foul the very thing it came to enjoy. Miss Gerard parked her car on the grass beside the road. On this May day the sea and the shore were theirs, save for three young things who were bathing.

She saw him feeling for the door handle.

"Let's see if I can get myself out."

She came round from the off-side to find him standing with a little smile on his face.

"That was easy."

"Shall we go and sit by the sea?"

"Yes."

"Take my hand."

They had to climb a low bank of sand and grass and she did not warn him in time of the change of level. He dug a toe into the sand and stumbled, recovered himself, laughed.

"I'm so sorry, Clive."

"Flying blind! How many steps up?"

"About four. That's right. We are on the top. Now, down."

A bank of shingle lay between the dunes and the sea, and she warned him about the shingle. It shrilled under their feet, and from away along the beach came the

laughter of young things who were splashing each other. He heard the sound and his head seemed to go up.

"Someone bathing?"

"Yes."

"I suppose they will let me swim later on? Can you?"

"Yes, I'm rather fond of it."

She guided him to a patch of sand and they sat down, with little sleepy waves unfurling themselves like rolls of silk within a few yards of their feet. The sun and the sand were warm, and she watched him spreading his hands to the sun and raising his face to it.

"Oh, this is good."

Serenity, the swish of the sea, a blue surface crimped with silver, the warm sun. This perfect day seemed created for perfect understanding. Her secret fear seemed to emerge like a little lizard to bask on the warm sand.

"Rosamund."

"Yes, dear."

"I want to tell you things. I've been so tied up. It seems easier here."

"Whatever you say, I think I shall understand."

"Will you? I wonder. I've been feeling such a useless thing. The old terror came back."

"Tell me."

"The horror of being a parasite. But I think I shall conquer that sort of cowardice. I realize that I shall have to go into some institution and get educated all over again. It's silly, but one rather shrinks from strangers."

"Just how and why? I'm not a stranger, then?"

He turned his blind face to her.

"You? No, and yes. Everything about you is beautifully familiar and yet strange. You're as vivid to me as the sun and the sand and that sea. I have my own inward picture of you. Shall I describe it? Yes, you have very dark hair, and one of those white skins, and brown eyes, rather large brown eyes. That's how I see you. That's how I shall go on seeing you when I have to go away."

She was sitting there in a frozen silence of her own, her hands clasping her knees. This terrible and dear illusion! Should she destroy it, be ruthlessly honest, take her coward self and strip it before his inward eyes? Or should she be cunning? Cunning! She flinched from the word. She wanted to be like a mirror to him; she wanted him in her life not only as a lover, but as a creature to whom their comradeship could be so complete and sensitive that any particular note would have

the same vibrations for them both. Yet, if perfect understanding was to be theirs did it not envisage an equally transparent candour? She did not regard it as a question of conscience, but of tactics. Your conscience might be as crashing and disastrous as Mrs. Grundy.

Meanwhile, his hands had found pebbles in the sand and he was throwing stones into the sea.

"Clive."

Her voice had a new note for him. It seemed to strike the silence like one of those stones hitting the water.

"I want you to know that I am not at all like that."

"Like what?"

"Your picture-paper, film-star person."

"Good God, do you think I see you like that?"

"I want you to see me somewhat as I am. Has no one told you that I am a little disfigured?"

"No."

"Oh, my dear, you must know. I've always been so silly and sensitive about it, a thing I was born with, what they call a nævus, on one cheek."

"Which cheek?"

"The one near you."

He put up a hand and touched her cheek, and his fingers were like an infant's fingers softly exploring her face.

"There isn't anything there."

"No, only a little discoloration."

"Just where?"

She put up her hand and guided his fingers to the place. And then he did a thing that filled her with strange wonder and exultation. He came close and put his lips to the place.

"There's nothing there for me."

"Oh, my dear!"

"You weren't afraid, were you?"

"Horribly."

"But don't you understand, Munda, that there never will be anything like that to me? Don't you understand that you are all sorts of things, a voice, something warm and wonderful and sweet, hands, a presence? I can't describe it all. I can't see you, but I seem to feel and know you all the more wonderfully. Don't you understand?"

She took one of his hands and held it between both of hers.

"It is very wonderful, Clive."

"To me, yes. That you should care for a wretched blind crock."

"My dear, you will never be that."

"And you will always be the most wonderful thing in the world to me. This isn't just silly sentiment, Munda."

"May I never fail you, dear."

"I think I have more right to that fear, haven't I?"

II

That she, a woman who had never been loved, might become silly about the one man who could love her, was self-evident to Rosamund Gerard. Indubitably she would need correctives, a periodic and bitter draught of honest candour, and she sat down and wrote to Margaret Hayle. She asked Margaret to come to her for the week-end. She wanted Margaret and Clive to meet.

And then there arrived for her that unexpected and very stimulating draught, sister Norah, transported in a taxi from Westbourn, complete with suit-case and will force. She had always hated strenuous, pallid Norah with her goat's eyes and jug of a chin, perhaps because in her childish days she had feared her eldest sister's bullying common sense. There was no subtlety in Norah. She saw the whole world according to Norah, and lectured it, or tightened up her hard mouth and defied it with her white jug of a chin.

Norah had married a rather futile little man who wore pince-nez, a man whose very legs were silly. He was a doctor. Vulgar people had said that Norah had taken him by the scruff of the neck and deposited him in the matrimonial basket like a puppy, but he had given Norah two children and every right to feel superior.

But Norah, arriving like a north-east wind, and proposing to stay the night just when Knoll Farm was preparing itself for other and more intimate things! Norah and her suit-case were in the passage, and the taxi discharged, and Jane retreating to the kitchen with a *non possumus* face.

Even the dog growled at the invader like some ungallant and instinctively suspicious male.

"I don't like your dog, Rose. Better shut him up somewhere. Yes, I couldn't let you know."

Miss Gerard stood holding Prince by the collar. She was no longer afraid of her elder sister, though Norah still roused in her elemental shudderings. She was the sort of person who used sandpaper to your soul, and rubbed hard and ruthlessly and

with the assumption that everything that Norah said and did was for the good of that selfsame soul.

"I'll just take my suit-case upstairs."

Would she, indeed! And what had inspired this sudden and boisterous descent upon Sussex? Miss Gerard could divine the reason. But she and the Alsatian occluded the passage, and both dog and mistress were quivering with restrained emotion.

"I'm sorry, Norah, I can't put you up. You will have to go down to Westbourn."

She was aware of her sister's pebble eyes staring at her as they had stared at her in her childish days. Norah's eyes could be so fierce and cold. "Don't be silly. Do what I tell you." And Miss Gerard felt both her face and her consciousness flushing with old hatreds and humiliations.

"I'm afraid I have sent the taxi away. If you have a visitor I don't mind camping."

Miss Gerard was trying not to shake.

"The only plain language you ever understand, Norah, is your own. Forgive me. I can 'phone for a taxi later. You would like some tea?"

She was aware of her sister replacing the suit-case on the oak chest in the passage.

"Oh, I see. It's like that. You never did have any feeling of responsibility for other people, Rose."

Miss Gerard smiled a little, wincing smile.

"Plain language, Norah. There is no need for you to say that I am a selfish woman. I like being selfish. Come in and sit down. Quiet, Prince. I'll ring for tea."

Norah straddled in the doorway with her tummy thrust out.

"I may as well tell you that I have come to borrow money."

"Thank you, Norah. Is this one of my responsibilities?"

"Well, blood is thicker than water, isn't it?"

"Unfortunately it is."

Norah could always produce a number of pseudobiological or ethical sayings to prove to you what your duty was to the family or to the community, nor would she be put off with irony, or surrender to humour. She walked into her sister's parlour and found it surprisingly occupied by a bed.

"Not that room, Norah."

"So I see. Regular house-party."

Shepherded into what had been the dining-room she sat down on the parlour sofa which had been removed to the window, and took off her hat. It was a hard, domestic, uncompromising hat, and under it her hair was shabbily grey. Obviously

she was tired, worried and out of temper, but Rosamund Gerard had never found it possible to be sorry for Norah. You might just as well try to be sorry for a piece of white rubber hose that remained indomitably cussed and contradictory, even when you attempted to rescue it from kinks and tangles.

"You have been buying more furniture."

"No, it's just the same."

"This sofa's new."

"No, Norah, it isn't."

"Well, you have had it re-covered. I can't afford such things."

Miss Gerard had rung the bell. Prince, lying on the hearthrug, was watching Norah Snade with steadfast and motionless malevolence.

"Oh, Jane, we'll have tea, please."

"Yes, miss."

Jane had a funny, crumpled face. She had been listening behind the passage door, and seeing Mrs. Snade's suit-case still below stairs, she was ready to congratulate her mistress on standing up to her formidable sister. For Jane could recall a previous visit, when Mrs. Snade had so upset Miss Gerard that her mistress had left her manuscript untouched for days. As Jane had described it to Will Spray: "Her, jawing and jawing like a schoolmistress, and that chin of hers going up and down."

Miss Gerard was the rebel. Life had come to possess a new, significance for her, a rhythm that was not to be interrupted for more than a few moments by Norah Snade. Could Norah destroy the inward beauty of this memorable day? She left her sister the sofa and sat down by the little gate-legged tea-table, and Prince came to lie beside her chair.

What was the trouble in the Snade household? Norah was not like sister Phœbe; she did not gush or exert charm, but fired both barrels point-blank at you. Had not Rosamund heard that poor Herbert had been sued by a patient for failing to show reasonable skill and care in treating that particular patient? The case had appeared in the papers. Her sister's face became intense and turgid. She mouthed. Yes, a most disgraceful business! The judge had summed up most unjudicially against poor Herbert, and the jury had assessed the damages at five hundred pounds. Then there were the costs to be considered. Of course poor Herbert's professional reputation was bound to suffer. Also poor Herbert was not well.

"What do you want me to do, Norah?"

Her sister's face and throat seemed to swell.

"Why, help us. You are a rich woman, Rose, and you have no liabilities. It is an

absolute disaster for us. Herbert hasn't been able to save."

Jane appeared with the tea and the problem had to be put aside for the moment, but directly the door had closed on Jane, Mrs. Snade's big chin became active.

"I don't know what we are going to do. We shall have to pay this legal blackmail. Herbert may have to commute his life insurance. Then there is Walter at his prep. school, and last term's fees."

Miss Gerard was pouring out tea and feeling moved to counter her sister's assumption that her only liabilities were those of blood-relationship. She might help the Snades but she was not inclined to regard it as a duty.

"Sugar, Norah?"

"Don't you remember that I never take sugar?"

"I'm afraid I had forgotten. Prince does. Just one lump, once a day."

She balanced a lump on the dog's nose and he tossed it up and caught it, while Norah Snade contemplated the piece of juggling as though it supplied her with a further proof of the irresponsible silliness of her sister.

"You spoil that dog."

"We both like it. But, Norah, I want to explore the sociological assumptions of this case. Am I to understand that because I am your sister, and unmarried, and somewhat wealthy, I am under an obligation to you and your family?"

Mrs. Snade stirred her tea, in spite of the absence of sugar.

"Well, isn't it natural?"

"You said a moment ago that I have no liabilities. How do you know that I have no other claims on me?"

"Oh, charities, of course. I suppose you do subscribe," and Norah emitted one of her characteristic laughs, a kind of abrupt, harsh, bubbling bleat. Miss Gerard, helping herself to bread and butter, smiled down at the dog. Charity! The unwanted woman's cheque book! An exquisite recklessness stirred in her.

"As a matter of fact, Norah, I think I am going to be married."

Her sister's face was just like one of those blank and bald faces in a flashlight photograph. Rosamund going to be married! With that face! Tee-hee! Well, really!

"I expect you are surprised, Norah."

"Well, my dear, I must say I thought you would be celibate. Your work, you know."

"Yes, I am supposed to be so devoted to my work. It is rather good to labour for the benefit of the Inland Revenue and one's other liabilities."

"And who is the lucky man? Your publisher or some literary friend?"

For Mrs. Snade was telling herself that a woman like Rosamund was just the

sort of person to be fooled and exploited by some ingenious male. No doubt poor Rosamund would be ridiculously grateful to any man who would accept her disfigurement. Your clever women can be so incredibly silly when their emotions are stimulated. Also in uttering words of warning, Norah could assume that elder sister attitude and plant her barb.

"As a matter of fact it is an airman, Norah, but he will give up flying."

An airman! Then he was young, and most probably dissolute and irresponsible. Had not Herbert told her that all airmen drank?

"Really! Then he is quite young?"

"Quite. Younger than I am."

"Has he any money?"

"Yes."

"My dear, it all sounds rather like the war. Do you think you are being quite wise?"

"I'm not contemplating being wise. I may even be imagining myself a mother."

Mrs. Snade's large chin hung flaccid. Incredible rashness!

"But, my dear Rose!"

Miss Gerard was looking at the bottom of her tea-cup.

"You downright and masterful women are so very transparent, Norah. I wish you would not 'my dear' me."

"Just as you please, Rose. But I do say what I think."

"Relatively, yes. But if I were equally frank you would be offended."

"I don't think so."

"You and Phœbe both come to me for money. And you both hate me because of it. You grew up to regard me as a poor thing, and my ridiculous success has been an offence to you. But that does not prevent either of you from accepting my help."

How would Norah react to such plain speaking? As she had always done, with bustling assurance and suburban scorn?

"Don't be so absurdly sensitive. You always did imagine things, Rose. Phœbe and I have always realized that you were not quite normal."

"Because of my face?"

"Well, one doesn't want to emphasize what has been obvious."

"Thank you, Norah."

Miss Gerard bent down to pat the dog's head.

"Animals are so much kinder, and in some ways so much more subtle. Prince does not ask me to write cheques. Excuse me a moment."

She left her sister lighting a cigarette, and going up to her working room she took

out her cheque book and sat reflecting. Let this be a judgment of Solomon, a magnanimous and mischievous act which would satisfy her soul and put an end to all future exactions. She wrote Norah Snade a cheque for three hundred pounds, folded it up, and smiled at the fir trees on their hill. Why had she not told Norah that her lover was blind? Almost she could hear her sister's laughter, and the crudely facetious things that she and Phœbe might say to each other. But if Norah accepted this cheque in spite of what had passed between them, then she could remember in the future to be ruthless.

She watched her sister's face as she unfolded the cheque. Norah was disappointed; Norah had hoped for five hundred pounds.

"Much obliged to you, Rose. Shall I write you an I O U?"

"No need for that, Norah. It is a present."

"Isn't it rather nice to be able to write people cheques like this?"

"In this case yes, Norah, because it will be the last."

"Oh, if you are feeling like that I had better tear it up."

But Miss Gerard was quite sure that the cheque would not suffer sudden death. Her sister's fat fingers fribbled with it for three seconds and then tucked it away in her handbag.

"I'll accept it as a loan, Rose. Herbert is rather a proud little man. He shall send you an I O U."

Miss Gerard rang the bell for Jane.

"Oh, Jane, please, will you ring up Campbells and ask them to send a taxi for Mrs. Snade."

"With pleasure, miss."

Jane meant it and was determined that Norah should understand that she meant it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After Norah of the rubber chin, Margaret with her serene eyes. Norah she had feared not at all, but Margaret she did fear as one may fear beauty and the terrible brightness of a thing that is true. It was useless to be dim and mystical with Margaret, and to make your confession in some curtained corner where your soul could excuse itself to an unseen face. Margaret's eyes looked straight at you, and their very kindness made their sincerity all the more challenging.

Never before had she felt afraid of Margaret. She even took the new car out of the garage and hid it away in an old farm lodge, and left the coach-house to her friend. Would this be the end of their friendship? So wrought up was she that she wanted to blurt out her confession like some desperate girl in a hurry to empty her heart to a shocked and formidable mother.

Yet when she saw Margaret in the flesh her fear of her friend became a ridiculous reproach. Moreover, there were tell-tale objects even in the blue-doored coach-house to enlighten Margaret's eyes: an oil-drum, cleaning materials, half a dozen petrol cans, and on the floor fresh oil droppings and the wheel-marks of a car. Margaret was feeling debonair and gay; she had snatched a young life rather cunningly from the paws of the pessimists.

"What make is it, my dear?"

Miss Gerard was removing Margaret's suit-case from the back locker.

"You wide-eyed wench! Yes, I have had the thing about a week and I'm loving it."

"Good for you. And my little lady has turned her out. Too bad!"

"Manners make the motorist."

"I wish that was universal."

Margaret was taken to her room and left there to unpack before tea and to sort out certain suggestive impressions. Jane appeared with a jug of hot water, which also was part of the usual ritual, for Jane and Miss Hayle understood each other and could say things to each other without any disloyalty to Miss Gerard.

"I see you have a car, Jane."

Jane appeared to approve of the car.

"Yes, Miss Margaret. And she has been so clever at learning to drive it."

"I think she would be, Jane. You and I and Miss Gerard are not exactly fools."

Jane saw the joke and crinkled at it.

"I'm glad you have come for this week-end, miss."

"This particular week-end?"

"One of her sisters was here yesterday, miss."

"One of the two Uglies. Which one, Jane?"

"Mrs. Snade, miss, the one with the chin. She always seems to upset Miss Gerard."

"She upset me, Jane, on more than one occasion. But Miss Gerard seems rather happy and in good form."

"Yes, miss, I think she is."

And Jane withdrew, leaving Miss Hayle with the impression that both she and Jane were wise as to the transfiguration and in sympathy with it, and that the future might conceal a surprise for Cinderella's elder sisters.

Dr. Hayle understood the courage that goes out and faces the world, and dares to do the difficult and delicate things under critical observation, surgeon's courage, teacher's courage, and her friend had not been conspicuously courageous in confronting humanity. Though there were other forms of courage, and among them that which dared to build up a world out of words, and Miss Gerard was a word-master. Margaret could judge a patient's morale by the externals, the crisp precision of movements, firmness of lips and of speech, the brightness and straightness of the eyes. No healthy soul should flinch and hesitate and apologize. You might be willing to qualify your opinions, but humanity should never apologize for its feelings when those feelings are inevitable and actual.

Jane gave them tea in the loggia, and Miss Gerard remembered that on this warm day Margaret would be wanting to bathe. A path led down by way of one of the valleys to a secret stretch of beach that formed part of Miss Gerard's property.

"Like to bathe, Margaret?"

"Not unless you will."

"Yes, I'll swim with you if you won't go too far out."

Margaret may have had a reason for speaking of her own particular and professional affairs, perhaps because she divined her friend's trembling upon the brink of intimate confessions. Margaret was rather full of her latest and most sensational case, and how devilish clever she had been about it. "For after all, my dear, one has a right to be dashed pleased about a piece of work that means someone being able to make a job of life." Miss Gerard could echo Margaret's throb of exultation. Was she not engaged in just such an adventure? And was clever Margaret arranging the curtains and adjusting the lights to a pleasant and intimate

atmosphere? But it was not until they were following the valley path under the golden fingers of the oaks, with chervil covering the green growth with white lace, that she put her own problem into words.

"I want Clive to meet you. He is coming up to tea to-morrow. You won't mind, dear?"

Margaret might have retorted like sister Norah, "Don't be silly," but with so different a meaning.

"It is one of the things I want very much."

"Thanks, dear, so do I. Because I rather think you will understand that I am not being a hopeless fool."

"I know you better than that."

"No, Margaret, no one knows anyone really, only in bits and moments. I'm just the sort of woman who might have been incorrigibly sottish and desperate. It is rather terrible to feel grateful to some creature for caring—"

"My dear!"

"Oh, yes it is. It should be revolting to one's pride and one's feeling for life, but in this case one can strip oneself of the merely defensive things. He knows how much you are my friend."

"Thank you, dear."

"My sister women, those of them who matter, are being strangely kind to me. Women are decent to each other, Margaret. Men don't realize that. All the silly male cynicisms."

"And he?"

"Oh, by the way, he knows about my face. I told him. Somehow, it doesn't seem to make any difference."

"Why did you tell him?"

"More through cowardice than courage, perhaps. I was so afraid that some woman like my sister Norah might tell him."

Miss Gerard had built a bathing hut under the cliff, and Margaret noticed that someone had been at work here dividing the interior into halves with a light matchboard partition. She did not remark upon the alteration, but hung up a light blue bathing-dress in the right-hand compartment and sat down on the wooden seat.

"The sea's alive to-day."

Miss Gerard answered her from the other side of the partition.

"What I call a throbbing sea. Flat calms don't please you."

"There's no rhythm without waves."

"And this hut is rather like matrimony, my dear. Sympathetic segregation! Not

quite the sacerdotal idea."

Miss Hayle was peeling off her stockings.

"Who did the carpentering?"

"Myself. There is something pleasant about the smell of new wood. By the way, I have something I want you to read and criticize."

"As literature?"

"No. I might call it a practical essay on how to rationalize the environment of the blind. That sounds horribly eugenic and priggish. Let's call it a blind man's day with reference to all the domestic details. I have tried to think of everything, Margaret, that could crop up in the day's routine. Things to help him, like the fire-guard in front of a nursery fire."

Miss Hayle sat in silence for a moment, looking out at the sea.

"Something should be left to the child. But you understand that, dear."

"I hope so. I want to save him the snags, those little blunderings and clumsinesses that must hurt a blind spirit."

Margaret was saying to herself: "I hope he is good enough, no, not good, man enough to be worth all that you will give him."

II

Miss Hayle took Miss Gerard's Book of the Words to bed with her. As a treatise on the sympathetic treatment of the blind it was unrelated to the orthodox text-book in that it was brief, pragmatical, and did not indulge in learned generalizations that were like the recipes in the cookery books, dogmatic and not always helpful as to detail. These notes of Rosamund's had been fired by the imagination. She saw the blind life going on as she saw the lives in her books, and with infinite understanding she had picked out the pattern. Margaret was both touched and astonished by the compassion and the candour of her friend's visualizing of every detail.

"Fasten a silk cord to the passage wall and leading to the lavatory door."

What an Ariadne thread!

She could say to her friend: "You yourself might have been blind. But then, there are few people who can interpret life as you do." Miss Gerard had shown sudden, sensitive colour. Had she missed anything? Could Margaret suggest?

"No, my dear, you seem to have joined nurse, physician and friend."

"I have confessed to Jane."

"The good Jane. Any objections?"

"None apparently. I have offered her additional help. You see, Mary Spray is half mine and half her father's. Jane has a sister who does not seem to have a prejudice against country things."

"How rare!"

"And Jane does not seem worried about my morals!"

"Are you?"

"No more than Eve was. One is not feeling sly and defensive."

"No ethical cunning. That should be his concern."

She was to find that it was so. Miss Gerard drove down to Westbourn about three o'clock, leaving Margaret in a long chair and a mood of anticipation. Mr. Strange was ready, sitting on one of the seats in the hospital forecourt after parading himself for inspection before Sister Brown. He knew that he was to meet Miss Gerard's friend, and he was a little afraid of this new personality, for Miss Gerard's friend might be so critically impartial. He was waiting to hear Miss Hayle's voice, for voices were becoming significant and revealing to him.

The porter came out to help him into Miss Gerard's car, and the man's kindness was too bluffly patronizing.

"That's it, sir. Put your foot here."

He even laid hold of Clive's ankle and planted his foot on the running-board.

"Thanks, I can manage now."

Wistful was a word Miss Gerard did not use. It belonged to the winsome world where grass was lush and eyes dreamy, but it did apply somehow to Clive's blind face.

"People shouldn't help one too much. They might leave one something."

She took those words to heart.

"That frightens me a little."

"Frightens you?"

"I want you to say that it depends on how the thing is done. That dear good mutton-fist meant well. There are horrible limitations about meaning well!"

"Oh, it's in the personal mystery behind the touch."

"Clive, if we both understand that!"

"If I didn't understand it shouldn't I be a crude young beast? But I'm feeling scared, Munda."

"Of what?"

"Your friend. It's like going up for judgment."

"You need not feel afraid of Margaret. She's lovely, inside and out."

Dr. Hayle had strolled up to the knoll before tea, and hearing Miss Gerard's car

climbing the hill she walked back to the Italian gate. Margaret's first glimpse of them together was as they came round the house where a blue ceanothus was in flower and alive with bees, Clive had a hand and wrist crooked round Miss Gerard's arm, and Margaret saw him as she saw so many people, instantly and vividly and with a comprehending completeness. He was three inches taller than Rosamund, short and light in the body, long in the leg. His blind face seemed to float, faintly smiling, under his very fair hair. And Margaret was conscious of relief. She could not say why or how one's subtle loves and hatreds arose. You might analyse your liking to infinity, and the analysis would not explain the intuitive flash of the first feeling, or transcend it. But this blind lad pleased her, and she was glad.

"Clive, this is Margaret."

He stood quite still, as though waiting for something to happen. He would remain shy of this unseen presence until he had heard it translated into sound, and perhaps the woman in Margaret divined this shyness and liked him for it. His quick sensitiveness was as transparent as his rather delicate skin.

She repeated her friend's word: "Clive, this is Margaret. I am glad that I have not been produced as Dr. Hayle."

She saw his face lose its waiting and anxious look as though his blindness had feared to be touched suddenly by an alien something that might hurt. His hand was out, and she went near and took it.

"Thank you, Margaret."

He was grateful to her, for he was asking for much more than kindness. Mere kindness can be so unenlightened and blundering and humiliating. Miss Gerard left them alone together, while she went in to help Jane with the tea. He heard Miss Hayle's voice saying: "I rather like the sun," and he could have told her that her voice suggested lambent yellow light. Certain sounds were beginning to associate themselves with colours.

"Yes, the sun."

She put a basket-chair out on the grass.

"Just here."

He felt for it, touched it with the backs of his legs, and sat down.

"One would never have imagined, you know, that the backs of one's legs could be useful as feelers."

There was a suggestion of laughter in his voice, and again she liked him for it.

"There is virtue in a sensitive skin."

"It seems to become more sensitive. Or is it that parts of one pay more attention?"

"Perhaps both."

"It is really extraordinarily interesting how one begins to sense things in a different way. But I'm sorry. I'm talking like a case."

"But not feeling like one?"

"Did you ever read the 'Pilgrim's Progress'?"

"I have."

"Well, the Slough of Despond, self-pity. But you understand about impersonal things, not just groping inside yourself but getting out and exploring. I'm beginning to divine all that."

An unusual lad this! And Margaret, observing him and liking him more and more, began to understand that life could be both intimate and mystical for two sensitive creatures to whom consciousness was no mere looking-glass.

"Getting into the sun, Clive."

"Yes, and the something inside you that warms."

Then Miss Gerard appeared, carrying the tea-tray, and somehow quickly aware that these two people had found each other. She had always been very proud of being Margaret's friend, as though some of Margaret's loveliness could be borrowed like a precious dress and worn for the confounding of the vulgar.

"Where do you want to be?"

"Clive likes the sun. No consideration for our complexions!"

He was up and smiling, liking to be teased by a voice that was so happily mischievous.

"Oh, no, I'm not the complete egotist Margaret thinks I am. Let's sit in the shade."

He even got hold of his chair to move it.

"Show me, Munda."

"No, my dear, we stout women are not afraid of the sun."

"Let's vary Noel Coward. Only mad dogs and Englishwomen sit out in the noonday sun."

Margaret, going for a table, looked back at Miss Gerard over her shoulder.

"Red noses in June. But that's rather vulgar. Rosamund has one of those marvellous skins, Clive, that never spoil, so she can be philosophic."

He stood turning his blind face from one to the other.

"Am I to sit down again?"

"At once, my child."

"I'm being good."

Jane, arriving with the teapot and hot-water jug, heard their three voices all

together and in unison over some provocation of Margaret's, and Jane's bosom looked and felt motherly. Well, wasn't it good to hear Miss Gerard laughing, and wasn't it good for this poor lad, and for everybody. Jane put the teapot down on the tray and beamed round upon the three of them.

"There's cream, miss, there. You won't forget it?"

"No, Jane."

"We won't let her forget it, Jane," said Miss Hayle.

Miss Gerard had so arranged matters that Clive was close to the table, with a clear space on it for his plate and cup. She might be a little anxious about his cup, not that it might be broken but that he might mishandle it and feel distressed. Both she and Margaret watched his right hand creep up over the edge of the table and across the surface until his fingers touched the saucer. There was a delicate precision in the movement. He felt for the handle with first finger and thumb.

"I have put some cucumber sandwiches on your plate, Clive. Is that in order?"

He smiled.

"I rather think so."

They noticed that he used his left hand for the sandwiches so that it could approach the plate without being in danger of coming in contact with his cup. Prince, who had been enjoying a siesta in some sunny corner, came walking demurely down the garden path. He sat on his haunches and persisted in putting a paw on Miss Gerard's knee as though appealing for his particular place in the picture.

"Yes, dear, you are very lovely."

She kissed his head. No canine nose must be put out of joint.

"Is that Prince?"

"Yes."

"Is he allowed a sandwich?"

"On very special occasions."

The dog's eyes were fixed on the man's blind face. No doubt to the dog it was an unusual face, eyeless and strange. Miss Gerard may have been willing the dog to go to Clive, and that was what he did, putting his muzzle on Clive's knee and looking up at him with peculiar, unblinking steadfastness. Clive did not feed the dog; he caressed him, and Prince remained quite still, seemingly content to contemplate Clive with an air of interest and good will.

III

Miss Gerard had more than a feeling that it behoved her to leave Margaret and

Clive alone together. Margaret might be capable of saying certain delicate things that could not slip from the lips of two people who were acutely conscious of sensitive reservations. She proposed to take the dog for a run along the cliffs, and Margaret understood her.

"I'm feeling rather lazy, Munda."

"Stay and talk to Clive."

She and Prince went out by the Italian gate, and Margaret, with her cigarette-case in her hand, was alive to the silence that she had left them. Did Clive smoke? She looked at his unstained fingers.

"Have a cigarette, Clive?"

"I haven't smoked since my smash."

"Not wanting it?"

"Yes, that's not quite true. I did try, and I made such a horrid mess on the sheet —cigarette ash."

"You received a scolding?"

"No. They have been awfully kind to me down there. But I did realize that it might be a dirty habit for a blind man."

"Ash won't matter on the grass. Have one of mine."

"I'd love to."

She did not put the cigarette into his mouth, but into his hand, and the subtle difference mattered.

"I'll give you a light. All serene."

He sat in silence for some seconds, and then the spirit seemed to move him.

"Do you know that I was terribly afraid of meeting you?"

"I take that to be a sign of grace. But you need not be afraid."

"I'm not. I seem to have learnt such a great deal since I have been shut up with myself in the darkness. One seems able to concentrate more. But I'm talking about myself again."

"I want you to."

"I'm only talking about myself because it's so important that it should be a possible self. Have you ever wandered into a cathedral, Margaret, when the great place is empty and rather dim, and sat down in a corner and found yourself somehow becoming big and strange and still?"

"Yes, I have. A wonderful feeling of floating out of the flesh into childish immensities."

"Being blind can be like that. Sitting alone with yourself, but inwardly seeing. That's why I want to talk to you about her. Perhaps she has told you?"

"Yes, she has."

She saw him flick the ash from the cigarette, and then sit very still for some seconds.

"It means a wonderful world to me, but is it going to be wonderful for her? She will be giving so much more than I can. Isn't that so?"

"Not necessarily."

"And then there is her work. Supposing I were to spoil it?"

"Most men, Clive, would say that you would be helping her to express herself fundamentally as woman."

"But isn't that terrible nonsense?"

"Some women think so, when it originates from the dominant male."

"I want you to be ruthless with me, Margaret. I'm only telling you that I do understand a little. I have a horror of being a parasite and of taking from her—You know, she is such a wonderful person, so much beyond me in every way."

Margaret's eyes were very gentle.

"She may not think so. And you are not quite usual, my dear."

"I? I'm a bit sensitive, that's all. I used to get horribly ragged at school about certain things."

"What things?"

"Oh, sex, and shooting birds and animals, and not being sufficiently keen on games. That's why I took up flying. To prove to myself that I wasn't just a rabbit. But this is ever so much more perilous than piloting a plane. One can't crash with such a comrade."

"Exactly. With emphasis on the 'cannot'. A courage that isn't blind, my dear."

She saw him drop the cigarette end on the grass.

"Is that your verdict?"

"It is."

"That I shan't hurt her by loving her?"

"There is only one thing that might hurt her."

"And that?"

"Ceasing to love her, or loving her just for yourself."

His lips moved, but no words came from them for a moment. Then he said: "I don't think my blindness would ever bring me to that."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

There were four brass plates upon the particular door in Wimpole Street, and Miss Gerard, stepping out of her hired Daimler, was moved to a little feminine exultation over her friend's conquest of Canaan. "Dr. Margaret Hayle." Behold Margaret among the men, the world's prophets and physicians, and though the transfiguration of Eve had almost ceased to be news, Miss Gerard could recall her father's attitude to feminism, and hail Margaret as one of those who had flouted Victorian gentlemen who had nailed their trousers to the mast.

A young woman in a white linen coat opened the door to Miss Gerard. She, too, was completely modern in that she had qualified her professional appearance with much attention to her complexion and the wearing of high-heeled shoes. Was the white linen coat a mere symbol, and when it was shed did this very hygienic person revert to peach blossom? Meanwhile, Miss White Coat waited for the visitor to explain herself.

"Is Dr. Hayle in?"

"Yes. Have you an appointment?"

"No. I wonder if she could manage to see me for one moment. Not professionally."

"Dr. Hayle has a very busy morning. What name, please?"

"Miss Gerard. I won't keep her."

"Will you come in and wait?"

Miss Gerard, shown into a waiting-room that served all four brass plates, found a vacant chair. A small girl, sitting beside her mother at the table and turning over the pages of *The Bystander*, stared at Miss Gerard's face, and Miss Gerard smiled at the child. No longer was she afraid of those transparent glances, the little human mirrors in which she had been accustomed to discover the reflection of her distorted and unhappy self.

Dr. Hayle was finishing a case, and in three minutes Miss White Coat returned. "Miss Gerard, please." People who had been waiting half an hour looked at her with faint and critical displeasure, for it would appear that the last should be first. Dr. Hayle was sitting at her desk jotting down some details in her case-book, and if there was unexpectedness in her friend's visit, there was even more unexpectedness in Miss Gerard's person. Rosamund had never troubled about her hats and her

dresses, and had suffered a pretty figure to be concealed by any sort of frock, and here was her friend looking as though she had been dressed by Molyneux. Moreover, all the feminine details were exquisite and right, hat, hair, shoes.

Miss Gerard smiled at her friend.

"Yes, I'm at the Cavendish for a few days. I have rather broken out. I want you to come to lunch. I have been seeing people for him about things he could not do himself, his insurance money, his bank manager. I have had the family lawyer in attendance."

"Sit down, dear. I'm not too rushed to listen comfortably."

"No, I'll not sit, Margaret. Though I do want your expert advice."

"On what?"

"Children, or not having them. But if you can lunch at the Cavendish we can talk."

"One o'clock. Or say one-fifteen?"

"I'll send my Daimler for you. It's hired, my dear, not purchased."

Margaret got up and kissed her, for there were no adequate things to be said to her friend on a transfiguration in which the physical and the spiritual were mingled. But for the rest of the morning Margaret Hayle was conscious of her friend's presence in the room, something profoundly enriched and sweetly perfumed. Rosamund had come into bloom suddenly like her name, and the transformation, though dressed in that perfect frock, was no superficial virtue. And Margaret understood, being as much the particular woman of a particular generation that cherished physical hygiene and personal æsthetics, not for the mere male, but because a fine and fastidious self-love provoked them. Rosamund was dressing her new self. It would not be revealed to Adam's eyes, but the spirit of the transfiguration would be divined in other ways. It was life flowering for the moth that would fly towards the invisible perfume. Yes, but how inadequate were symbols, and how relative the academic formulæ.

Miss Gerard had herself driven on to Campers' bookshop in Oxford Street. Her old self, when it had walked into a shop, had entered it with an air of brittle austerity; she had had her curt, rude days, and her apologetic and inferior moments when a crowd of other women, or some little wench behind the counter, had made her feel so bitterly humble, but now she carried that blemish as men had carried a wound during the war. It was no longer a badge of cowardice, but somehow part of her new and adventurous self. She was the mistress of a smiling serenity. Could Messrs. Campers supply her with books for the blind?

"You mean in Braille, madam?"

"Yes. Probably, there will be a weekly order."

"With pleasure, madam. But why not go to the Westminster Library?"

She was driven into Regent Street, and in Regent Street she had an electric radio-gramophone demonstrated to her. Could the machine be operated by her own power-plant? Most certainly it could, though some adaptations might have to be made. She agreed to buy a fifty-guinea machine, provided they would install it and guarantee its functioning. Yes, Westbourn was her nearest town. The company had agents in Westbourn who could undertake the work and provide the necessary service.

She was driven back to the Cavendish Hotel, and she sent the car to collect Dr. Margaret Hayle.

"I shan't want you this afternoon, Britton."

"Very good, madam. And to-morrow?"

"Call for me about ten."

Margaret was one of those rare people who can put busy working self aside, and enjoy both the good things of life and a friend's occasion. Lunch at the Cavendish was an *à la carte* affair, and because her friend's new gaiety touched her, she let herself be spoiled.

"Have you ever had to hunt a birth certificate, Margaret?"

Miss Hayle might agree that the official mind could be founded in obstructions. And all the social highways were being reconstructed. Caution. One way traffic. Move only on the green. Perhaps it was necessary for the official to possess a one way mind?

"He has given more work to my imagination than any book."

Plainly, her imagination was alive, and dealing with actualities that were subtle and compelling.

"That there should be inspiration in the unexpected."

"But isn't that inspiration?"

"Tell me, Margaret, didn't you think of me as a hopeless coward?"

"No, dear."

"You must have done. Always running away from mirrors and faces. And now I am perfectly brazen."

"Hardly that."

"One has pretended to laugh at times at the normal woman."

"Is there such a creature?"

"There is the familiar saying, Margaret, that to express life as an artist a woman must be unhappy. I wonder if it is true?"

"Doesn't it depend on what you want to express? I'm not a disciple of that school."

"My 'Pilgrimage of Pain'!"

"That wasn't macabre. Do you know what struck me particularly about Clive?"

"What?"

"A sensitive gaiety. If he has come into your life like that, why shouldn't he come into your books?"

II

He sat at his open window waiting upon this wonderful occasion. There had been no need to tell him that it was a serene and summer day, for he could feel the sunlight on his hands and face, and no wind brushed against the red brick walls. If he was conscious of the sun warming his outer world, his inner world was illumined on the morning of his marriage by a feeling of gratitude. He did not conceal it from himself, but let it go forth to her with a tender gaiety. He was so helpless, and she was giving him her hand, life, the adventure of new self expression, hope, beauty, an exquisite understanding. And what would he give her in return? He would not be so helpless in his giving. In the darkness he could discover an equal understanding, a self that listened with her and for her until in its secret wisdom it would be as near to her as any human thing could be.

Sister Brown came into the room, dressed for the occasion.

"Now, my dear."

He stood up as on parade.

"Inspection, Sister."

"You look ever so nice."

"Hands."

He held them out to her.

"No ink? I have been practising scribbling my signature."

"Here are your gloves and hat."

They lay on the bed, and she gave them to him.

"Sister, you have been more than good to me. May I kiss you?"

"My dear, we shall miss you."

Two or three nurses were waiting in the corridor. "Good-bye, Mr. Clive. Good luck." His blind face blessed them. "You've been so awfully good to me, all of you." He went down the stairs on Sister Brown's arm, and out to the waiting car. The hospital porter held the door open.

"Good luck, sir."

Clive stood feeling in a pocket, and found two coins that he assumed to be half-crowns.

"I say, please buy some cigarettes, Thomas."

"Thank you, sir."

The coins were pennies, and the porter, with benignant drollness, glancing at the coppers in his palm, closed his fat fingers on them and winked at Sister Brown. "It's all right. Don't let on, Sister." But Clive, half in and half out of the car, was suddenly smitten by the thought that he had dived into the wrong pocket.

"I say, what did I give you, Thomas? It should have been the other pocket."

"I'll keep them for luck, sir."

"You sportsman. Here, no mistake this time."

"It's all right, sir. Glad to do anything for you, sir."

"Please, Thomas. Everybody has been so awfully good to me."

The porter closed the door on them, and saluted the blind man, a gesture that was somehow inevitable. Sister Brown took the salute and, as the car moved off, she passed it to her patient.

"Thomas was in the Guards. He gave you a Guards' salute."

"Did he? How lovely of him! Sister, why should people be so kind?"

"Because they like it, in your case."

He sat and smiled.

The other car was waiting outside the Registrar's office, and out of it got Miss Gerard and Jane. Jane was in black, and a little puckered up with conscious emotion. She was to be more than a mere witness at the marriage; she was to help in the blessing of it in the part of confidante and cook. "Don't you worry, miss; I'm not. So there."

Of the ceremony itself nothing need be said, save that Clive, having his hand set to the appointed place, produced a signature that was legible, and did not run off the edge of the page.

"Is that right, sir?"

"Quite right," said the official.

They were in the closed car together, with Jane sitting beside the chauffeur, and a glass partition separating them. Sister Brown stood on the edge of the pavement, and waved them off. Then her handkerchief was put suddenly to other uses. She blew her nose on it, and addressed her inward self. "You silly old ass. Well, I do hope she'll make him happy."

He sat and held her hand.

"May you never be sorry, Munda."

"Have I not more cause to say that?"

"You! It's to me as though you were letting me share your eyes."

"Dear, let's always think of it in that way."

For from the very beginning of their life together she was the outward seeing eye, describing things to him, not like a nurse to a child, but as one who unconsciously turned vision into sound. That is to say she saw things aloud for the two of them, and felt the sense impression reacting upon his sightless self so that his stored memories reproduced some actual picture. She could say, "No more houses. Fields and hedges. Our chauffeur has a very fat, good-tempered neck. One can learn so much from the back of a neck. It's almost as evidential as a face." And he could take up the interplay with a suggestion of seeing. "High coloured necks, and optimism! One has to beware of skimped head-pedestals. Highbrow heads on little skinny stalks!" She was to remember those words of Margaret's. Sensitive gaiety. His blindness was not to smudge his inward vision. Things flashed on the dark screen.

But it was to be no mere sentimental journey. At Knoll Farm she guided him into the house and into the room that was to be his. His luggage had been sent up by special car and was here waiting to be unpacked. She had given much thought to the preparing of this room and its furniture, so that it should be easy for him to learn and remember the position of things and to move about with confidence. His bed was in a corner so that it had the walls on two sides, and the rest of the furniture arranged round the walls, leaving the central space free.

"Shall I unpack for you, Clive?"

"Show me things, Munda."

"Come and stand with me here by the door."

She began to describe the room and its furniture to him. She told him that when he entered the room the bed was behind the door and to his right and in a corner. Beside it stood a solid little table. The chest of drawers and wash-hand stand were together against the opposite wall, a small sofa and arm-chair in the window. The centre of the room was free, and the carpet a thick, soft pile. There was no object against which he could blunder.

"You have thought of things for me, Munda. Let me say my lesson. Bed, bed table to the right. Over there chest of drawers and washing-stand. Sofa and chair in window. How many steps from the door to the chest?"

She spaced it.

"Six of mine."

"Let me try."

He walked confidently across the room, and paused with a hand just touching the chest of drawers.

"That's easy. Now I'll go round. Nothing on the walls?"

"No, dear."

"So I can feel the walls if I want to. Here's the table and the bed. Now I'm going to cut across and find the sofa. About eight steps? Yes. Don't prompt me."

He arrived at one end of the sofa, explored it with his hands and sat down.

"How's that?"

"Splendid. See if you can come to me, Clive. I have something else to show you."

He rose and walked carefully but directly towards her.

"Halt. You are just there."

"Yes, dear."

"I could hear your breathing."

"Take my hand. We are going out into the passage. Feel along the near wall for something."

He groped and touched the thing.

"A kind of rope."

"Yes. It is fastened to the wall. It travels along and just round a corner to a door. Do you understand, dear?"

He raised her hand and kissed it.

"I understand. Is there a bath, too, in there?"

"Yes, I had one put in. Rubber walls and floor. Nothing to knock against. Now I'm going to unpack for you before tea." She led him back into the room.

"Perhaps we had better do it together. Make a pattern of things. In the far corner beyond the chest of drawers there is a hanging cupboard where I will put your coats. Nothing but a curtain in front."

"I see."

"Find the sofa and sit down while I begin."

She opened his two suit-cases against one of the walls, and kneeling laid out some of the contents on the carpet.

"I'll begin with the little personal things. Safety razor, brushes, washing things. I'm putting them on the dressing-table which is also the wash-hand stand. Beginning from the left, brushes, comb, safety razor, sponge and glove in a basin, shaving

brush, toothbrush, etc., in another basin. You'll remember all that."

"Say it again."

She did so, and he repeated the list after her.

"Now your clothes, dear. The chest has five drawers. Two small ones above. Let's begin with the top left-hand drawer. Collars, handkerchiefs, ties, links and studs. The right-hand drawer, cigarettes and etceteras. Can you remember?"

"Yes."

"Now what shall we put in the first long drawer? Shirts? Shirts and pyjamas?"

"Yes, Munda."

"And in the second, underclothing. That leaves the third drawer for your trousers."

"Can they hang up somewhere?"

"Oh, yes, I'll arrange that."

She was busy putting his clothes away, and he sat on the sofa and listened to her movements. He understood that it pleased her to do these things, and he did not tell her that ever since his broken arm had come again into action he had been teaching himself to do all these things for himself. Her movements were like the quiet and consoling breathing of someone who would never be far away. Also he was delicately and strangely conscious of her as woman, somehow mysterious and sweet-scented, the woman whom he had married.

"Finished, Munda?"

He had heard her closing the suit-cases.

"Yes, dear. I've put your shoes along the wall beside the chest, and your slippers by the bed."

He held out a hand.

"Come here, Munda."

She sat down beside him on the sofa, suddenly and sensitively conscious of him as man.

"I want to give as well as take."

He may have divined her essential shyness, perhaps because he was experiencing the same sensitive shyness.

"What can I give you for all that you are giving?"

"Don't you know, dear?"

"The thing one calls love. Oh, yes, that. But the love business can be so cheap. Unless it means so much more than crude self-expression."

"But that is what you are giving me, Clive, what I have never had, dear, a feeling of new completeness. I have lived such a selfish, self-centred sort of life. I have

never learnt to play with anybody, not even with myself."

He put out a shy hand and touched her knee.

"I feel that I have still to find you in the darkness, and that it will always be rather wonderful business, finding you. It's so difficult to put things into words. You'll be the ever-wonderful and mysterious presence, somehow like the new self that has grown up in me. It may sound strange to you, but I'm beginning to wonder whether man isn't often such a crude sort of beast just because he has eyes."

"I think I understand, Clive. You are seeing things from within."

"Yes, that's it. And that is how I shall always see you, Munda, and go on seeing you all my life."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

He lay and listened to the sound of her footsteps in the room above. He was learning to analyse sounds and to make patterns of them, and to attach to each detail of the mental picture its own particular significance. He had heard a clock strike six, and on this his first waking morning in the house of marriage he was content to wait upon the rhythm of this new, strange world. His love was grateful and sensitive. How was it that he knew that it was her custom to go early into the room above and begin her work for the day, and that he would have felt shocked at the idea of disturbing her? He was no vigorous and exacting child to shout and thump upon the floor and call to her "Munda, I want you." For already she was two women to him, the woman whose voice and perfume and whose hands were a wonderful reality, and the woman who was the interpreter of other people's lives, the mysterious and creative artist. He had said to himself with an almost boyish solemnity: "I must be so careful not to spoil her work."

He had heard that door open and close. Her footsteps had crossed the room and come to a pause. There had been the sound of a chair being moved. She would be sitting down at her desk. He had a feeling that he could share in her work, help in it by being quiet. A strangely unmasculine attitude this, but his love for her was not to be a thing of the eyes, mere sensuous satisfaction, fickle, full of the exactions and the treacheries of sex. She was like life itself penetrating his dark world and filling it with a multitude of subtle vibrations. In feeling her presence he would transcend the mere flesh, and divine exquisite subtleties in their relationship that can elude mere visual awareness.

"Work, dear, work. I'm quite happy."

He, too, would have work to do. Already he was beginning to plan his part in the show. He lay and listened. Again he heard her footsteps. They seemed to go from the centre of the room, skirt some object, and pause by the window. The silence was complete. He pictured her standing by the window, looking out at the garden and the green hill with its crown of trees, perhaps contemplating some inward inspiration.

She had sat at her desk, but not to put words on paper. She preferred the open window and the garden and those two green valleys going down to the sea. Her mood was intimately her own, and its interplay not to be rendered into prose. She

could say to herself: "What a coward I have been. He knows, and it does not matter."

She was remembering his rather exquisite shyness. She had not supposed that any man could be like that. Boy's love? She had tried to express such a love in one of her books, but that this rather wonderful and lovely thing should manifest itself to her in the flesh made her tremble and sit and stare. She could exult over it.

"My dear, I'm so very glad you are not greedy in that way. A woman such as I am does not ask to be clutched at and devoured. There are other ways of taking and of giving. How is it that you understand?"

She sat there looking at the green hill and its trees just as he had pictured her looking at them. The sunlight was more than sunlight on this summer morning. It seemed to partake of the self-illumination of her new world, light penetrating old darknesses and dreads.

Sensitive gaiety! If he was that, could she not be of the same happy temper? Of course she could. No longer would she shut herself up in a world of creative make-believe. She would live as well as write.

"We ought to be down at the sea, my dear."

She was conscious of young, inward laughter. Dear God, how very young she felt! But perhaps he was still sleeping, and she had yet to take her bath, discreetly and alone with a kind of secret and virginal consciousness of things that were yet to be, and rising she went back softly to her bedroom, so softly that not a board creaked.

Below, he lay and waited. There were other stirrings in the house. He heard footsteps in the passage, the opening of his door.

"Your early tea, sir."

He sat up in bed.

"Good morning, Jane."

"I'll put it here on the table, sir. And shall I pour it out?"

"Thank you, Jane. But we ought not to talk, ought we? She's at work still."

Jane, whose attention had been concentrated upon the teapot, was yet able to take notice of this rather unusual attitude in a young husband. Jane had experienced marriage and the male, and if a housewife's work was never ended, its most serious moments could be treated with casual irreverence when man had lost a trouser button.

"She's having her bath, Mr. Clive. Is it sugar?"

"Two lumps, please. And Jane, I want you to do something for me, will you?"

In a little while it might be evident that Jane would be ready to run her old legs

off in his service.

"With pleasure, sir."

"I'm going to get up when I have had my tea. I wish you would just look in when I am dressed and see that I'm all clean and tidy."

"Of course, sir, if you wish it. Here's the cup. And the bread and butter is just here."

"It's awfully kind of you, Jane. Let me tell you that I am not going to be a tame lamb about the house and a nuisance to everybody."

His blind face laughed at the occasion, and Jane made haste to be jocund with him.

"You'll never be that, sir. Bless us, but here's the dog! Prince, my dear, are you coming to say good morning?"

Apparently he was, and somehow strangely ready to accept this other creature not as a rival but as a friend.

"Is that Prince?"

"Yes, Mr. Clive."

"Let him stay."

Jane turned at the door, with a "Well I never" face, to watch the Alsatian sitting on his haunches beside the bed and licking the hand that was put out to him. Certainly Mr. Clive had a way of persuading women and dogs to like him, and Prince's reputation had not been one of mildness towards intruding males.

"I'll leave him with you, sir. But mightn't he be in the way when you're getting up?"

Clive had found a lump of sugar for the dog.

"No, Jane. I think Prince and I are going to understand each other."

Which prophecy proved true, for when Clive entered upon the adventure of getting up, the dog walked to the window and lay down there as though he somehow understood the deliberate and tentative movements of the blind figure. This other creature was interesting and strange, and to be watched with intent and friendly eyes. It was different from all the other figures about the house, and completely unlike any other man-thing in trousers. Prince lay with his nose on his paws, and appeared to wonder about a face that had no eyes.

Her rationalization of his room had enabled him to memorize its details. Also his finger-tips, or their centres in the brain, were developing sensitized memories of their own. He had discovered that shaving was a straight-forward affair if you let your fingers feel the pull of the blade on the beard. It was all rather a question of taking time and of refusing to be flurried. The object that bothered him most was the tooth-

glass, for it was easy to knock the thing off the glass shelf if your fingers came in sudden contact with it. Also, unless coat and trousers had been put on the same hanger, he could be misled as to their being of the same suit.

He talked to the dog.

"Easy for you, my lad. Stuffy fellow, never change your clothes. Oh, damn!"

For his collar stud eluded him. He was ready to swear that he had left it ready in the shirt, but the thing was not there. His hands explored the dressing-table, but to no purpose.

"Any good at finding studs, Prince?"

It would be such a graceless confession of failure to ring the bell for Jane, for, obviously, Jane must be a very busy woman. Why not explore the situation with one's head? He had left his shirt on the chair by the bed, and if the stud had slipped out of the buttonhole it should be near the chair. He went down on his hands and knees and searched the floor, and Prince, becoming interested in these crawling activities, joined in the game.

"Hallo, my dear; I've done my washing, thank you. Ha, you little brute, got you!"

He was dressed and fastening on his wrist-watch when Jane came to keep her promise. He stood, head up, smiling at the presence.

"Just look me over, Jane. Is my hair all right?"

"Yes, sir."

"And finger-nails? Be honest about them."

"They are perfectly clean, sir, but—"

"What is wrong?"

"You'll excuse me, sir, but your coat and trousers don't match."

He laughed.

"What a joke! The hanging cupboard had a game of hide-and-seek with me. Get me the right coat, Jane. Easier to change that than the trousers."

She found him the right coat and helped him on with it.

"Which one is this, Jane?"

"It's a grey, sir."

"That's my Sunday best. Never mind. I'll tie bits of strings to them, one for party frock, two for second best, three for work in the garden."

Jane wanted to kiss him.

"I'll sew tabs to them for you, Mr. Clive, just inside the coat collar and the backs of the trousers."

"That would help, Jane. Yes, enormously."

He asked her to put him in the passage. "I'll go out into the garden, Jane, before breakfast," but she shepherded him farther than the passage. "I'll take you on to the grass, Mr. Clive," and again he laughed, "Like a kid, where it is safe to crawl." He could feel the grass under his feet, and he had Jane's assurance that it was safe for him to walk up and down here without danger of blundering into flower beds. Jane had her breakfast to cook, bacon and scrambled eggs, and she left him with the dog, who assumed the air of being a partner in this business of exploring the lawn. But why was the man-thing standing still with his face to the sun? Prince could have said much upon the locating of interesting smells, but the man's blind face was a dial. The sun was in the east, the hill and trees on his right, the house on his left. Someone at an upper window saw him turn towards the house.

"Munda?"

His face was raised to the window. How was it that he had divined her presence there?

"I'm just coming down. You and Prince are early."

"We had our morning tea together. I woke up before six and lay and listened to you working."

He heard her sudden happy laughter.

"Did my thoughts creak so badly, like the floor?"

"You didn't work, Munda?"

"No. Just sat at the window. I'm coming down."

The dog met her on the stairs and she kissed him. "You dear thing not to be jealous." Her gaiety had a blackbird's note. How poignant and lovely was the day! She saw him framed in the farmhouse doorway, standing there on the green grass and waiting, his head in the sunlight.

"Munda."

"Coming."

"Let's go up to the hill before breakfast. Have we time?"

"Yes. Why should one live by the clock?"

She went to him over the grass. His blind face had a listening look.

"You are near me now, Munda."

"Yes, dear."

It was the first kiss of the morning and of their marriage, fresh, tentative and shy.

"Oh, my dear!"

They held hands, with the dog watching them, solemn eyed.

"Let's go up to the hill, Munda."

"Yes, let's."

"Come on, Prince my lad."

Beyond the Italian gate she felt his fingers close more tightly on hers. There was a challenge in their tension.

"Let's run, Munda. Can you?"

"My dear, I'm not so old as that!"

"Old! What a jest! I want to see if I can run. Let's try."

But half-way up the hill he stumbled, and she caught and held him.

"Oh, my dear, I thought—"

"Silly ass! Not lifting my feet properly. Not so bad for a first attempt."

She was a little breathless both with running and emotion.

"Mustn't be reckless, Clive."

"That's just what I ought to be. Not the woolly lamb idea. My dear, how sweet you smell."

"Do I?"

"Yes, like the grass and the trees. I suppose Prince is thinking that we put up a poor show?"

"Perhaps. He is looking at us and laughing. Dogs do laugh."

"Prince, I'll teach you to laugh at your new brother! But, Munda, isn't life good, even though—?"

She was guiding him through the trees.

"Oh, my dear, your courage makes me ashamed. Ashamed and happy."

He held her and kissed her hair.

"All the world's blind, dear, when I do this. But there is one thing to marvel at."

"Many things, Clive."

"Yes, but what I meant was the soul of a dog. He should be wanting to rend me. He has had you all to himself."

She put out her hand to the dog.

"Prince, darling, we both love you. Listen, there's Jane beating the gong. Breakfast. No, no running this time. We are on our dignity. I can see Jane in the porch."

II

Her forethought had remembered to consider even the food he would eat and the crockery he would handle. In London she had bought a set of massive white cups rather like those used at station buffets, solid vessels that would resist fumbling contacts. She had ordered bacon for breakfast; rashers should be easy things to deal

with. "Not poached eggs, Jane." "No, miss," but the good Jane had sent them in scrambled.

She had guided him to his chair.

"Can you manage bacon, Clive?"

"Rather."

"There are buttered eggs, too."

He was quick to divine her forethought.

"I have had quite a lot of practice, Munda. The only thing I ask you to pardon is my wearing my serviette à la continental!"

He heard her laugh.

"So be it."

"Buttered eggs on my own head!"

She helped him and then poured out his coffee. He was tucking a corner of the serviette into his collar.

"In the early days Sister Brown made me wear a bib like a baby. I shall grow out of bibs. Is that my cup? Thank you, Munda."

In a little while she was to discover that he had mastered the delicate art of dealing with the food on his plate. Knife and fork were almost like two additional fingers. She noticed that when he had loaded the fork he passed the knife below it to make sure that no fragment was trailing. Also, he picked up his cup and replaced it with peculiar precision, keeping his little finger cocked out like a sensitive feeler in search of the saucer.

"Why didn't you work this morning, Munda?"

"Simply because I did not want to."

"Not feeling like it?"

"Perhaps because I was feeling too happy."

His sightless face had become serious.

"That ought to be good for work."

"That's a point, Clive, which the literary gossips have been debating for many years. Some wise idiots say that to do her best work a woman ought to be miserable."

She saw him lay down his knife and fork.

"Is that true? Because it is not my idea to make you particularly miserable."

"I am going to prove it otherwise."

"That a genius can be happy and married, and yet—"

"I'm not a genius."

"I think so. And let's agree, Munda, that I am not going to spoil your work. I'm

going to be the stern husband. I shall drive you upstairs to work."

"Will you, my dear!"

"Yes, and when do I begin my own work? When does my little Blind Teacher arrive?"

"To-morrow."

"Not till to-morrow?"

"I want to play to-day, Clive. Mayn't I play?"

"With me?"

"Of course. I want to show you everything, the garden and orchard. And we might bathe and have our tea in the beach hut. And it's lovely along the cliffs."

He was groping for something on the table.

"All right, Munda, one day's holiday."

She realized that he was searching for the butter, and she leaned across and pushed the dish close to him.

"Just on your left, Clive."

She watched him feel for the knife and lay it gently across the pat. Then he moved it to and fro, measuring its position, and cut himself a neat portion.

"How's that? I haven't got too much?"

"It wouldn't matter if you had."

"Oh, yes, it would, my dear. I shan't be satisfied till I'm a bit of an expert at my craft. Does that sound priggish?"

"I never heard anything less priggish."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

She left him sitting in the sun, smoking a cigarette, with the dog at his feet. She was going to help Jane for an hour with the house-work, for poor Masha or Mary was submerged in one of her periodic and hopeless romances, and at such times she became so emotionally unstable that she was more of a hindrance than a help. At the moment her passion was the postman, and though Mrs. Strange could sympathize with Mary Spray and see in her a small and love-obsessed sister, beds had to be made, rooms cleaned, and all the nice economy of a house fastidiously cherished. The crisis would not be permanent, for Jane had persuaded an equally solid sister, "young Eliza," to share a comfortable and pragmatical life at Knoll Farm. Young Eliza was forty-seven, a serious-minded celibate with a faint moustache and a strange liking for polishing silver. Eliza was to arrive at the end of the week with a tin trunk, and a black hat and dress and the understanding that she was to be allowed one service at church on Sundays. Her own stout legs would have to carry her two miles to it, but what was worth while was worth walking to. Eliza's psyche had not become mechanized.

Miss Gerard had celebrated in one of her books a virtue which she had described as "Housemaid's Conscience," a cheerful thoroughness in the doing of rather dull things, without which the world would become a slattern's salon. Conscience can display itself in the washing down of a bath and the cleansing of a tooth-glass, and Rosamund Strange, having done these things for her blind husband, joined Jane in the kitchen.

"What about the breakfast things, Jane? I have done the rooms."

"They're all washed up and put away, miss."

Mrs. Strange smiled at her. Did Jane think of her as living in sin?

"You give me them things, miss. I'll put 'em away in the house-maid's cupboard."

But her mistress felt capable of herself disposing of the paraphernalia. Was it beneath her dignity to be seen carrying a white slop-pail and other etceteras?

"I can manage, Jane. I'm afraid you are going to have a few heavy days till Eliza comes."

"I'm not grumbling."

"You never do, Jane. I don't know why, but you are not in the fashion."

Said Jane: "It may depend on whom you do things for, miss. Drat it, but I keep forgetting."

Mrs. Strange put the things away in the cupboard, and giving thanks to her Household Gods, returned to the garden and her husband. He was not in the chair. Accompanied by Prince he appeared to be playing a new and particular game of his own, walking slowly and carefully round the edge of the lawn, and pausing now and again to feel the grass verge with one foot. She stood for a moment watching him, and in watching him she divined the significance of his inspiration. Life, especially for a blind pride of purpose, was to be a series of adventures, of exploring and discovering and accomplishing, and if the woman in her was profoundly touched, she could exult over the spirit that moved him. What a comradeship was life offering her, a comradeship of sensitive courage and gay endeavour! Not yet had she come to suspect that she might be troubled by a courage that would sometimes shape like blind recklessness.

"I must take risks, Munda. One somehow has to satisfy one's secret soul."

No, he was not one of those large and fat young men who appear in particular to be prone to marry wealthy women, and who accept parasitism and grow in the process more fat and otiose and complacent. Pride pricked him, and he would sacrifice to his unseen god. Oh, blessed flame that would never gutter out in grease!

"Clive."

"Hallo."

Already she had come to understand that his blindness did not like to be surprised by silent approaches or with secret suddenness.

"I want to show you things."

He stood and waited for her to join him.

"I was just conducting an experiment. Do you mind if I finish it?"

"Go on, dear."

"You see, if I follow the grass verge round like this I come to the stone path. Then I turn left to the iron gate and I'm out in open country."

She watched him strike the path, walk to the gate with his arms outstretched, feel for the latch and open it.

"There you are! Let's see if I can find my way up the hill to the trees. I just go straight ahead?"

"Yes."

"Don't prompt me, Munda. I want to find out how my sense of direction works. One is always supposed to wander away to the left."

A light breeze was blowing from the south-west, and keeping it on his right

cheek he began to wade through the summer grasses, head held high, his face to the sun. His movements were confident, his carriage not that of a man who groped in the darkness. Nor had she to prompt him. He reached the hill and began to climb it, and here the turf was short and sweet.

"Not so much grass, Munda."

She told him that the hay crop was to be cut next week. It was given yearly to a neighbouring farmer, but on the dry hill the turf was kept short and firm by rabbits who had their burrows among the firs.

"We are close to the trees, Munda."

"How can you tell?"

"Shadow, my dear. And I can smell them and hear them."

She shut her eyes and found that he was right.

"Better take hands now."

"No. Let me see if I can pilot myself up to the top."

He went more slowly here, putting his feet down firmly, but keeping his hands to his sides. He told her that in some strange way he seemed able to sense the solid trunks. "There is one quite close on my right, isn't there?" There was, and she saw him smile. "Now, how did I know that? I can't quite say." Only once did she have to warn him, when a tree with roots like a huge bird's claws stood directly in his way. "A little to the left, Clive. Roots." He changed his direction and a few seconds later they reached the hill's brow.

"We are up."

"Yes, dear."

He was not a little pleased with himself.

"I ought to crow, Munda. Let's sit down. The sea is right down there?"

"Yes."

"More explorings."

But suddenly she was confronting the possible perils of that unfenced cliff.

"Clive."

"Yes, dear."

"You are going to promise me something."

"I suppose so."

"You must never go farther than the hill without me. There are cliffs, and no fence."

"My dear, I shan't—"

"Promise."

"You're not worried, are you?"

"Yes."

"Oh, well, then I promise. I'm not thinking of joining a suicide club."

They sat for half an hour on the hill, sharing one of those exquisite silences in which nature-sounds seemed sufficient. "Let's just listen, Munda." There was the wind in the trees and the sound of the sea, and a lark singing. He told her that he could smell the trees, and that but for their perfume he was quite sure that he would have been able to smell the sea, and that almost he could feel the pulsing of the bird's wings in the blue space overhead. They held hands and listened, and she, remembering those unhappy moments in her life when she had sat alone among these trees, on the edge of doubt and disaster, was moved to marvel at her happiness and to question it. Could life be so good, and last? And suddenly she was moved to raise his hand and put it to her lips.

He was startled.

"My dear, you mustn't do that."

"Why not?"

"I kiss hands, not you. Don't forget that, Munda."

"My dear, there is so much else that I want to forget."

She had spoken of showing him things, and in the garden and the orchard he listened to her voice, and translated sound into vision. She had a happy and vivid way of describing things to him, though like a shy creature whose psyche flows through its pen she was apt to fumble her words with strangers. Her picture of the orchard with its rather wild old trees, its patterning of light and of shadow, the hedges laced with chervil, and the tall grass full of flaming sorrel, became to him instantly a part of his consciousness. So did the farm buildings and the yard with its lily pond, old tile and brick and stone, so did Will Spray with his sea-rover face and peasant's slouch.

"You make me see things, Munda. I suppose I don't quite see them as they are, but the inward picture is the thing that matters to me. If I had been born blind I should not have this inward vision. I'm lucky."

To old Will, who like many simple souls cherished under a crust of cynicism belief in the Divine Cunning, this blind face was like ground in good fettle. Will had a feeling for human sweetness and integrity, growth that was not sour or blighted.

"You'll have to teach me things, Will."

"I dare say as I could do that, sir."

"Pick fruit, you know, and push a mower."

Will, like Jane, was simply and wholly at his service.

II

It had been her custom to lie in a long chair in the loggia after lunch, and read and reflect and fall asleep, and when she confessed the habit to him he hailed it as a good idea. If there had been pleasant things in her life before he had come into it, those pleasant things should continue.

"You'll go on doing it, Munda. I'll take a deck-chair into the orchard."

He insisted on carrying his own chair and cushion, though she acted as guide. There were two gates and a winding path beside a thorn hedge to be negotiated.

"There is a virtue in being alone when you don't feel lonely."

"Is that my medicine, Clive?"

"My dear, do you think I don't understand? There is a part of you that has to be alone sometimes. That's one of the most horrible things in our crowded world, not being able to be alone."

"You found that out?"

"Oh, yes, the hearty, matey people with gramophone minds. Solitude can be a sacred thing, and I'm not going to trespass on yours."

She said, "Clive, you're too good to be true," and he laughed and pressed her arm. "I'm not blind inside. Shouldn't it be obvious to an admirer of Douglas Gerard's work that a mind like hers must move in other worlds of its own? I understand that, my dear."

But when she had established him and his deck-chair under the shade of an apple tree she remembered a certain thing that she had bought for him, a portable wireless set in a leather case. Music and voices for the blind! She went back to the house to fetch the set and, returning with it, saw his blind face turned towards the sound of her footsteps.

"I thought you might like this, Clive."

She placed it on his knees, and unfastened the catches.

"What is it?"

"A little wireless set. It's quite simple. I'll leave you to find out all about it."

He held one of her hands.

"Who is too good to be true? My dear, you mustn't spoil me."

She left him to explore the set's controls, and returning to the loggia, lay down on her long chair with a cushion under her head. But she neither read nor slept, but listened for some sound to come to her from the orchard, and when it came it was very faint and distant, a little sensitive stridulation like some insect note. Was she wise as to his carefulness? Perhaps. The music that he allowed himself was muted so that

it should not break in aggressively upon that other silence. She lay and smiled.

At three o'clock she returned to the orchard, to find Clive asleep in his chair, with the magic music-box playing muted and ghostly music at his feet. His face was in the shadow, but a fragment of sunlight wavered to and fro over his very fair head. Yes, she could suppose that it would be so terribly easy for a woman like herself to be supremely foolish about him, but that without the flutterings of such wings life can be a rather grisly business. She bent down, and turning one of the controls, let the music swell out into the sonorous and gaillard splendour of a waltz by Johann Strauss.

She had described how the people in her book would come to life, but this waking was different, and so associated in her mind was it with an opening of the eyes that she was conscious of a little inward shock. This sudden aliveness without sight, a suggestion of secret anguish suddenly suppressed! She saw him sit forward in his chair and put out a hand that seemed to flutter over the instrument. She realized that he did not know that she was there, or that she and not the set had played this trick on him.

"My dear, I'm the culprit!"

"Oh, Munda!"

Almost his blind face reproached her.

"I was dreaming. One sees in one's dreams."

How was it that she had not divined so simple and obvious a thing, that when a blind man dreamed sight returned to him?

"I'm sorry, dear."

"Sorry! It wasn't much of a dream, some ridiculous business. You are the reality."

She knelt in the grass and turned off the music. Its very sensuousness had suddenly become strident.

"We are going to bathe, Clive."

"Are we? But I haven't a frock."

"Yes you have. I bought you one."

"You think even of bathing togs."

"Rather obvious things. Dreams aren't obvious."

"You don't seem to understand that all this is a kind of dream. Darkness makes a mystery, and you are in the centre of it, a presence, a kind of glow. No, I'm not being sentimental."

"Perhaps I do understand."

"No one else can. You're both a dream and reality."

"Spirit and flesh. But we'll take tea down to the beach hut, Clive, not thermos tea. That's for grown-ups."

He smiled at her.

"Let's always be a couple of kids, Munda, when we feel like it. But fancy Douglas Gerard being infantile!"

"Douglas Gerard is dead, my dear."

"No. He mustn't be. Only different. Or say Douglas Gerard upstairs, and Munda in the parlour."

"Highbrow and Lowbrow! But I think you will often be upstairs with me. And I may be dreadfully downstairs. It's rather soothing to come downstairs."

His blind face lit up.

"What a lovely spirit there is in you. Come along, let's go and make a fire on the beach. Mrs. Crusoe and Good Man Friday! Wait a bit, I mustn't tread on the wireless set."

"No, dear. It's out of the way."

"Mine to carry?"

"If you want to."

"Of course I want to. What colour is my bathing frock?"

"Light blue."

"Great. That will go with my hair!"

III

While packing the tea-basket in the kitchen she could not help conjecturing what the realists would have made of her romance, and what she herself might have made of it in the high, literary manner. Yes, the usual melancholy menu, a month's rhapsodical sensuality, satiety with the meat and, for a savoury, disillusionment on toast.

"You'll be wanting the spirit-stove, miss?"

"No, Jane, we are going to light a fire."

"On the beach, miss?"

"Yes, on the beach."

Well, it was their affair, and if her mistress chose to raid Jane's coal-cellar and fill a canvas bag with firewood, Will Spray would be called upon to make the damage good. The tea-basket was entrusted to Clive, but his wife carried the bag of firewood, and he would be allowed to discover it for himself in a corner of the hut. She felt herself happily responsible for the irresponsible soul of a playmate.

Almost she was capable of emptying her bag of firewood on the beach and pretending that it was driftwood to be collected, but they were to bathe before tea and time was not limitless. The tide was not full, and she had to help him over the shingle and past some sleeping rocks, but when they were waist-deep in water she let his hand go, threw herself forward and struck out. She was a very average swimmer and he something of an expert, but in following he began to diverge.

"I'm here, Clive."

He heard her splashing and changed his course.

"I hear you. I say, isn't this great!"

For in this other element he was conscious of being free. His youth and his strength were released and could spend themselves without fear of blundering against some obstacle. He could feel the swell of the water and its salt taste on his lips, and swimming strongly he was leaving her behind.

"Clive."

"Hallo."

"I can't swim so fast."

"Sorry."

"You can make me feel the inferior creature, and that's good. Don't go too far out. There are currents."

He turned towards her voice.

"One can strike out here without hitting something. Let's see if I can swim round you."

"I'm going to float."

"Righto. I'll dive under you."

He did it, his fair head reappearing between her and the shore.

"How's that?"

"Splendid."

"Tired?"

"There's the kettle to be boiled."

"So there is. Home then."

But his sense of direction was at fault, for though he could sense the incoming waves, he began to swim towards a point beyond the cove where a wedge of rock ran into the sea.

"This way, Clive."

"Was. I going wrong?"

"Only just a little."

His floating face was suddenly wistful, but only for a moment. "Just like life,

Munda. It's easy to get into a sea of trouble, but not so easy to get out of it. I can't drop my pilot."

He was close to her now and swimming stroke for stroke; they came to shallow water and she found her feet and stood up.

"Only waist-deep, Clive. Here's my hand."

He groped for it and found it, and holding hands they made for the shore. She shepherded him into his half of the beach hut and placed his towel on the wooden bench. "I'll race you, Munda, and be out first." She took up the challenge, and while putting on her stockings heard something come into vigorous contact with the matchwood partition.

"Clive."

"Only my head, my dear."

"Poor darling."

"Your fault for being too cocky. Your bet's not limitless like the sea."

"Can I come in and look?"

"No, Munda."

Their race proved a dead heat. They appeared in their mutual doorways like two figures in a mediæval town clock, but she could claim to have beaten him because he was minus collar and tie. "You're not complete, my dear, but I ought to have been handicapped. Let's look at your poor head." She took his face between her hands, and discovering a faint red mark she put her lips to it. And suddenly his arms were round her and he was holding her as a man holds the woman he desires.

"Oh, Munda."

Her arms clasped his head.

"I'll come to you to-night, Clive."

"Oh, my dear!"

But there were other flames to be kindled on the hearth built up of stones collected from the beach, and having prepared the hearth for him she allowed him to be responsible for the fire. Paper and firewood were emptied from the canvas bag beside his kneeling figure.

"Good Man Friday mustn't burn his fingers."

"Woman, this is man's work. But where are the matches?"

Heavens, had she forgotten the matches? She had, but the good Jane had remembered to slip a fresh box into the tea-basket.

"Here, Clive."

While spreading her cloth on a patch of sand she watched him laying and lighting the fire, putting his face close to it as though to sense its burning. She did not want to

interfere for the job was his, nor was any interference necessary. His hands were the hands of a cunning fire-maker, laying stick upon stick like a child building a toy house of wooden bricks. But she saw that he was bothered about the kettle. The thing would not sit down safely on the hollow well of stones.

"Munda."

Something to hold the kettle? She looked about her and found an old piece of sea-fretted driftwood.

"This will do, Clive. Under the handle. That's right."

"Splendid."

Having laid out her tea-things she sat and watched him kneeling and holding the kettle over the fire, and from time to time adding more wood. His face was intent and happy. But one other thing she saw, the soles of his shoes needed mending, and something in her smiled over the worn places in the leather.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Hot steamy weather.

She had been cutting roses when she had heard the sound of Mr. Viner's car, and following one of her secret paths between flowering syringas she had found the perfume part of a memory, if that which had happened on the previous night could be regarded as in the past. Persian nights and strange perfumes. She had not left him till he had fallen asleep, and it had been a source of wonder to her how the man creature fell asleep after those moments of exquisite intimacy, like an infant that has been given the breast and is satisfied. Meanwhile, she had come to an opening in a yew hedge, and while watching a pair of stout legs in dark grey flannel trousers emerging with a suggestion of struggle and of effort from the interior of an Austin Seven saloon, she was moved to remember that the advent of this teacher of the blind had caused her a pang of jealousy. But how incredible! She stood with her basket of roses and saw that the grey legs were attached to a stout and crumpled figure in a brown linen coat. Mr. Viner's head was hatless, its crown a pink and glistening surface.

A blonde and stolid young woman sat at the wheel of the car, holding Mr. Viner's hat for him. It had fallen off during the process of extraction.

"Better put the car in the shade, Maisie."

Maisie was his niece, and not interested in avuncular heroes. She pushed his hat at him with an air of casual peremptoriness.

"Here's your hat."

An obvious and rather abrupt young person whose sudden stare fixed itself upon the woman with the roses. What was the matter with Miss Gerard's face? Mr. Viner had put on his hat, and turning about discovered the presence.

"Miss Gerard? I beg your pardon, Mrs. Strange."

The hat was once more in his hand. She was conscious of being looked at by one large and luminous eye that was magnified by a high-powered lens. The other eye was absent. She was aware of telling herself that Mr. Viner was one of the ugliest men she had ever encountered. A moment later she was correcting that crude, physical impression.

"My husband has been so looking forward to your coming."

This little bunch of a man with his uncouth trousers and bulging coat had

suddenly become to her a person of immediateness and of dignity. She was very sensitive to people, and if the young woman in the car was cold and rather sulky suet, this man with the big, benign head made her feel an inward glow.

"Roses."

She held the basket out to him for him to smell.

"Lovely things."

"May I put them in your car?"

"That's very kind of you. Our introduction, if I may say so. Maisie, take the flowers."

His niece opened the door and, with another pebble-eyed stare at Miss Gerard's face, reached for the basket and placed it on the seat.

"Would you like to have a few words with me, Mr. Viner, before you see my husband?"

He had resumed his hat. He looked at her with that one very luminous eye.

"It is the beginning that is so important."

She knew then that he understood her, and that she understood him.

"Compassion, but not pity."

She was taller than he was, and as she led the way back into the rose garden she smiled down at his ugly and wisely gentle face.

"I have learnt that."

"With your voice you would."

She found herself laughing with a feeling of undescribable, inward tenderness.

"So we are together at once. My husband is teaching me many things, Mr. Viner. The woman who writes books. Don't say that you have read them."

"But I have."

"Well, now we know. But what I want to say to you about my husband before you see him is not author's comment. It is right in the middle of reality. And yet, is there any need for me to tell you anything?"

"Dr. Heberden gave me some of the details."

"Dr. Heberden is a dear, but there are things—"

"The soul of other psychologies."

"Oh, yes, courage, a quite delightful spirit, a gaiety that might make one ashamed. It never occurred to me that blindness could be an adventure. That shows one's limitations. But there it is."

Mr. Viner stood quite still, looking down at a particular rose bush.

"Is that how he confronts it?"

"Yes."

"Then I do not think you need tell me anything more. This should be a happy case. Believe me, the blind can be happy people, Mrs. Strange, if one does not treat them as poor parasites."

Clive, sitting in the loggia, heard the two voices coming towards him in a dark world that was warmed by the sun. In here was the man who was to open other doors to him, and Clive, having listened to Mr. Viner's voice, was reassured by it. He heard Mr. Viner laugh, and only particular people could laugh in that particular way, with a kind of soft roundness.

"One does not make obvious remarks to flowers, Mrs. Strange."

"One tries to refrain."

Clive, feeling those two presences very near to him, stood up with his blind face beginning to smile.

"Clive, here is Mr. Viner."

Clive's hand was out. "I have heard your voice, sir." And again Mr. Viner laughed. "I hope it is evidential." He had a grip that lingered for some seconds on Clive's fingers, and the human contact was ratified.

Rosamund left them alone together, and ascending to her working room she sat down at her desk with her elbows resting on it and her face in her two hands. She had not meant to listen to the two voices, but somehow her listening became inevitable and collusive. She heard her husband say, "She has given me everything. I want to give back all that I can." Mr. Viner's voice was replying, "So you want to be a person, responsible for your part in the show. It's just a question of will force and memory." She heard Clive explaining that his ambition was to be a complete and capable secretary. "Perhaps you will give me a little lecture on the subject." And again Mr. Viner laughed. He was a teacher not a lecturer, and there was a difference. Well, to begin with, Clive would have to learn Braille, teach his brain and finger-tips to memorize the multifarious combinations of the six dots. Next would come the typewriter, yes, an ordinary machine, with a Braille scale added for tabulating purposes. The blind operator had to memorize the keyboard. Then would follow the most difficult and technical business of all, Braille shorthand for use in dictation. There was a special machine for this, six keys, with two rows of three keys working vertically. A strip of paper ran through the machine rather like a news-tape. One roll would serve for fifty or sixty ordinary letters. Afterwards you transcribed your shorthand, using the typewriter.

"How often shall I have a lesson, Mr. Viner?"

"Three lessons a week of an hour each."

"In between I can practise?"

"Yes, with someone to help you."

Mr. Viner was watching the blind, yet live face.

"Tell me, sir, how long will it take?"

"You might learn Braille and typewriting in four months."

"And the shorthand?"

"No pupil I have had has mastered that under a year."

He was aware of the blind face's sudden clouding.

"A year?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so, but to be able to write Braille and Braille shorthand is essential. I won't humbug you. It's a great test and a great accomplishment, and you'll master it."

"Oh, yes, I'll master it, Mr. Viner. And when can we begin?"

Mr. Viner pulled something from a large pocket in his crumpled coat.

"Now."

"That's splendid. Can you leave me some stuff behind to work at?"

"Yes, you shall have plenty of homework. As to books, you can get them free from the Westminster Library. There is a special postage rate, a five-pound volume for a penny."

II

She was walking down the lane with Mr. Viner while the small car followed behind.

"There are one or two things I want to say to you, Mrs. Strange. Do you mind?"

She said: "I hope I am not afraid of anything you can say."

He paused under the shade of a hedgerow oak, and waved Maisie and the small car on. "Wait at the bottom of the lane." He took off his hat and wiped his bald, pink head. "You'll forgive me, but it has been my experience that in most cases the blind should not be isolated. There is something communal in one's likes, emulation, common problems. But I do agree that your husband's case is somewhat different."

She stood in the shade, conscious of his kind, wise face.

"I don't think I shall ever make him feel inferior and I can tell you why. Firstly I love him; secondly he is a much more lovable creature than I am."

"He is a very lovable creature."

"And I hope I shall never let him feel lonely."

The luminous eye flashed at her.

"A woman of your sensitiveness understands the difference between loneliness

and being alone."

"Quite. I have explored both to the dregs. But if he needs blind friends—"

"Let that wait, Mrs. Strange. And then, he is rather like a highly bred horse trembling to begin. Don't let him overdo things. His nature is all that way."

She smiled at the luminous eye.

"I'll remember. He is going to teach me to play!"

Mr. Viner did not tell her that in the lives of some of those who lost their sight there came a period which he described as a blind spot on the soul, sudden discouragement, sudden despair, a feeling that your groping fingers would never disentangle the knot of life, that the business of learning things all over again was too difficult. He could have quoted the case of a girl whose memory had proved unequal to the registering of complex associations, and who had been found floating in the sea. But if he did not speak of such hazards to Rosamund Strange, it was because he did not believe in frightening people and also because he was no poor judge of the qualities that go to make up character. The essential urge was the thing that mattered. He might have quoted to Clive's wife a passage in Ben Purse's book, "The British Blind": "Take from life the motive power which induces us to strive for betterment and individual rehabilitation and you deprive man of that fundamental difference which distinguishes him from all other forms of animal creation."

In fact, instead of stimulating the urge she had to assuage it. He would have sat for hours in the loggia with his Braille card and his books.

"Hear my lesson, Munda."

Her book, "A Pilgrimage of Pain," had been produced in Braille, and it was his first text-book, and she sat and watched his sensitive fingers at work and his lips repeating the words. It was her affair to correct his mistakes, and in those early groping days he made the most ridiculous slips. "What a mess I am making of your masterpiece, Munda!" It was not an easy book for his fingers to transcribe, being charged with delicate and subtle meaning, but persist with it he would.

"Unless it bores you or irritates you, Munda."

"Nothing you can do will."

"I know dear old Socrates is always telling me that the Bible would be easier."

He could laugh over the hashes he made and she laughed with him, though the book was not designed for laughter. Its psyche was infinitely serious and full of twilight moods.

"Sodiferous slosh! Oh, my dear, what a splurge! What ought I to have got?"

"That sounds like a hostile critic, Clive."

"But what are the words?"

"Solicitous plush."

"Solicitous plush! How awfully subtle. Read me the passage." She read it, and the delicate and faintly malicious significance of the phrase, the imaginative texture of her phrasing, might have puzzled him.

"I've got you. What a lovely phrase! Fat Aunt Emma dressed up in her drawing-room and entertaining the Member's lady. You will never let my wits go wool-gathering, Munda."

She would have said that during those early weeks she was like a mother absorbed in watching those sensitive fingers and slightly hesitant lips. She was to discover that he creamed his hands at night and wore gloves with the idea of cherishing the sensitiveness of his touch corpuscles. He wore gloves, too, when he gardened and went crawling round the grass with a pair of shears, trimming the verges. His capacity for memorizing things astonished her. He could go straight to the radio set and tune it in. Put between raspberry canes his quick fingers would find the ripe fruit. He could walk down the paved path to the Italian gate and make his own way up to the knoll and its firs. But it was his mental receptivity that surprised her most, the swiftness and accuracy with which he was learning to associate mental images with a series of dots, the rapidity with which he taught himself to memorize the keyboard of his typewriter.

There had been a little argument between them over the typewriter and the Braille machine.

"How much money have I in the bank, Munda?"

"Quite a lot, dear."

"Then I owe you some. You paid for these things."

"Does it matter?"

She realized at once that she had hurt him. It mattered particularly to him, and she would have hated it not to matter and for her dear sisters to be able to speak of him as her tame husband.

"I have the bills somewhere, Clive. I'm frightfully careless about bills."

"You mean you don't pay them at once?" and his voice was almost severe.

"No, dear, I pay them and forget to keep accounts."

"That's going to be your secretary's business. How much do I owe?"

She went and hunted up the bills, and brought them to him with his cheque book. He had his account now with a branch of Barclays at Westbourn, and his slightly compressed and careful signature was to become familiar to the clerks.

"How much, Munda?"

"Thirty-seven pounds ten, in all, Clive."

He felt for his stylo, and found that she had put the cheque book on the table.

"Fill in the letterpress and I'll sign. And now we are on the subject, what ought my share of the housekeeping to be? I have about a hundred and fifty a year, you know, after investing three-quarters of the insurance money."

"Let's say a pound a week."

"Not enough. Two pounds a week. And I am paying dear old Viner."

She was filling in the cheque. It would have been so easy for her to falsify it against herself and for his benefit, but she did not.

"In the near future I shall have to write you cheques, Clive."

"Me?"

"Well, I propose to pay my secretary."

"That's different."

"Not in the least, my dear. If you pay for value received, so shall I."

"Serious?"

"Utterly."

She was at work again on her book, and not finding her power of interpreting life in any way impaired. Perhaps the lights and shadows were less sharply contrasted, and the more poignant passages penetrated by a tender gaiety. Her critics were to complain that Douglas Gerard had sacrificed an iridescent sophistication for an almost virginal simplicity. They missed her moments of brilliant bitterness. But how could she write bitterly, or even with an exquisite cynicism, when she was reading her work to a blind man? He had asked for it. She would be like a mother telling a child stories that were disillusioned or charged with the quintessence of melancholy. Besides, she was not feeling like that.

"That's great stuff, Munda. You're making Mrs. Griggs an amazing person. I can see her all the time scuttling about that boarding-house."

"Can you, dear?"

"Real people, people who become everybody's friends. You're different from the woman in the Pilgrimage."

She had to laugh.

"How clever of you to discover that!"

To Mr. Viner she could say that Clive's progress seemed to her to be quite astonishing, and Mr. Viner could reply that Clive promised to be his unique pupil. The vital urge was there, charged with sensitive emotion, and no one could say just how far it would carry him. As a philosopher and a sociologist Mr. Viner was an inspired individualist.

Three times a week she drove her car and Clive into Westbourn. Perhaps she

had shopping to do, and a dancing lesson to be endured, though her dancing lessons were not yet confessed to, but in Westbourn's Regent Street they played a game together. They would stroll slowly along the pavement, Clive's hand tucked under her arm, his blind face intent and alert. He called it his game of "Spotting Shops." Was she going to the grocer's? Well, that was easy. The mingled odours drifted to him and were evidential. So, too, with the hairdresser's, subtle odours emerged; and a butcher's shop could be recognized by the smell of sawdust.

"What's the test this morning?"

"I'm going to buy a frock."

"Let me find a frock shop for you."

She did not think he would succeed, but succeed he did.

"Am I right?"

"Yes. But how?"

"Quite easy, dear. Stand here by the window and shut your eyes for a moment. What do you feel and hear?"

"Voices."

"Exactly, feminine thrills! Crowds of women looking in windows."

He sat on a chair while she chose her frock, and listened to the voice of the saleswoman. He had to be allowed to feel the particular dress she had chosen, and afterwards he asked her a series of questions.

"Wasn't the saleswoman a blonde?"

"She was."

"And stout, with blue eyes, and rather a silly soft mouth?"

"Yes, that's the type."

"I thought so. So terribly the lady."

"My dear, I shall become quite frightened of you."

They developed other subtleties in the spotting of things and of people. She would leave him parked in the car on the sea-front while she took her dancing lesson, and when she rejoined him they would settle themselves in a couple of chairs on the parade and play the game of exploring voices. That he should be extraordinarily sensitive to voices did not surprise her, but that he should be able to attach a physical portrait to a voice in the way he did was somehow astonishing.

"Ask me what went by then?"

"Well, what?"

"A stout old fellow in a Panama hat. Rather red and fussy. And with him a bored woman, probably his daughter. Thin and depressed, with stooping shoulders."

She followed the two figures with her eyes.

"My dear, you're right. Retired army, and a resentfully retired spinster. At least, that's the impression. How did you—?"

"Oh, their feet and their voices. Didn't you hear what he was saying? And her 'Yes' and her 'Is that so?'"

Sometimes he was very wrong, and they would laugh together over his misreading of a voice, or his misinterpreting of an aura, for there were occasions when someone would sit down close to them, and never was it necessary for her to warn him that they were not alone. He could tell when a dog passed by the padding of the creature's paws upon the paving, and often he would call to the dog and the beast would come to him. Prince, if he happened to be with them, they left in charge of the car, because he was apt to be jealous of other dogs and not inspired by brotherly love. As for children, Clive was shy of them, and she had cause to remember a particular child and the occasion, a small fair-haired, blue-eyed thing parading along the line of chairs and exhibiting all the nascent arrogance of a spoilt young ego. A somewhat sickly and irritable nurse was in attendance. The child had a small stick with which she was rapping the vacant chairs.

"Don't do that, Miss Evelyn."

Evelyn rapped them all the more emphatically, looking with a kind of jocund and infantile insolence into the faces of people who happened to occupy chairs. The nurse swerved across to collect her charge at the moment that the child came opposite the Stranges.

"You mustn't be a nuisance to people, Miss Evelyn."

Clive, leaning forward, held out a hand.

"Hallo, Evelyn. How are we?"

The little animal's eyes were fixed upon Rosamund.

"What a funny face you've got."

The nurse, out of patience, caught the child by the arm.

"What manners! I'm so sorry. You'll come home at once, Miss Evelyn."

Sudden struggles and screams, which were resolved by the girl picking up the child and carrying her off. Rosamund Strange, wise as to Clive's hurt face, took the wound to herself.

"That was meant for me, dear."

"You, Munda?"

"The engaging frankness of childhood!"

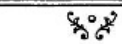
He said: "I don't believe it. I suppose a blind face can seem rather sinister to a child."

"But it wasn't you, Clive."

"Oh, yes, it was, Munda. It couldn't have been you."

She could not convince him that the wound was hers, and never again did he try to attract a child, which, to her, was peculiarly significant. She had no illusions about children, while he, having so much of the happy child in him, may have both desired them and feared them, especially after that particular incident. And perhaps she divined one of the secret fears of the blind, the dread of blundering against some unsensed object or person, of being rebuffed or met with some unexpected blow, some shock to one's essential faith in the goodwill of the invisible world.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



He did not tell her that he was being challenged by a fear that was new and strange to him, though many blind people are familiar with it, the dread of going out alone. He might and did say to himself, "This adventure has to be faced. You can't be for ever like a frightened kid in the dark holding on to mother's hand. The blind must be able to walk among those who see. Next time she leaves you alone in the car you will get out and dare that aloneness."

Though he did confess his cowardice to Mr. Viner at the end of a lesson when the master had praised him.

"You are going to beat all my records, Clive."

Mr. Viner had read and reflected upon much of the new psychology, especially so as it affected the blind, and had he had to select a healer he would have chosen the much abused Jung, who preached a conscious goal and the precious urge of effort. Mr. Viner could not be satisfied with subsisting on the subconscious, and as to the Behaviourists he had christened them fanatical ants. But he did allow that the dark world is full of fears, shadows of the psyche's own creating, and that the particular and manifesting fear might be only the shadow of some other and more significant ghost.

"I'm an awful coward, really, Mr. Viner."

"So am I, my dear."

"I made myself fly because I was afraid of it. One has to do some things just because one is afraid of doing them. Silly pride."

"Not silly. What is worrying you at the moment?"

"Going out alone. In the streets, I mean. Some silly thing in me seems to shrink. It is not so much the fear of being hurt—"

"The fear of failing?"

The blind face lit up.

"Yes, making a mess of the business. But how did you know?"

"Know? Because all of us fear something. As you know, I sometimes have to make public speeches to a public that is interested in the blind. In my early days I used to lie awake in self-conscious terror. Quite absurd, but actual. Take your fear by the throat, my dear, and throttle it."

Yet behind this almost childish fear of being alone with strange people in a

strange and dark place, was that other and unconfessed fear, a sensitive dread of becoming an encumbrance. The Great Book tells us that perfect love casteth out fear, but we humans are far from perfection, and to a blind man the precious lamp that lights his invisible path may be a thing to be cherished with fear and trembling. Who was responsible for that quaint and simple saying: "Vex not your violet"? He was so convinced that he was taking everything and giving little. What if one took too much, hour by hour and day by day, until the oil in the lamp could not be replenished? He had a horror of ever seeming to be too exacting.

It happened on the morning when she was taking her last dancing lesson. Westbourn was in high season, the sands stippled with humanity, the parade very much on parade. The parking spaces along the front were crowded, but she managed to discover a vacant niche opposite the Victoria Hotel.

"I shan't be long, Clive."

She did not tell him where she was going, and he did not ask her. It might be to her particular hairdresser's, and a woman should be allowed little privacies of her own. Also he was tense with the premeditated ordeal, his first walk alone along the sea front. He had no stick with him, the blind man's white wand. And when she had left him alone in the car he sat listening to the noise of the traffic, and to all the *va et vient* of that summer day and of humanity on its holiday by the sea. Was the parade very crowded? Probably. He would grope his way across it to the railings and let them serve as an Ariadne's thread.

He got out of the car, and in opening the door its handle struck the side of the car that was parked next it. The impact startled him. He felt that he ought to apologize to someone. "Sorry." But the other car was empty. Slipping through the narrow space he reached the near railings. There was a break in them every hundred yards or so to give pedestrians access to the parade. But where was the nearest gap? Should he climb the railings or slip through between the bars? He decided to slip through, only to find his head coming in contact with some solid yet slightly yielding substance, and to hear an exclamation.

"Here, I say, what do you think you're doing?"

He had forgotten the row of deck-chairs and he had butted his head against the back of a girl who was sitting reading a novel.

"So sorry."

"I should say so. What's the idea?"

Someone was looking at him over the top of a chair, the young woman's friend, a man with a soft shirt collar turned over the collar of his sports jacket. He too was fair haired, and hatless, and seeing that blind and somewhat confused face was

instantly human.

"All right, Maisie."

He was up and moving his chair.

"Want to come through, old man?"

"Please don't bother. I'm so sorry. You see I'm blind."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Across to the other railings."

"Righto. I'll take you over. That's it, down a bit. Now we're through."

He piloted Clive across the parade and Clive thanked him. Yes, he could manage now that he had his hands on the railings. And would his rescuer apologize again to the lady? The young man returned to his deck-chair and the girl, and made some kind and obvious remark upon the pathetic limitations of the blind.

"He sent his apologies to you, Maisie."

"I should say so. How do I know he wasn't after my bag?"

"Don't be silly. I'm going to keep an eye on the chap in case he wants helping."

"Regular Boy Scout, aren't you?"

Clive was standing facing the sea, his hands gripping the iron rail. He could feel the wind in his hair and the sun on his skin, and hear the sea breaking on the shingle. Also he was very conscious of innumerable voices, of crowded humanity passing to and fro behind him, of children shouting and traffic hooting. This silly incident had shattered his confidence. He felt bewildered, afraid to move, lest he should make a second blundering contact with some other body. The darkness was so different from the darkness that he dared with Munda. But this surrender to an almost childish terror was impossible. He must will himself to make the necessary effort, shake off this feeling of self-paralysis for, after all, it was only his own fear that was fooling him. And what did he fear? Some clumsy movement, other people's pity, or the shame of failure? He had those railings to guide him, and turning sideways to them and keeping his right hand on the upper rail he began to walk slowly along the parade. He was conscious of other bodies near him in the darkness, of voices, of the sudden imminence of a possible contact that brought him up with a jerk. But those other bodies seemed to float off like bubbles. People gave him compassionate, curious looks and drew aside. Abruptly the railings ceased, and he stood hesitant and perplexed. He had come to a place where steps went down to the beach and the void was like a perilous, dark gulf. He put out his right foot and felt the edge of a step and, exploring it he solved his problem and regained a sense of direction. The steps went down at right angles to the parade, and so did the railing. The gap had to be crossed. He took three deliberate steps, with his right hand feeling the air. Once

again it touched metal.

Reassured and more confident he went slowly on, but there was a trap ahead of him. Two middle-aged women had settled themselves in deck-chairs close to the railing. One of them was asleep or day-dreaming, the other busy knitting. Had they been talking Clive would have had his warning, but he walked straight into a pair of stout and black-stockinged legs, overbalanced, and fell sideways, clutching at the iron rail.

"Well, really!"

"Haven't you got eyes?"

He was half-sitting on those stout legs, his face to the sea. The legs squirmed and protested. He pulled himself up, feeling hot and humiliated.

"I'm awfully sorry."

"You should be."

And then both women saw his face, a tragic face.

"I'm most awfully sorry. I was feeling my way along the railings. I hope I haven't hurt you?"

The woman's voice was gentle.

"Not in the least. It's quite all right. Can I help you?"

"No, thank you so much. I'll go back again the other way. But are there any chairs?"

"No. It's quite clear."

"Thank you. Please forgive me. I haven't been blind very long, and I'm trying to learn."

The compassion in the other voice had hurt him, and as he felt his way back along the railings he heard the woman say: "Poor lad, he oughtn't to be out alone. No, I'm not hurt. He only fell across my ankles." The wind in his hair, the sun on his face, that great spacious sea down yonder, darkness, and his fingers in contact with that iron tube! What a clumsy mess he had made of the adventure! Blindness was so final. There were some things that you could do, other things that would remain utterly beyond you. The blind beggar? In the old days, all the blind, save the fortunate few, had been beggars. The social conscience had been troubled by the blind; people were kind to you, and concealed behind their kindness was pity. It might be the fashion to pretend that the blind were capable of leading useful and practical lives, but was not the blind man always the recipient of alms, the charity of people who suffered his limitations?

But, dear God, he did not want pity.

Retracing his steps he came to the place where steps went down to the sea.

There were those six feet of railless space to be crossed, but directly his hand left the iron rail something failed in him. He faltered on the edge of blind panic. He was trembling. If he dared that void he might blunder into someone, and for the third time that morning make an ass of himself. Supposing he were to collide with a child and knock the youngster down the steps?

He stood holding the iron rail. He was both angry and on the edge of tears. He could remember falling into just such an emotional state when a fellow had bullied him at school, and he had flown at the bully, blubbing and striking blows. But you could not strike out at the empty darkness. It was so final and inevitable. It was everywhere.

He suffered his arms to rest on the iron rail. Strange desolation possessed him. His head went down. The sea, the sea was there, and he could not see it. Invisible children were at play. Where was the illusion that he too could live life to the full, walk with gaillard and proud head in the presence of his fate? Pity? Always and everywhere he would be somewhat helpless without those ministering and beloved hands. He would remain a tax upon her strength and upon her patience, day after day, year after year.

It was intolerable, humiliating, terrifying. He would not have cared had he not loved her as he did. Surely no love could outlive years of perpetual ministration, the little boring trifles of a blind man's necessity? It might weary her, spoil her work, turn the sweet impulse into a mere sense of duty. She might come to pretend because she pitied, and pity would persuade her to endure.

Suddenly he heard her voice.

"Oh, my dear, how splendid of you."

He was abruptly erect, gripping the rail. Splendid? When he had blundered against people, made an ass of himself?

"Forgive me, Munda."

He felt her close to him, and was strangely soothed.

"I had to experiment."

"Yes, a kind lad told me you had gone exploring."

She had seen his bowed head and his ravaged face before he had realized her nearness, and for a moment she too had been afraid. Had his gaiety been all pretence, and had she surprised the real man weighed down by discouragement and ennui?

"I'm afraid I made rather a mess of things, Munda."

"Did you, dear?"

"Yes, the first walk all on my own. I fell over a deck-chair and a woman's legs."

She slipped an arm under his.

"You chose a very difficult place, didn't you? People don't sit about on pavements. You should have begun with a quiet street and a stick."

"Yes, I suppose I should, but I felt rather driven to make my first attempt. Simply had to."

"Inward urge?"

"Yes."

How much did she divine? Perhaps more than he suspected. She would have said that he wanted to be a responsible person, able to move about among his fellows without being dependent on some other person. Not that he resented her interference, if interference it could be called.

"I have such a horror of fussing you, dear."

"You, Munda?"

"Yes. Even a child likes to play its own game in its own way."

"You have never fussed me, dear. Yes, I'll tell you why I am so terribly keen on being able to get about by myself. One can have a horror of being a nuisance even to —"

"Me?"

"Yes."

She pressed his arm.

"You never will be. But I understand. And I want you to be free, to feel free. No tyranny of any sort."

"Oh, my dear, I'm so afraid of spoiling things for you."

"Don't you know that you are giving me what I have never had? And each morning I say: 'God keep me from being greedy.' Now I want you to wait here while I go and buy something. I shan't be five minutes."

But he held her there for a moment.

"It's all very wonderful, Munda. You don't know how happy I am. I did not think anyone could understand as you do."

She left him there, and with a feeling of secret exultation she went to buy him a stick at a tobacconist's shop on the sea-front. She chose a plain ash stick and returning with it she found him leaning upon the railings.

"You ought to have had this, Clive."

"What is it?"

She put the stick into his hand.

"I had an idea. We are going across to Victoria Square and you are going to walk round it."

"On my own?"

"Yes, I'll keep a few yards behind you."

"Munda, you do understand. Come along. I've had a crash and I am going up again at once. Come along."

She shepherded him across the parade and the roadway to the farther pavement, and past the Victoria Hotel to the square. Surrounded by high white and grey houses, it was a comparatively quiet place. Lamp-posts were set at intervals along the edge of the pavement, and in the far corner stood a red pillar-box. She placed him on the edge of the pavement.

"Now, dear. There is just one thing to watch for."

"Don't tell me."

He set off, tapping the kerb with his stick, and she followed a few yards behind him. He was nearing one of the lamp-posts, and her urge was to warn him, but she smothered the impulse, for she saw that at every other step he was flicking the stick horizontally in front of him. The stick touched the post; he paused, walked round the post, recovered touch with the kerb and went on. He was counting his steps. He came to the second post, negotiated it and walked on more briskly, for he could presume that the lamps were set at equal distances along the path. His next problem would be the pillar-box. His stick touched it. She saw him put out a hand and feel. He was smiling back at her.

"Munda."

"Yes, dear?"

"Can I post a letter for you?"

She joined him by the red box, and in front of the decorous windows of a private hotel she kissed him.

"You did that wonderfully."

He was a little flushed and laughing.

"As a matter of fact, Munda, so did you!"

II

She kept her particular surprise for him until the evening. There were roses on the table, and she had brought up from the farm cellar a bottle of Pol Roger—1921. The B.B.C. was giving a programme of old waltzes, an historical parade, Chopin, Waldteufel, Strauss, and she was moved to remember one of the first short stories she had written as a girl, sweet, sensuous stuff full of romantic yearnings, and white muslin, the Blue Danube, a ballroom, and the dream man. How she had hungered to

feel things, to put on some pretty frock and dance, to become a thing of the senses, to match movement with emotion, and just for one night to be a girl with a pretty face!

"Supposing you put on a dinner jacket, Clive."

"What, are we celebrating something?"

"The conquest of Victoria Square."

"She sounds rather a formidable lady."

"I'm going to dress."

"That's a challenge."

She had several surprises for him, her frock, her scent, the perfume of a mood, roses, wine, music. The electric radio cabinet was still a secret, and so was its case of gramophone records. It stood in a corner of the dining-room behind the door, and after she had poured out his wine, she went to unlock the cabinet and turn on the switch.

"Munda."

"Yes, dear."

"I say, champagne!"

"Wine, woman and song. Why not some music!"

She was setting the controls, but the first sound that emerged was a raucous blare.

"Sorry, Clive."

"What on earth is that?"

"A first attempt. That's better."

The studio orchestra was playing Chopin's sixth waltz, and if, as Douglas Gerard, she should have transcended such sentimental stuff, as a woman who was loved she was satisfied with the music of moonlight, tears and kisses. Moreover, his blind face was turned to her in a way that suggested seeing, and his very fair head was the head of youth.

"It isn't my birthday, Munda!"

"No, but it happens to be mine."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Birthdays can be boring, unless—"

She saw him feeling for his wine glass.

"Here's homage. I can't make a speech. Too overcome with emotion!"

She raised her glass and touched his with it.

"I thought that radio set might be pleasant when conversation fails."

"Has it failed?"

"Not quite."

"And what is the set?"

"A Caledonia electric radio-gramophone. Rather an intriguing machine. It's almost human, plays eight records, and changes them itself."

"You are a wicked person."

"It is good to be wicked sometimes."

The lately arrived Eliza appeared to change the plates, and Chopin gave place to Strauss. Eliza did not look like Strauss; she had a faint black moustache and an air of wax-white composure. Prince, who had been lying on the rug by the window, had walked across to explore the strange wooden box which emitted peculiar noises. He looked at his mistress and whimpered.

"Don't you like it, dear? Eliza, I think you had better take Prince out with you."

"Yes, madam."

Eliza was less austere than she looked, and taking Prince and the used plates back into the kitchen, she was able to inform her sister that their mistress had rolled up and removed the rugs from the dining-room floor. "Yes, and I've been polishing that floor with her for the last week." "Dancing?" "And why not?" asked Jane. Eliza had nothing to say against dancing, and could recall occasions when she had prided herself on dancing the valeta. Moreover, it was a comfortable house, and Eliza liked a glass of beer with her dinner and had it.

She said, "I'm a churchwoman, Jane, but I always have said that churchy houses aren't so wholesome as the house where you don't see a prayer book."

Jane was preparing Prince's supper, dog biscuits and gravy.

"This isn't a pious place, Liz. It's 'uman. Now, my dear, you put your nose into that."

For a "sweet" Jane sent in one of her particulars, black currant pudding with cream. Jane might have described it as her Chopin effort, luscious and yearning. Eliza found her mistress placing records on the gramophone, with Mr. Clive standing by her, his table napkin in one hand, a champagne glass in the other.

"You need not wait, Eliza. We can manage."

Eliza had no doubt at all but that they could.

The first record was a waltz, *I Follow My Secret Heart* from Coward's *Conversation Piece*. The furniture had been so arranged in the big room that there was a wide space about the table.

"Why shouldn't we dance, Clive?"

"Dance? Can I? I used to, rather much."

"A man who has conquered Victoria Square!"

She took the white napkin and the glass from him and placed them on the table.

"I don't know that I'm very good, dear. But there is plenty of room, and Jane's special pudding won't run away."

His arms were out and she slipped into them, and for a moment they stood mutually conscious of an exquisite, mute shyness.

"Am I girl or man?"

"Man, of course."

"Can I be? You'll have to guide a little."

She had practised such guidance, having taken her little dancing mistress into the secret.

"We'll move the table after dinner, Clive. Now."

She had been so afraid of that first dance with him, lest her old disharmonies and a hypersensitive rigidity should spoil the rhythm, but directly he began to move, something within her melted to the music and to him. She could remember once tearing up a page of manuscript, succulent sweet stuff in which a woman had floated to music. Floated! And she was giving him little occasional touches, gentle pressures of the hand, and in passing she pushed his chair back to the table with an elbow.

"All right, Clive?"

"I say, you're marvellous, dear. We haven't touched a thing."

"We shan't do."

And presently she realized that in some strange way they were so much one that she could guide him without being conscious of any interference.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Dr. Hayle, coming down for a long week-end early in September, and feeling rather like the family physician and friend, found Rosamund Gerard's young husband in his shirt-sleeves polishing his wife's car. He stood to confront her with a tin of cleaning material in one hand and a portion of a discarded pair of pants in the other. His face was very brown, so brown that his teeth flashed at her like the teeth of some young man on a poster advertising a pleasure resort, and if mental health could be judged by physical appearances, all was well with Munda's world.

"Hallo. I say, you're early, aren't you?"

Margaret was feeling a little terse and tired, for the week-end traffic on the Westbourn road had been more than usually exasperating.

"I'll apologize."

"Oh, please don't do that. It's only that we hadn't cleared the garage for you."

He appeared to have become suddenly conscious of the tin and his rag. He had come out into the yard to meet her, and she saw him try to stuff the tin into a trouser pocket, but it was too large and refused to be pocketed. The silly irritations of a road that had seethed with little competing egotisms seemed to fall away from her. His face had so sun-tanned a serenity, and yet was so alive with a kind of self-teasing gaiety, that she was refreshed.

"That tin is too large, my lad. Why try and hide it?"

"I'm not. And since you are so damned observant, what do you make of this?"

He held out the piece of woollen stuff.

"It was a vest."

"Wrong. Pants. If you will hold the tin, I'll get your luggage out. I suppose it lives in the locker at the back?"

Her normal self might have said: "Don't bother. I'm my own porter," but that which was both woman and physician in her refrained, and chose to watch this piece of behaviour in a motor mechanism that was blind. Margaret, like Mr. Viner, laughed at the muscle-maniacs and all those sedulous pedants who would reduce man to a *mélange* of conditioned reflexes. She might watch a sick child as she watched Clive Strange, for the co-ordinations of this blind figure were excessively interesting and significant. She saw him walk straight to her car as though the sound pattern it had left enabled him to know exactly where it stood. A hand sweeping along its body

guided him to the back. He found the locker catches, unfastened them, raised the lid and lifted out her two suit-cases, but it was all done with such precision and with such an absence of fumbling that she was astonished.

"Munda's in the garden. I'll take these up."

"Give me one."

"No, I can manage."

She noticed that he set his feet down firmly and sharply on the stones and that he walked without hesitation towards the house. Knoll Farm had a back door set between two outjutting small wings. The door was shut and as he approached it her impulse was to warn him. Again she refrained. He appeared to know that the door was shut. He put down one of the suit-cases, found the handle and opened the door. But how was it done? Did his footsteps send back some echo or vibration from the brick surfaces, and enable him to gauge his position in space?

"Munda, Margaret's here."

He led Dr. Hayle through into the hall and, with a "Munda's in the garden," turned up the stairs with her luggage. Miss Hayle had a vision of very green grass and two brilliant little beds like baskets of flowers. She looked for her friend, and found her bosom deep in one of the big borders tying up an helenium that had broken its bands. Mrs. Strange's head and shoulders seemed to emerge from a bath of colour.

"Hallo, dear. Just coming. Have you had lunch?"

"Yes, I got off the road and camped."

Mrs. Strange came carefully out of the border, and Margaret would have said that her friend had somehow stolen the essence of her flowers, and that if a woman in the early thirties could rediscover the bloom of youth, Munda had discovered it. But bloom was not the veritable word. Her friend was happy, and distilling her happiness into a rich maturity. She did not flinch from life or from the discerning eyes of her friend. In the old days she had had a way of looking aside when she spoke to people, of showing to the world a self-conscious and wayward profile, but now her face had a fullness and a serenity.

"Is your luggage out?"

"Clive's taken it."

"I'm afraid the garage wasn't ready. I was just coming to move my car. I'll do it now. Clive can back it out into the yard when the yard's empty."

They kissed, and Margaret was moved to say: "He's rather wonderful. Only a few months ago—"

"You noticed that? It's so like watching one's child, day by day. Oh, yes, I'm

rather happy, dear."

There was a moment of shyness between them.

"I'm so glad, Munda. Yes, I was bothered. But some things are obvious."

"So obvious that we miss them!"

Margaret could say to herself that Rosamund seemed to have forgotten her disfigured face and almost all the repressions and discords of her youth, though one could not forget a repression; it just ceased to be. That there was a quite extraordinary sympathy and understanding between these two was obvious, and concerning a marriage such as this, which was neither sickly nor sensual, one might be persuaded to argue that all husbands should be blind. Let the promiscuous, sex-strutting Juans keep their eyes.

Clive had taken to a pipe. He smoked it after tea, and looking across at his wife suggested that she and Margaret should go and bathe. No, he wasn't coming; he had work to do. He had made rather a mess of his last piece of dictation and had satisfied neither himself nor Socrates. He explained Socrates to Margaret. "I can't see him, you know, but he is one of those people who make you react like a barometer. Ask Munda to describe his one luminous eye. No, I'm quite set about working."

Margaret and her friend, wandering down the green valley to the sea, stepped delicately over the things that both knew to be intimately actual. They were undressing in the beach hut when Margaret asked that particular question, a physician's question. The answer to it would be so completely evidential.

"How's the work?"

Munda was peeling off her stockings, and thinking how strange it was that a woman should be more particular about such details even though love was blind.

"Quite happy. I tore up half a book and began again. One was becoming rather too consciously clever."

"That's a good phrase. Well, really, one of my stockings has laddered."

"They will, just as women will persist in writing letters. Oh, by the way, Margaret, I have a letter I want you to see."

"Any diagnosis required?"

"One is so afraid of being consciously suspicious of one's relations. Clive hasn't seen it."

"Does he see them?"

"He types most of the answers. I dictate slowly. Later, he will be able to take notes down in shorthand."

"Which sister wrote it?"

"How quick of you!"

"Not really."

"Norah. Her poor little husband has cancer."

"The doctor?"

"Yes."

Margaret stepped out into the sunlight and stood poised. She had a beautiful body and she loved it.

"Does Clive know about your sisters?"

"In fragments. You see, one rather wishes to keep some people and things away from him. I might be a woman with a past, and absurdly sensitive about it."

"Symbols, my dear. Your sisters never grew up. Remained seventeen and schoolgirls at their worst. I'm sorry, but I never could stand Norah."

"It is not a question of standing Norah. She has a completely vitrified ego. The question is how much is one responsible when one does not feel responsible? It is so much pleasanter to help whom one likes. Well, that can wait. Isn't the sea perfect, rumpled silk? Clive's taught me much more swimming."

"He ought to be here. His work was an excuse, my dear."

"Yes and no. He understands some things in a way I thought no man could."

Dr. Hayle, wandering into the orchard before going up to change her frock, discovered something new among the apple trees, a little hut covered with oak boards cut in the rough, and thatched with heather. Strange sounds came to her from this orchard house, a voice and the clatter of a typewriter. The voice was not Clive's voice but that of someone broadcasting from Portland Place. Margaret would have refrained from showing herself had not both sounds ceased, suggesting that the day's work was done.

The little house had two windows with casements that could be shuttered, and through one of the open windows she saw Clive sitting at a big deal table with his typewriter, books and portable wireless set before him. He was covering up the typewriter with a black cloth. Behind him she could see shelves for the storing of apples.

"Hallo, Clive. I did not mean to disturb you."

"Come in, Margaret. I've just finished. Have an apple?"

"You live with the apples?"

"There are some Beauties of Bath on the shelves. Sounds rather a reflection on Bath, doesn't it? Munda put up this place for a double purpose. I asked her to."

Already the place smelled of autumn and apples. She sat down in a garden chair and saw what he could not see, those green orchard aisles with the trees brilliant

with fruit.

"You see," and he stood up and reached over to shut up the portable wireless set, "I have to make rather a row when I work. I try taking down the talks on my typewriter, but of course they go too fast for me. I haven't had time yet to master Braille shorthand. The thing is she mustn't be disturbed when she's at work."

"That was your idea?"

"Well, yes. You know, Margaret, what really matters is her work. She matters to thousands of people. Good God, you should see the letters she gets, most of them fool-letters, of course, but some of them are rather touching."

Dr. Hayle was contemplating his blind face and finding there elements of beauty.

"I am going to ask you rather a beastly question, Clive."

"Go ahead."

"Are you ever jealous of her work?"

She saw him smile.

"No, I don't think I am. Wouldn't it be pretty beastly?"

"The husbands of celebrated wives are apt to—"

"But this is so different. What sort of life should I have had without her? I want to give back some of the things she has given. Besides, Margaret, you know what she is, so utterly without conceit. I suppose the really big people have that sort of humility."

"I should include you, my dear."

"Me! Oh, I'm just a rather affectionate sort of ass. But this new book of hers! You ought to read it. Great stuff. It makes me feel—"

He hesitated, and she had a feeling that he had wanted to say that marriage had not marred Munda's inspiration.

"I think I know, Clive."

"Then you're pretty quick, or am I so transparent?"

"I knew her long before you did, Clive. You have given her things she never had. But that sounds so damned priggish! What I mean is that certain rare people need other rather rare people, otherwise—"

"You are being rather nice to me, Margaret."

"My dear, it's not very difficult. But come along, I'm getting almost sloppy. Do we take any of these apples in?"

"No. I took some in this morning. Do you know, I can pick apples, Margaret. Yes, we lock the door and close the shutters. Apples ought to be kept in a cool, dark place, but in air that is not too dry. Rather like me!"

II

Knoll Farm might possess a visitor, but its rhythm was not to be varied for one such as Margaret Hayle. After breakfast Rosamund went to her upper room, Clive to his orchard-house, while Dr. Hayle read *The Times* in the loggia. An hour's work, and then a drive to some place in Sussex. Margaret had finished with *The Times* when her friend came down from her upper room, her face was the face of a woman who was happy. Margaret saw a sheen upon it, the inward and secret exultation of work that had been good.

"I've brought Norah's letter."

Even a letter from Norah Snade could not cloud her mood.

"I was rather unkind yesterday. Poor Norah, she has always been so bossy and vigorous, and yet things haven't gone quite right for her."

Margaret took the letter and read it, knowing that Norah Snade was one of the few people whom she had found it impossible to regard with dispassionate fairness. Margaret thought of Norah as she remembered her at school, sallow and strenuous and masterful, given to sudden splurges of coarse laughter, and concealing beneath her thick white skin surges of strongly scented sex. Norah's letter was as strongly scented as herself, reeking of rectitude and aggressive motherliness. It was completely candid in pointing out to Munda what her duties were to Norah, and what was Norah's in this present crisis.

"Pretty cool, Munda."

"Yes, but after all, one must help her with the children," and she went on to explain that they had had to sell the practice for next to nothing, and that poor little Herbert had not been able to save. There would be nothing but his insurance. Norah had only about fifty pounds a year of her own.

"Quite, but her suggestion that you should settle money on the children, the implication that it is your duty?"

"That's just Norah. Of course I shan't do that, but I'm a rich woman, Margaret, and feeling that life has suddenly been very good to me."

"My dear!"

"I'll pay for the education. Humanly I owe nothing to Norah as Norah."

"Hardly. She was pretty beastly to you."

"Again, just Norah. Coarse texture, an understanding of nothing that was not Norah."

Margaret handed back the letter.

"Even her writing. Like her eyebrows and moustache. Heavens, what a cat I am!

But Norah always did rouse the unholy feline in me. That is why one should have nothing to do with people who upset your glands."

"Because I mean to help the children that does not necessitate contact with Norah."

"Yes, no contacts, my dear. Just your cheque book and good luck to youth. But what about the day? Shall we take my car?"

"Do you mind?"

"I love loafing along lanes."

"I'll go and tell Clive. Do you think I ought to tell Clive about this?"

"I should. You know, Munda, there is a sort of sweet sanity in Clive."

Munda's fan-mail was a provocation to her husband. It was not vanity that made her read those letters to him, even those that were marked private and personal, and those that were rude. Many of these letters, like Norah Snade's, were petitions for financial assistance, though the appeal might open with ingenuous flattery. It was Clive who coined the phrase, "Wait for the third page," for somewhere about the third page the interested inspiration would manifest itself. Also Clive could say, "In a little while I shall be able to answer these for you," and here, what Margaret had described as his sweet sanity would appear.

Yet scattered through this mass of egregious egotism were little human documents in which Clive was sure that he divined a refreshing sincerity. The more naïve and clumsy the story, the more did it appear true. These sensitive people stammered out their story. The professionals were too damned glib. Nor was Clive interested in the many ladies who were in a hurry to discard even the fig leaf, in writing to Munda about their sex experiences and the sins of their husbands. "No one has ever suffered as I have suffered. My life story is unique. You must write it." Some were sufficiently candid to confess that in the matter of remuneration they would be satisfied with fifty per cent. of the royalties that might accrue.

Clive had an inspiration: "Munda, a lot of those women think you are a man."

"My dear!"

"Douglas Gerard. And the transference idea in Freud. You are the beloved analyst."

She laughed.

"Possibly. But do airmen read Freud?"

"I had read extracts from him. But some of these letters strike me as genuine. Wouldn't it be extraordinarily interesting to follow them up, I mean the ones that don't come from Glasgow or Darlington or somewhere?"

"Go and see the people?"

"Yes. Studies in real life."

"Would it interest you?"

"It would."

The suggestion was a spark which set alight in her impressions and tendencies that had been accumulating in her consciousness. She, who had hid herself away from the world was being persuaded to reconquer it with this new comrade. With her inward eyes on Clive she could translate Goethe's cry of "More light" into one of "More life." Why, during the winter months, should she bury this blind man in an old Sussex farm? Sweetly sane he might be, but was it not her dear concern to widen and enrich his dark world, and to amplify it with every interest that she could discover? Yes, and had not she herself felt the stirrings of a more humorous and gaillard spirit? Why not the great city for the winter, concerts, theatres, even little dinners and dances? London would be a veritable treasure chest for Clive's blind hands to explore.

"I have had an idea, Clive. Do you want me to visit the people who write to remind me that on page so and so, line seven I have dropped a comma, or even split an infinitive?"

He caught her laughing mood.

"Hardly. The little fussy meticulous fools who see only one small fly in a mountain of amber. What's the idea?"

"A flat or a small house in town for the winter."

"But could you work in town?"

"I feel that I could write in a public-house."

"Munda!"

"Yes, I am coming on."

"But Mr. Viner and my lessons?"

"We could find a substitute in London. Yes, and take Jane and Eliza and Prince with us. The Sprays could come in and look after this house."

His very serious face confronted her.

"You want to do this just for me?"

"No."

"Because you think I might be bored?"

"No. I am feeling like it myself. I want to explore all sorts of things, and there is so much to explore. Good for my work, dear, which sounds priggish."

"It would be enormous fun, Munda. I might play the blind beggar and you the noble wife. We could go masquerading into all sorts of places. Shoreditch and Wapping and Bethnal Green and the Caledonian Market."

"And the Embankment at night, and the Berkeley and Grosvenor House. Contrasts upon contrasts."

He had the face of a boy.

"Let's, Munda, let's. But I can't contribute my proper share."

"Oh, yes you can. And you can teach me to listen."

Meanwhile, he had to listen to Norah Snade's letter in a spirit of sweet reasonableness that was somewhat wilful and self-conscious. No doubt his wife's relations might assume that her marriage was a somewhat negative affair inspired by propinquity and pity for a poor blind boy. Munda had been mute about her sisters, and though Norah's letter was aggressive and self-righteous, it could plead a very human problem. But how did Munda feel about it? Also, the education of two children would be a considerable expense.

"Of course, one has to help. What are the kids like?"

"I haven't seen them for years. Walter is about fourteen, Eileen ten or so. It will mean three or four hundred a year for some years."

"Of course, Munda, I don't know what your income is. No business of mine to know."

"It's every business of yours. If I were to die you would be the family banker."

"How?"

"I made a will, my dear, leaving everything to you absolutely. Haven't I told you? I have saved nearly thirty-five thousand pounds, and my income—"

"I don't want to know."

"I want you to know. I am something of a world's best seller. I make about ten thousand pounds a year. Quite a third of that goes in taxation. Still, one's margin—"

"You want me to say just what I think?"

"In our case, yes. I once said in a book that a wife might think she was giving her husband advice when she was only giving him indigestion."

"I don't want to do that," and he laughed. "I imagine your subscription list is pretty heavy. What's the margin? Can you afford it?"

"I don't like my sister."

"Judging from her letter she is a little formidable. And because you don't like her you feel all the more bound to do things."

"That is exactly how I feel. To be better than one's self, consciously magnanimous. I'm not pretending, Clive."

"Let the kids have their chance."

"Is that your wish?"

"Yes. I'm having my chance. One ought to pass such things on."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A letter, other than Norah's, was to challenge her new courage. The secretary of the Minerva Club, writing on behalf of the club committee, invited Miss Gerard to be the principal guest and to speak at their November dinner. She had begun by reading the letter aloud across the breakfast table to Clive, and then, discovering a possible involvement, she had laid it aside.

"Oh, just an invitation. We shall have to regret. And I am still catalogued among the unmarried!"

"Celebrated women retain their virginity, Munda!"

"Oh, do they, my dear!"

"But what about that letter? Am I not to know? I don't want to know, unless—"

"Just an invitation to a literary dinner."

"Where?"

"The Minerva Club."

Clive had to confess his ignorance, and that ignorance asked to be corrected. The Minerva Club contained a very serious and cultured body of women, authoresses, dramatists, scientists, artists, and an invitation to one of its dinners was of considerable significance. A speech delivered to the Minerva Club had to be something of a *tour de force*, witty, provocative, individual. The male mind, especially in its oratorical moments, might be treated with gentle irreverence, and only the exceptional male might dare to accept the challenge, and in his wisdom he would leave behind him all chains of office and academic trappings.

"They ask me to be the guest of the evening."

"You ought to go, Munda."

She was conscious of inward qualms.

"That means a speech. Horrible idea! I have never made a speech."

"But you could do."

"Not the kind of speech they want. The tradition is that one should be both naked and clothed in wit. And there is no more critical crowd in London."

"Well, they have asked you."

"Yes, my dear, I should shake at the knees and make an egregious ass of myself. My mind works only on paper and in a quiet room."

She was a little horrified to find him gently pressing her to accept the invitation,

and all the more so because her new self was adding its voice to his. She could accuse herself of cowardice, of surrendering to the old, hyper-sensitive ego, of being afraid to face criticism and the faces of her fellows. She, who talked so confidently in prose, was convinced that she would behave like a paralysed and terrified child on a platform.

"I'd like to go with you if they would ask me."

She was conscious of sudden breathlessness. To let him go and listen to her making a poor fool of herself! Public humiliation. But what would be the real effect of his presence? A stimulus, a spur? Oh, no, she could not risk it.

"I would go, if they would spare me the speech."

"They must want to hear you, Munda. After all, you are an expert. I'd love to hear you speak. You have the voice for it."

She heard her old bitter self exclaiming inwardly, "But not the face, my dear!" And then, with sudden self revealings she knew that the scorn of self can be both passionate and different. Could she not stand up before those other women and talk to them intelligently for ten minutes? Why postulate a critical unfriendliness, delicate mockery, the knife that dissects? Something in her said, "Don't funk it, don't funk things. Go."

But there were other letters to be read, and she noticed that he did not press her further, and that he could discriminate even in the darkness and avoid blundering against a prejudice that might be rightly hers. She would sometimes wonder what the effect of blindness might be upon different temperaments, whether it would exaggerate individual idiosyncrasies, or chasten them, but in Clive she could divine a delicate sensing of other whims and queernesses, as though in learning to feel his way about he had become not only more sensitive to material objects but to the atmospheric changes of the psyche! She had yet to learn how in his dark world he feared too pragmatical a touch and anything that could be construed as over-eager interference. His pride was to be a person, not a puppet to be pushed and guided, and in asking this freedom he was equally ready to grant it to others.

She went up to her room to work, but inspiration eluded her. She had a decision to make, and to say no to that letter would be so easy. Miss Gerard regrets. But why did he want her to go? Was he somehow wise as to the challenge of life as it affected them both? The proud husband strangely swollen with a sense of social duty? That, of course, was absurd. Men might be proud of a woman's looks, but of a woman's brains, never! Yet why had he sided with her new self against her old? And in the complex interplay of two temperaments was it possible to disentangle every conscious thread?

Make your decision or your confession and peace may return to the soul. She did both, but not upon impulse for she was beginning to laugh at herself a little, and at her panic in the presence of such a social mole-hill. She took paper and pen and wrote, "Miss Gerard has very much pleasure in accepting the Minerva Club's invitation." Pleasure! Why not find pleasure instead of pain in the play of other personalities?

Clive was reading Braille in the orchard house when he heard her footsteps brushing through the grass.

"Clive."

"Hallo."

"You were quite right. I have accepted that invitation."

She saw him sitting at his big table with the trays of fruit behind him like patterns on a wall. Old Spray was teaching him to recognize apples by their shape and the texture of their skin. Worcester Pearmain was not Keswick Codling, and to Clive the dark fruit had each its characteristic colour.

"I shouldn't worry, Munda, if it is going to interfere with your work."

"I shan't let it do that. I have asked them to include you in the invitation."

"You know, Munda, we are both rather shy creatures. I used to get panic over children's parties. Such a silly business! What is it, inferiority complex?"

She went in and sat down on the edge of his table.

"I am going to be a bold and brazen hussy. That's the cure for too much self-introspection. And laughing at oneself in the mirror."

"You did not think I was being bossy, Munda?"

"Yes, terribly so."

"Now, you are laughing at both of us."

"No, dear, I shall never laugh at you."

II

She was spreading a map of London on the loggia table. September was passing, and Jane had made jelly of the Sweet Water grapes from the vine on one of the loggia pillars. The pines on the knoll were in the early morning a shroud of mist, and the tang in the air had the poignancy of autumn. Sometimes the dew lay on the grass till noon. The coloured clock of the years would soon be bronze and gold.

Where was the adventure to begin? Had London any particular and individual lure for him? She paused with the point of a pencil poised over Russell Square.

"Bloomsbury?"

She looked at his face and her pencil moved on. He said that he would go where she pleased, and then, when she made some half-playful remark about prides and prejudices, he began to tell her of that period in his life when he had been proposing to become a lawyer, and had found himself hating being shut up and sitting in the same chair. "I wanted more movement, Munda." He had lodged during those legal days in a funny, white little old terrace somewhere off the King's Road. "I used to like getting down to the river in the evening, and across into Battersea Park. Being with people and trees and the water, without being part of the crowd." Her pencil made a wide sweep to Chelsea, the home of the irritable sage, and of modern and strange young Christs.

"Chelsea."

"I don't see you as Chelsea, Munda."

"Need one be Chelsea? I shan't ask you to grow a beard."

"Doesn't it depend upon a somewhat quiet corner for your work?"

"And a somewhat quiet place where you can walk?"

"Not necessarily."

"Oh, yes it does. But supposing I go and look at Chelsea? I have sounded Jane and Eliza and there are no objections."

"Jane can make Chelsea buns, and Eliza break china. But does she?"

"Hardly at all."

She went alone in search of the London house, for the day she chose was one of Mr. Viner's days, and as Clive himself had said: "I shouldn't be much use at house-hunting." She drove herself into Westbourn, garaged her car, and caught the 9.20 train to Charing Cross, and in Charing Cross station she passed within ten yards of a particular person who happened to be looking at the bookstall while waiting for a train. Had Rosamund Strange seen her sister on that September morning, many things might not have happened. Norah Snade, prophetically and shabbily black, was counting the copies of Douglas Gerard's books that were to be seen on the bookstall. Three separate works were displayed there, and a whole pile of a cheap edition of "A Pilgrimage of Pain." Her famous sister's famous masterpiece! Norah might sneer. It was not pleasing to a woman like Norah Snade to find herself as a suppliant to a sister whom she had made a habit of despising. Munda's money! How preposterous it was that the scribbling of silly stories should make a woman so rich! The rewards were out of all proportion to the labour. Norah might persuade herself that what she could ask for her children was their right, but when the person whom you have treated with contempt becomes a dispenser of favours, secret hatreds begin to creep. The impulse to hurt or to browbeat anything weaker and more

sensitive than herself had been natural to this she-bully. Disguising itself, the propensity might have masqueraded as the impulse to blame.

As yet, Norah would not say openly to herself that she wanted to hurt her sister because her own crass self-love was feeling injured by having to play the suppliant. It was a bitter business, this begging, and charity does not beget its like. Human vanity can put on gratitude and find it a poisoned coat, and Norah would have said that only inferior people feel grateful.

Her train was in and Norah carried her suit-case to the corner of a third-class carriage. Another woman, coming to occupy the opposite seat, and being interested in faces and the personality behind them, was not moved to enter into conversation with this bitter woman. Mrs. Snade sat and stared out of the window, not as though rows of roofs and chimney-pots and all the man-made mess interested her, but like someone digesting sour thoughts.

"Do you mind if we have the window down a little?"

The window was closed and Norah facing the engine. She stared ungraciously at her *vis-à-vis*.

"Just one hole."

The other woman lowered it, and resumed her book. Why did some people find life so stuffy and grievous? But the incident of the window had deflected Norah's thoughts from her two children to her husband. For her children, creatures of her flesh, she was ready to bully and to bribe. They were her children and somehow her poor little failure of a husband had no share in them. Poor little Herbert, wretched little man.

The woman with the book saw her travelling companion take a letter from her bag and read it.

"I will think over what I am prepared to do for Walter and Eileen."

Think over, prepared to do! This from a wealthy sister who fed the public on refined sob-stuff! Hence the suit-case, and Norah's descent upon Westbourn. She would have it out with Rosamund. She would point out to Rosamund that a sensitive social conscience did not function only in books. A spinster like Rosamund! For Norah did not yet know that her sister's threat to marry had become reality.

Rosamund, meanwhile, was sitting in the office of a Chelsea house and estate agent while a clerk filled in orders to view or looked up the necessary keys. Would madam like to be accompanied? No, madam would prefer to go alone. The house would be but part of the picture, its place on a blind man's map a matter of importance. The agents were able to give her half a dozen addresses, in Oakley

Street, Cheyne Walk and Upper Cheyne Row and Marietta Terrace, and Rosamund went forth to explore the sophistications of Chelsea.

She found herself in a delicious little cul-de-sac with mignon houses making eyes at her. No garages, no cars to come home noisily with the milk. She was about to introduce herself to the particular house when, from a big red building across the way, a yellow soprano voice began to sing. It sang neither for joy nor for love, but obviously and professionally. A musical academy? Ye gods! Mrs. Strange was grateful to that voice for manifesting, and went elsewhere.

Cheyne Walk. Walnut and Queen Anne and "Sartor Resartus." Egg-blue shutters, and someone arguing with a taxi-driver. She went in to explore the house and came out feeling, she could not say why, that the place had been a Pandora's Box. A big, white, semi-detached villa in the Upper Walk gave her a momentary thrill until someone in the next house began to play upon the violin. How actively arty was this neighbourhood. She proceeded and, crossing Oakley Street, came at last to Marietta Terrace.

Trees, thorns, acacias, limes, cream-coloured pillars and iron railings, funny little front gardens, compressed but somehow friendly houses, one door, one window, two windows, grey balustrading. One tradesman's van, no conversational loafers and, at the moment, no music.

Marietta Terrace might be either very chic or very bargain-basement, or perhaps both, but it pleased Munda Strange, even though its windows looked upon the backsides of some very bourgeois houses. Bourgeois backsides! She was conscious of laughing at something with Marietta Terrace. The particular house, No. 43, had a very blue front door, a young acacia that was turning yellow, a bird-bath and crazy paving. It seemed to show a leg, but delicately so, and if its facade suggested cocktail parties and an overdrawn bank account, that was all in the way of gaiety. Rosamund explored. She found that No. 43 would just accept the Strange ménage if Eliza had a bedroom out, and Eliza could be trusted out. Her working-room could be on the top floor, and Clive could use the dining-room for his secretarial studies. She would give him the lower front bedroom. As for the kitchen quarters, they had been modernized and were Olympia in miniature, and Jane would have every modern gadget.

Rosamund opened one of the front windows and stood there for quite twenty minutes, listening for possible extraneous noises. Nos. 42 and 44 seemed as quiet as the empty 43. She liked the feel of the house. It would be delightful to furnish it as a period piece, and it would look charming when furnished. She closed the window and, contemplating the backs of those other houses, realized that backs are quieter

than fronts. Their mouths were all the other way. And the stairs? Narrow and just a little steep, but without traps. There was nothing to puzzle a blind man.

But she had other matters to explore: Marietta Terrace's environment as it affected Clive. He had spoken to her of the Embankment and Battersea Park. Again her exploring proved happy. Phryne Street took her into Oakley Street ending on the Embankment opposite the Albert Bridge. There were traffic lights here and a refuge. She crossed, and passing over the bridge, found a side gate that opened into Battersea Park. A path guarded by railings brought her to the big breezy space beside the river, seats, the shadows of big plane trees.

She stood and watched the river, and reflected that Clive could walk all the way from Marietta Terrace to Battersea Park with but that one crossing to negotiate. She could go with him to pilot him over, or he would find someone who would shepherd him across. People were kind to the blind. And here in the park he could walk safely along the river wall, with easy landmarks for guidance, and in the middle of the day not too many people to obstruct him.

She returned to the house agents and arranged to take No. 43 Marietta Terrace on a seven years' lease.

III

Clive and Mr. Viner had ended the morning's lesson by falling into a sociological argument on the subject of state paternalism. Clive had said: "But if people know that they will never be hungry or homeless, does that not eliminate fear, the fear that makes life irritable and mean and sordid?" and Mr. Viner's blue eye had grown luminous, for this was his particular pigeon.

"Yes, and you will eliminate something else, my dear. Effort. Oh, yes you will, in spite of the shouting of slogans. Man must struggle, even for his dinner."

Mr. Viner chuckled and went upon his busy way, leaving Clive to wonder whether the people, like St. Paul, who suffered from some thorn in the flesh, were not more fierce and potent in combat and in endurance than those who were unprovoked by a creaking body. Though one should understand life and cherish compassion. As to his own urge, it was to forge out of the dark metal of his blindness a tool or a weapon. Rich in a material sense he would never be, but to occupy some individual niche in life, that was essential. Munda's secretary and good comrade, unjealous of her work and her success, a thing that the flippant might describe as a tame rabbit of a husband! Clive sat and turned his face to the September sun. Yes, the sun, giver of life to all the children of men. Did he desire to

be more than a woman's sedulous shadow? Yes, most certainly he did, and if he had some vision of the things a blind man might accomplish they were as yet a mere greyness in the east. He had more than a feeling that though life seemed to come to him through Munda, he himself might be a burning-glass focusing the rays upon other lives.

Taking the dog with him, he walked up to the knoll and sat down among the trees. It was very still here, yet he was conscious of a vastness of sea and sky. And how would poor Prince like London? And had Munda found her predestined house? She would be back for dinner with all the news.

What time was it? He felt his blind man's watch. Half-past eleven. He had promised old Will to do apple-gathering in the orchard, though he was not allowed up a ladder because the placing of a ladder was somewhat beyond him. He stood on a chair and groped for the apples that were within reach.

He made his way back to the house and into the orchard.

"Will, are you there?"

"I be, sir. Thought you had forgotten."

"Where's your tree, Will?"

"The Worcesters, sir, three of they, and easy to reach. Planted six years come Michaelmas. You won't need a chair, sir."

"Too easy, Will."

"Well, I wouldn't call it easy pickin' blindfold, but you're a better picker than my gal. She be that careless."

"I'm getting to know all there is about apple-picking, Will. Never drop an apple, pick into a pail. Baskets bruise their skins. From pail to tin bath. How's that?"

"A basket's always been good enough for me, sir."

"Have you got the pail?"

"Yes. Borrowed one of Jane's."

"Good enough. Put me by the tree."

Will, walking away to resume some job of his own, turned about to watch the blind man at work. Clive's hands were moving among the foliage of the tree. The pads of his fingers touched an apple ever so gently. There was the twist of a hand, and the apple lay in the palm. Will saw Mr. Clive put the fruit to his face and smell it, and the simple soul of Will was moved to marvel.

He wiped one of his own hands on the seat of his trousers, a characteristic gesture.

"Dang it, but sometimes you wouldn't think he was blind."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Mrs. Snade, coming to the blue gate of Knoll Farm, and remembering other occasions when she had found her sister's house shut up like some fortress, supposed that she might have to march round its defences to that other gate by the gardener's cottage where tradesmen and unexpected pilgrims were permitted to ring a summoning bell. Norah had taken a Southern bus to Fellbridge and walked from the village to save the price of a taxi. She was feeling both tired and out of temper, and putting her hand to the ring of the blue gate as though to test her sister's defences and to be able to say, "Locked as usual! How idiotic!" she found the gate unexpectedly yielding. It opened submissively to her hand.

Her sister's garden! To Norah, the sleek texture of it was as provocative as a fabric she had never been able to afford. She was not concerned with its beauty, but with the smooth richness it suggested to a woman who had lived in a little corner of organized gentility, with a jobbing gardener coming in once a week to polish so many square yards of horticultural front window. Norah had laboured aggressively at keeping up appearances.

Even the green velvet of those grass verges refreshed with September dew were not four-three a yard, and when you had children to be maintained in the struggle of keeping up appearances, the spreading of silk might seem a sin. Norah walked up to the house with the lip of her soul stuck out at Rosamund's garden. As a mother and a prospective and shabby widow she felt that she had every right to be bitter. All this money spent upon flowers, floral cushions and curtains! How many gardeners did Rosamund keep!

Norah was a woman with what her father had described as "a most outrageous temper." Her rage storms did not rise suddenly like a desert wind, but would gather and loom for days, and then burst with a perfectly irrational turbulence. In the nursery days she had terrified her younger sisters. Moreover, her temper had been under strain and simmering for weeks, and her sister's letter had exasperated Norah. She arrived at her sister's door tired and hot in the flesh and in the spirit. Had the door been a flaring red instead of a soft blue it would have been more in sympathy with Norah Snade's aura.

She rang the bell and Eliza came to answer it, an Eliza who was as strange to Mrs. Snade as Mrs. Snade was to Eliza.

"Is my sister in?"

Eliza stood uncompromisingly in the doorway, liking neither the visitor's abrupt voice nor her countenance.

"No, madam. Mrs. Strange is in London."

"Mrs. Strange?"

"Yes, madam. What name, please? Can I take a message?"

"My name is Snade. I have come to see Miss Gerard."

Eliza's face remained stolid. Snade! Jane had had things to say to her sister about Mrs. Snade, and candour in the kitchen can be elemental.

"I have told you, madam, my mistress is in London for the day."

"How very exasperating! I have just come down from London to see her."

"Mrs. Strange should be back soon after tea, madam."

Eliza was not easily moved and she still occluded the doorway, not because she proposed to keep Mrs. Snade on the doorstep, but rather because she was puzzled by the visitor referring to her mistress as Miss Gerard. Meanwhile, Mrs. Snade made a very definite and deliberate forward movement and Eliza stood back.

"I'll come in."

"Certainly, madam. Would you care to see Mr. Strange?"

"Who?"

"Mr. Strange, madam. I think he is in."

Norah had been so exasperated by her sister's absence from home that she had been strangely slow in appreciating this other and most astonishing change in Rosamund's state. Rosamund married! Well, really! And keeping that most significant piece of news from her sisters! And who was the mysterious person who had been persuaded to marry a woman like Rosamund?

"Most certainly I will see Mr. Strange."

She walked past Eliza into the hall, and turning towards the door which, as she knew, had been the door of Rosamund's drawing-room, she heard Eliza's voice restraining her.

"Not that room, madam."

"I know my way about this house."

"That is Mr. Strange's bedroom, madam."

Was it, indeed! How intriguing! Norah diverged towards the door of the dining-room, wondering why her sister's new and mysterious husband slept on the ground floor. Was he as decrepit as all that?

"You can tell Mr. Strange that I am here."

"Very well, madam."

Clive was at work in the orchard house, but Eliza took her problem to Jane in the kitchen.

"It's her sister."

"Which one?"

"Mrs. Snade."

"Her! What's she want?"

"She wants to see Mr. Clive."

Jane had her spectacles on; she had been reading the *Daily Mail*. She removed her spectacles and laid the paper aside on the kitchen table.

"Oh, does she! I don't know about that. She's never been here without making trouble."

"She looks like it," said Eliza.

Jane had what her mistress would have described as her cookery-book face. She resumed her spectacles, took them off again, got slowly out of her chair.

"Well, I suppose someone ought to tell him. I think I'll tell him, Liz. Where is he?"

"In the orchard house, I think."

Jane toddled off to the orchard. In this emergency there were quite a number of things she would like to have said to Mr. Clive on the character and proclivities of Mrs. Snade, for Jane felt protective towards Clive. She heard the clicking of that peculiar machine with which the blind wrote in shorthand. She saw his fair head bent attentively over the table.

"Oh, Mr. Clive."

"Hallo, Jane."

"We've got a visitor. Mrs. Snade. Perhaps you have heard of her."

"Mrs. Snade!"

"All the way from London, sir."

"I had better come, Jane. Does she want to see me?"

He was in his shirtsleeves. He pushed his chair back and rose, and felt for his coat which hung behind the door.

"Need you, sir?"

"What do you mean, Jane?"

"Eliza only told her she thought you were in. If I were you, sir, I wouldn't be in to her."

"Why, she's not infectious, Jane, is she?"

"Well, it's no real business of mine, sir, and yet it is. She always upsets the mistress. She's that sort of lady."

But Clive was getting into his coat.

"All the more reason for me to see her, Jane. Yes, I can manage. And thank you, Jane."

Eliza had left the passage door ajar, and was standing secreted behind it, and while there she heard the dining-room door open and footsteps cross the hall. It would appear that Mrs. Strange's sister was of a somewhat inquisitive nature, or was Mrs. Snade visiting the lavatory? Eliza listened attentively for the creaking of a particular floorboard that complained rather indiscreetly when someone passed that way. The board did not creak, and Eliza was moved to use her eyes as well as her ears. She was in time to see Mrs. Snade's solid shape emerging backwards from Mr. Clive's bedroom, and Mrs. Snade's hand carefully closing the door. Well, really! Had the lady doubted Eliza's word, and been tempted to look for herself into a gentleman's bedroom? Eliza pursed up her lips and withdrew behind her door.

Mrs. Snade was back in the dining-room and apparently consumed with curiosity and impatience. She understood now why the furniture had been altered, and the big bay window of the dining-room turned into a lounge. But why did Rosamund's husband sleep downstairs? The problem was rendered still more intriguing by Norah's discovery of the radio-gramophone with a record still on the wheel. Dance music! *Love in Bloom*. Tut-tut! How very grotesque! And how much had this luxury machine cost Rosamund? Fifty guineas or so wasted on a gramophone when thousands of people had not enough to eat!

Mrs. Snade was back on the sofa when Clive came over the grass, avoiding the loggia and its chairs, and following the grass verge. Norah was not aware of him till he had passed the window, and all she saw was the back of a very fair head, and both neck and head were incontestably young. So, her dear sister had married some boy! And how old was Rosamund? Thirty-five? Ridiculous! And then the dining-room door opened, and Norah saw Clive's face, a face in which there were no eyes.

For a moment she was shocked, but any subjective reaction she experienced was smothered by her swift and very conscious appreciation of this most significant fact. It was as though a blind had gone up with a bang, uncovering to Norah's eyes the crude meaning of her sister's marriage.

"Good afternoon. My name is Snade. I believe I am speaking to my sister's husband?"

She did not rise from the sofa, but continued to sit like a suspicious hen on a nest, watching some intruding stranger.

"I came down especially to see Rosamund. The maid tells me she will be back this evening."

Clive had closed the door. He stood there for some seconds as though listening to a voice that produced in him unpleasant and disturbing vibrations. He could not see this woman with the bitter voice, but he knew exactly where she was sitting. Her presence confused him. He was conscious of being appraised by the woman on the sofa.

"I am sorry Rosamund is out. She went up to town for the day. Is there anything I can do?"

There were points to be observed about Clive, and Norah was noting them, though she could and did misconstrue their meaning. Almost he had the air of a child who had been caught in the store cupboard. So thought Norah. No doubt he was shy of his wife's relations, after exploiting a rich and eccentric woman like Rosamund.

"No, thank you so much. My business is with my sister. Won't you sit down?"

She bounced up and moved a chair.

"Yes, here. Really, Rosamund should have told me. I did not know I had a brother-in-law."

His face, vague and somewhat hesitant, became sharp and attentive. He did not smile. Nor did he take the chair she had pushed forward, but one that his hand touched nearer the door. He was asking himself why the bitter voice had become glutinous and sweet.

"You didn't know?"

"Really, I must scold Rosamund. Do tell me about how it happened. We have always been rather worried about Rosamund living all by herself in this queer place. You see, my sister is rather—"

She saw the eyelids flicker, and his blind face take on a look of strain.

"Need we discuss my wife?"

"But, my dear Mr. Strange, I am her sister."

"Quite. Of course you realize that I am blind."

Norah was sitting up very straight on the sofa, her hands fidgeting with her bag. So he had snubbed her, had he? And just how long had he been blind?

"Of course. I'm not blind, Mr. Strange. Please don't misunderstand me. I have so much trouble of my own. But really, you must allow me to be human."

His face had become set, yet bright with an inward and cold illumination. He was beginning to divine the cat couchant in this invisible woman.

"You want to know how it happened?"

"But, of course, I do."

"I was an air pilot with The Blue Hawk Company. I happened to crash in a fog,

just over the hill there. Your sister took me in. I was not expected to live, but I did live, sightless, as you see."

He was aware of her making moist, sympathetic noises.

"How terrible. So dramatic! Forgive me, but it does seem so strange, marrying a woman you have never seen."

She looked at his face and was profoundly puzzled by its sudden smiling gaiety and by the thing he said.

"Oh, yes, I have seen my wife, Mrs. Snade."

She made a cod's mouth at him.

"Seen her? But how? Do you mean that you really can see a little?"

He was laughing.

"Yes, I can assure you, quite a lot. Rosamund couldn't be invisible to me, could she? She's so unlike most other women. But you don't want me to be sentimental, do you? It would be rather bête."

Norah's mouth still hung open.

"Oh, no, Mr. Strange, we won't be sentimental. Why, it is quite a romance. It almost makes me forget my own poor troubles."

"I'm so sorry."

He was standing and feeling his way towards a small table by the fireplace.

"I'm so sorry. I haven't offered you a cigarette. No? Now, what would you like to do? Just wait for Rosamund?"

"I don't think I want to walk all the way back to that village."

"Did you have to walk? Well, of course you must stay. Are you stopping at Westbourn?"

"For one night, yes. I can't afford more than one night. Besides, it's such a poky little hotel."

"I'm sorry. I will tell Eliza to bring you in tea. Now, would you mind awfully if I went back to my work? I'm rather full of work just at the moment."

She glanced at him sharply. Work! What possible work could he do?

"Oh, certainly. Please don't let me interfere."

"Would you like the radio? No? By the way the gramophone is rather tricky, and like some other things best left alone unless you understand it."

Now, what did he mean by that? He had reached the door and stood smiling.

"Then there's the garden. I'll tell them to give you tea in the loggia. Oh, something to read. You'll find the *Spectator* and *Punch* somewhere about here. Good-bye for a while. Rosamund should be back by six."

II

Before returning to the orchard house he found his way to the kitchen, after closing the passage door. He had words of wisdom for Jane. Would she take Mrs. Snade her tea in the loggia, and ask Eliza if she would mind bringing him some tea to the orchard house.

"If it is any trouble, don't bother."

"It is no trouble at all, sir," said the voice of Eliza.

Clive's fingers were feeling the small raised signs on the face of his blind man's watch. The time was five-and-twenty minutes to four, but he had reasons of his own for wishing to know that his watch was right.

"What's the kitchen clock say, Jane?"

The clock agreed with his watch. He knew to a minute when Munda's car was to be expected in the lane, and it was his intention to meet her in the lane and warn her. He heard Jane's voice close to him, asking if she should guide him back to the orchard, and if he did not need Jane's guidance, he believed that he could lean upon her loyalty.

"Yes, Jane, you might."

They had reached the orchard gate before he asked Jane that question.

"Jane, you have always been her very good friend. Tell me, has Mrs. Snade been here often?"

"No, sir, and when she has it's been for reasons of her own. I'm pretty sure of that."

"Reasons? You mean?"

"To get something out of the mistress. If you ask me, sir, she's one of the bullying, greedy sort."

"Thank you, Jane. That was my feeling. I am going to meet Mrs. Strange and let her know who is here."

"Very good, sir."

For in the exploring of each other's personalities the man without eyes had divined far more about Norah Snade than she had discovered about him. The quality of her voice, its crude and obvious changes of tone had revealed to him both her timbre and temperament. Almost he had been able to decipher her vulgar rendering of the romance. No doubt such a woman would see in him the exploiter of a situation, a parasite, who, fastening upon a woman's compassion, was living upon her bounty. It might be a cliché that mean minds assume mean motives, especially in young men who can be considered financially interested in a particular relationship,

but Mrs. Snade was herself a cliché. It had caused her no joy to find her rich sister unexpectedly and rather mysteriously married, and to a derelict boy. That perhaps was understandable.

A little later, Eliza, bringing Mrs. Snade her tea and having been prompted by Jane, was able to lie to the lady.

"What time do you expect your mistress back?"

"About half-past six, madam."

"Doesn't Mr. Strange take tea?"

"He is having his while he works, madam."

Mrs. Snade looked up brightly at Eliza as though about to ask her more questions, but Eliza, with a stolid and irresponsive face, turned her back on her and left Norah to her tea.

At half-past five Clive shut up the orchard house, and avoiding the garden and the front of the house and his sister-in-law's possible intervention, he made his way past Will's cottage and along the path to the lane. It had been a long day without Munda. The lane climbed the hill in a curve, and half-way down the hill a field gate hung in a grassy recess. Clive's deliberate conquest of his environment had included the lane and a mile or so of the Fellbridge road, for country roads and hedges demanded a different technique. He found the field gate and posted himself there.

Had Munda enjoyed any luck in her quest of a house? Though a London house was not the preoccupation of the moment. What a curious thing it was that some people who set out to arouse your pity only succeeded in provoking your prejudices. Bitter people. It was so much a sin against yourself to be bitter, even though a disillusioned proletariat might rush to acclaim a new world conceived in bitterness and blood. Was it that they had not suffered sufficiently, or too much? But that was Munda's car. He heard it slow down to take the sharp turn into the lane, and then accelerate to breast the hill.

She saw him standing there on the strip of grass, the sunlight shining on his fair head. The day's good news was on her lips. She pulled up by the gate.

"I've found our house, Clive."

"Have you? That's splendid. Chelsea?"

"Yes, in a funny quiet place called Marietta Terrace. Had a dull day? You must say you have."

She was opening the door for him when he broke the news to her.

"Your sister is here."

"Which one?"

"Norah."

He could not see her suddenly frightened face, but the way her voice changed moved him.

"Oh, my dear, how very boring! Has she been—?"

He slipped in beside her, but she did not touch her brake or gear-lever.

"I only saw her for about five minutes, Munda. Apparently I was something of a shock to her."

"Yes, she did not know."

"Obviously."

She laid a hand on his sleeve.

"Clive, I did not tell her because she is not the kind of a woman to whom one tells things. Why should one?"

Her agitation touched him.

"Yes, why? That's all right, dear. She strikes me as a woman in trouble and bitter about it. Look here, I'm not going to let you be worried."

"Thank you, Clive. But you are rather innocent as to Norah. What did she say to you?"

"Not much. I'm afraid I rather shut her up. I think she wanted to find out all about me."

"She would do. I wish she wasn't in such trouble, my dear. It somehow detracts from one's right to be candid."

"Why be candid? How can she hurt you, Munda? You had decided to help her."

She sat looking through the windscreen at the green hedges of the lane. Did she fear Norah's bitter tongue on her own account? Yes and no. Her chief fear was for him, for Norah, in one of her rages, had a devilish knack of saying the inevitable and cruel thing.

"My dear, you're too sweet-natured to understand a woman like Norah. If I help her, and of course I shall help her, she will hate me."

"But Munda!"

"Some people are like that. Didn't you know? The bitterly ambitious people, the people who love themselves so fiercely that to help them is a secret and fatal insult to their souls. And they want to hurt you, to get even with you by hurting you."

He put an arm round her.

"Yes, perhaps I did know that. But how is she going to hurt us? Isn't it up to us not to let her spill herself over our lives? My dear, it ought to be so easy. We just go in bravely and brightly, and are quite charming to her, and give her no chance to sting. Look here, leave the play-acting to me."

"To you?"

"Yes. We will give her no chance to be bitter. She shan't see either of us alone. And if you like you can write her a cheque."

She found his hand and held it.

"Don't leave me alone with her, Clive. I might say harsh things, and one should not say things, even to Norah, when life is being rather brutal to her."

III

Mrs. Snade, cherishing a temper that had not gathered sweetness from waiting upon its opportunity, heard their laughter as they came round the house into the garden. Clive, like that clever old scoundrel of a French sergeant in "Beau Geste," had said to Munda, "Laugh, laugh, let her hear us laughing." He had his arm round his wife and she an arm over his shoulder, and Norah, standing by the window, was presented with this sweet domestic picture.

Moreover, it would appear that she was not to be instantly remembered and attended to. If she was Caliban, Clive could be Ariel. He swept his wife across the lawn and down to the Italian gate, and there they stood like lovers, looking at some sunset, heads together, laughing and sharing intimate and happy chatter.

Norah plumped back upon the sofa. Her sister with a lover! Most certainly love was blind, and in this case absolutely so. And were they laughing at her? How dared the world laugh when she was feeling bitter! Their voices were coming towards the house, and she heard Clive say: "It all sounds so naughty and Victorian. The Victorians were the really naughty people. We're so undressed and disillusioned." Now, what did he mean by that? For Norah had begun to suspect this blind young man of being other than he seemed, an uncomfortable and impertinent young man who made fun of you without your being able to say just when and how he was doing it.

"Norah!"

Mrs. Snade stood to receive them. If her sister's face was not the face of Rosamund, but somehow strangely new and virginal, so was her sister's handling of the situation. She came forward with bright eyes and a kind of jocund tenderness and kissed Mrs. Snade.

"Why didn't you let me know, dear?"

Norah's face was like a pale egg.

"I thought it wasn't necessary. You never went anywhere."

"No? Well, I could have met you in town."

Clive, hovering there with an innocent and gay face, had something to say on

that.

"Yes, but in that case Mrs. Snade and I wouldn't have met. What about a little sherry, Munda? Of course, Norah is staying to dinner."

They were particularly charming to her, especially so Clive, entangling Norah in such a net of silk that the stocky, broad-hipped ominous animal in her was provided with no opportunity to use its hoofs. She was given sherry by Clive, who appeared capable of handling a decanter and glasses in spite of his blindness. He was able to joke about it. "If I have given you only half a glass, we can repeat it. I can't very well feel with my finger." He sat and made conversation while his wife went to take off her hat and to warn Jane that Mrs. Snade was staying for dinner. Norah was wanting to follow her sister upstairs, but Clive's charm hemmed her in.

"Munda has been house-hunting. We are thinking of spending the winter in town. Do have some more sherry."

She had more sherry and a cigarette. She allowed herself to say that it was very nice for Rosamund to be able to afford two houses. Also she was wondering whether her sister's husband had money of his own. She had finished her second glass of sherry when they heard Rosamund's voice on the stairs.

"Norah, would you like to come up and wash?"

Here was Norah's opportunity, but in proposing to employ it she found herself in the presence of a woman who was so much the mistress of herself and her humanity that sackcloth was transmuted into silk.

"Norah, I'm so very sorry about poor Herbert. Where is he? I want to help, my dear."

"In the Middlesex Hospital."

"Can't they do anything?"

"Nothing."

"How tragic for you."

All the accumulated angers and exasperations of the day dissolved into sudden tempestuous tears. Rosamund was shocked. She could not remember seeing her eldest sister in tears. Nor was Norah silent in her weeping. She was bitter even in emotion, like some strong and selfish child that fights and struggles and resists even the hands of compassion.

"My dear, come in and sit down. One can do so little, but one does want to help."

"I don't want your help," gulped Norah.

"Oh, but you must let me help. You see, dear, life is being rather kind to me, and I have not always been kind."

"You have never known real trouble."

"No, perhaps not, in that way."

"Please let me alone."

"Of course, dear. Just stay here quietly for a while."

In the old days at home she had discovered that Norah's rage storms had had to be suffered. The soft answer did not turn away wrath, but stimulated it, and Rosamund divined in her sister's emotion a surge of rage and bitter self-love. She left Norah to her tears, and going to her working room sat down at her desk and took her cheque book from a drawer. She was conscious of the crudity of this gesture and yet the act was applicable to Norah's case. She wrote her sister a cheque for fifty pounds, scribbled a kind message on a sheet of paper and slipped paper and cheque into an envelope. Something in her felt soothed and spiritualized. Poor Norah, so like an angry, storming child. She sat for some minutes looking at the autumn garden in the evening sunlight. Her day had been so good, only to end in this clash of discords.

Presently she rose and, returning to her bedroom, found Norah dabbing her face with powder. There was an intractable jerkiness in her sister's movements.

"Norah, I want you to accept this, just for the present emergencies."

Norah's shoulders were stubborn.

"I don't want your beastly money."

"My dear, for your man's sake. I'm not asking you to accept a favour. As I said before, life is being rather kind to me."

"Oh, all right. Put it on the table."

"Come down to us when you feel like it. Where are you staying?"

"At the Aberdeen at Westbourn."

"Let me send for your things?"

"Please don't bother. I think I would rather go back there. I have to catch an early train."

"Just as you please, dear. I'll ring up for a taxi from Westbourn. About nine. You must stay for dinner."

Once more she left her sister alone and went down to find Clive sitting in the loggia.

"Come and sit down, Munda."

"Oh, my dear, so much emotion!"

He reached for her hand.

"Have you—?"

"Yes. She did not want to take it."

“Forgive me, but she’ll take it. Tell me about the house, Munda. Tell me everything you have done.”

In the room above, Norah had torn open the envelope and pulled out her sister’s cheque.

“Fifty pounds. She might have made it a hundred.”

As for the kind words that Rosamund had scribbled they were to Norah like drops of molten metal falling upon an inflamed surface.

She hated Rosamund.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

She remembered him saying to her, "Yes, it smells of autumn to-day. Will leaves blow about like this in Battersea Park?" It was the last autumn day in their Sussex home, for No. 43 Marietta Terrace was dressed and ready. It had been great fun furnishing the little house. They had stayed for a week at the Granchester, and to Clive it had been a seven days' journey into new country. He had been frightened of the hotel and its labyrinthine life, only to discover in this dark house of Minos how kind the world could be to him.

A south-west wind blew up Ashbourn Glen. He had said to her, "Let's walk on this last day," and the great cleft in the hillside was a torrent of autumn leaves. They drifted down from the high trees between the walls of sandstone, and lay in yellow reefs that rushed suddenly hither and thither. The sea was dimly blue beyond the great grassy throat of the glen. Overhead, clouds came and went. The path was in deep shadow, the tree-tops tumbling in the wind and the sun.

They sat on a wooden seat, and on the trunk of a beech tree lovers had cut their names. The eternal passion for self-expression. But there were no lovers here to-day, and the deck-chairs at Westbourn had gone to their winter rest. The beach huts were shut up, and no one bathed in the sea. The leaves scuffled about their feet, and to Clive there was a mystery in all this movement, the swaying tree-tops, the running water, the laughter of the leaves.

"We're lucky people, Munda."

She looked at him with dear attention. How platitudinous and yet how true it was that serenity is a personal essence.

"Tears, idle tears."

He bent down to touch the leaves. Why tears, and why idle? Did dead leaves weep? But the drift of her voice came to him out of a crevice of sadness.

"Sorry to be going?"

"Oh, no, my dear. I was just seeing something, something I can't forget."

"May I know?"

"The poor little face of a man who is dying."

During the week in town she had visited Norah's husband in the Middlesex Hospital, and she could not forget that starved, yellow, frightened little face. He had made a whispering noise at her, like one of these dry, rustling, yellow leaves.

"Good of you to come, Rosamund. Yes, I'm done for. Comes of too much smoking, too much smoking."

This one small vice might have exercised itself as a protest against the turbulent spirit of his wife. He had spoken to her of Norah and the children with a kind of faded resignation. He had assured her that he was not afraid of dying, but Rosamund had suspected that he was afraid of Norah.

"It's making her bitter, you know. I have failed just when the children wanted me. It's hard on Norah."

She had assured him that she would help, and his eyes had looked at her like the eyes of a grateful little dog.

"I hear you are married, Rosamund."

"Yes."

"I hope you will be happy."

To her the inference had been obvious. Pain and sleeplessness and slow starvation had made him eager to depart from a life in which he had played the part of the patient ass, the professional beast of burden.

"Are they kind to you here, Herbert?"

"Couldn't be kinder; wonderful people. You see, it won't be long now. I'm glad."

Ashbourn Glen might seem far from such humiliations and such horrors with its autumn splendour and the plash of its cascades. She could say to Clive that so much of life appeared to be a mere biological experiment, and that man's urge to control his environment was like ejecting noisy hecklers from a political meeting. She had brought away with her from poor little Snade profound compassion and one disturbing piece of news. Norah was living in rooms in Marchmont Street, and Marchmont Street was not a mile from Marietta Terrace. She did not tell Clive this. She was very determined that his blind world should not be invaded by Norah.

But why should she fear Norah? Was it the aftermath of those childish years when she had suffered from the superabundance of her sister's rank and turbulent ego? Why fear? Why was some particle of fear always suspended in the fluid of her consciousness? Was it her heritage, the inevitable progeny of years of suppression? You buried one fear in the morning, and by sunset another had taken its place.

She had so many fears which she attempted to dispel with a shrug of her soul's shoulders.

Would this blind comradeship endure?

Would the new world into which she was leading him infect him with its restlessness and its hurrying discontents?

The peril of the streets, the daily death roll!

She was dreading that literary dinner and the speech she would be expected to make.

How absurd it all was, and yet how real.

Clive was stirring up a little pond of dead leaves with his stick.

"It's going to be great fun, Munda."

"What, dear?"

"Marietta Terrace. I have a feeling that it is going to open up new things."

"What things, dear?"

"Oh, things outside oneself. I may be shut up in a sort of dark box, but I'm getting outside it. Would you mind, Munda, if I took on one or two things on my own?"

"Mind? My dear! Tell me."

"You know I might be able to help other blind people. Then there is the Westminster Library. They have voluntary workers who transcribe books into Braille. It seems to me that the one thing one shouldn't do in life is to get shut up inside oneself."

Her mouth and eyes were poignant. Well had Margaret said that he was a child blessed with sweet sanity.

"I should love you to do it, Clive."

"It won't interfere with our work together."

"No, dear."

A leaf fluttered down and settled most strangely like a little tongue of fire upon his head.

"Clive, tell me, are you ever afraid?"

"Afraid? I used to be. No, I don't think I am now. Yes, just one thing of course."

"And that?"

He turned his head and smiled at her.

"Losing you. That ought to be pretty obvious."

"My dear, I understand that on my side. I'm such a craven creature at times. Probably it's because I lived too much inside myself. One creates one's own gallery of ghosts. That's why you are so good for me."

"Ghosts! I'll keep them off with my stick! I suppose I'm a rather simple sort of ass."

"No, my dear. I think you were born wise."

Their entering into possession of No. 43 Marietta Terrace was marked by an incident that was not without humour. They had come in by daylight, and she, presuming that the interior of the house might still be strange to Clive, was proposing to deliver a peripatetic lecture upon its features, only to find that he knew it as well as she did.

"I'll show you, Munda, after tea."

Eliza brought their tea into a drawing-room that was suggestively modern, for Mrs. Strange had renounced Queen Anne and Louis Quinze in appreciating the efficiency of modern furniture. The square and well-padded chairs sat down on the floor like ducks on water, nor was there too much of anything in the rather small room.

"Is your place all right, Eliza?"

"Quite, madam."

Clive was in a gay mood, and with a pipe smoked and the lights on he offered to show Munda the house. There was a playfulness in the adventure that piqued her. "Now then, you mustn't prompt." He took her to the top of the house and into her working room, and opening the door walked straight to her desk. He sat down in her chair, and with an upward smile at her seemed to challenge applause.

"Let's sit and listen for adventitious noises. You ought to be working, you know."

She was laughing.

"Noises don't matter like they did."

"I don't think you will hear my machine up here. Muffled fingers."

But on this first evening in the new home a fuse in the fuse-box elected to burn itself out, leaving the whole of the lower part of the house in darkness. Eliza came hurrying up the stairs with the news. "The lights have gone, madam." To Jane, who was insisting upon cooking her first dinner, this sudden darkness was a provocation and an insult.

"Have we any candles, Eliza?"

There was not a candle or a lamp in the house, and the shops would be shut. It was Clive who diagnosed a faulty fuse. If they would lead him to the fuse-box he could make the damage good.

"But we haven't any fuse-wire."

He was on the stairs.

"Well, I'll ask next door. They may be wise virgins."

Nothing would satisfy him but that Munda should lead him to the door of No. 42. He would do the asking, and it so happened that the tenant of 42 was one of those resourceful Foresights who keep a supply of fuse-wire and tap washers and

spare globes about the house. He was able and willing to accommodate Clive, and Clive returned to No. 43 like the capable and consoling male, and fitted a new fuse.

"We must have our dinner, Jane."

"You are clever with your fingers, sir."

"Well, that's that, Jane. All bright and merry, are they, like your savouries?"

Also, there was no need of an Ariadne thread to guide him to his wife's room. He had only to cross the landing. He stood and knocked. "Can I come in, Munda?" She cherished the delicate courtesies of sex, even though her mate was blind and could not surprise her attending to her face.

"Come in."

He was wearing a blue and gold silk dressing-gown she had given him, and though her ritual was not complete he could not see what she was doing.

"Do I look nice, Munda?"

She felt tender to him over a charming, childlike vanity such as this.

"It's your colour, Clive."

"That sounds rather feminine."

He sat down on her bed, and she could see his reflection in her mirror beside and beyond a face that had ceased to fill her with fear. Even if Norah were to tell him in her gross way—Had Norah told him, or tried to tell him? Oh, very probably.

"Funny people, the Victorians."

"Yes, my dear."

"So very intimate in the wrong way. And so stuffy and solemn about it. One's toothbrush should be private."

She smiled at herself in her mirror.

"Wasn't it because the Victorians were supposed to have no secrets? A nice woman was not expected to powder her face. And my lord could snore as he pleased."

"Horrid idea! But as for secrets! Did a double bed produce such complete candour?"

"I think not. Only rather superfluous children."

"Yes, the child idea! I remember reading Ibsen's 'Ghosts.' Those nice Victorian double-bedded homes must have been full of slimy spectres. We have improved our mental hygiene, Munda."

She had come to understand his passion for physical cleanliness. His care of his hands and his body was not efficiency, but the fastidious self-discipline of a blind man who dreaded an easy slovenliness. The cult was an outward sign of grace.

Presently she was telling him about her exploration of their environment. It would

be quite simple for him to reach Battersea Park, much more facile than the speech she was trying to produce for the Minerva Club dinner.

"You are not worrying about that, Munda, are you?"

"Horribly."

"But you have only to talk as you write."

"All the difference in the world, my dear."

"Yes, in a way. But why on earth should you be shy of any collection of women? You don't swank enough to yourself."

"Need one swank?"

"Yes, but Munda, if one wants to be liked, which one does, there are heaps of people who want to like one."

"Think so?"

"Of course. Minerva must have been a rather unpleasant goddess. But all you have to do is to go there feeling friendly. Yes, and good friends with yourself. I wish I could make a speech for you, but I'm not Douglas Gerard."

And then he laughed, and she had to hold him to ransom for his laughter.

"Confess."

"Oh, rather naughty and silly, Munda. Being here, in bed, with Douglas Gerard! So very improper!"

III

London is not supposed to be interested in its neighbours, and the new tenants of No. 43 Marietta Terrace were just people who had arrived from somewhere, but the old lady who lived in No. 41, and who, because her legs had failed her, sat at her window and used her eyes the more, did observe this somewhat singular couple set out on their first walk. A witty person who inhabited No. 47 had christened the old lady of No. 41 "The Chelsea Buddha," for she sat in her little shrine full-faced and full-figured, bland and benign, with a smile like melted butter. Sometimes she used a pair of opera glasses upon passers-by, and she used them upon Rosamund Strange and her husband.

Miss Stukeley was interested. Here were two unusual and intriguing figures for her gallery, a young man who was blind, and a woman who looked ten years older than her companion, and whose left cheek bore that most unhappy blemish. Who were they and what were they? The young man was a study in grey and blue, the woman in black, but very exquisitely so. Miss Stukeley, bending forward benignly in her chair, watched the couple turn into Phryne Street.

Ten minutes later, when her faithful Kenward came in to see whether her mistress needed attention, Miss Stukeley, with her two hands clasping her Oriental tummy, let it be known that she was human.

"Yes, Kenward, I do."

"Is it a hot-water bottle, madam?"

"No, Kenward, nothing so obvious. I want you to find out who the new people are at forty-three."

"Very good, madam. I'll inquire from the baker. I believe he is calling there."

Rosamund had paused where Marietta Terrace ended in Phryne Street. "You cross here, Clive. Let's count the steps. About six. Then there are railings."

She put him next the railings and he tapped the iron bars with his white stick. A short walk brought them by a left turn into Oakley Street, and Oakley Street ended in Cheyne Walk and the turmoil of the Embankment traffic. She was very careful to explain everything to him here, the pillar-box and the plane tree on the edge of the pavement, the traffic lights, the island, and the two streams of traffic.

"Yes, I know the place, Munda. The Albert Bridge is right opposite us."

"This is your only crossing, but it is a bad one. You must never risk it alone."

"Isn't that rather challenging?"

"My dear, I don't want to sit at home worrying. If I am not with you, you must ask someone to show you across."

The lights were in their favour, and she shepherded him over to the far pavement and on to the bridge. From this point his progress would be easy, for he would have the parapet to guide him. They crossed the bridge, Clive counting the number of steps he took. "Now we are over," and again she paused.

"There is a little kiosk here on your left. Feel it."

"Yes."

"Now, just a little turn to your left and you will find wooden railings."

"Yes, I've got them."

A few paces farther on a pedestrians' gate opened into a path leading to the park.

"There is a slight slope down."

"Yes."

"And now iron railings on each side. Follow those on your left." She made him count his steps, and again she paused.

"One hundred and twenty-three."

"Now, you are close to a tree. We are just coming into the park, and there is a broad space here with the river on your left. Touch this tree. That's right. There are

four trees along the embankment here, with about twenty-three paces between them. After that it is plain sailing."

He was smiling.

"Four trees, three spaces of twenty-three paces, roughly seventy yards. You are thorough, Munda. I know where we are now. A great promenade, the river, plane trees, seats. It feels good."

She led him on.

"Now, we are by the last tree. Just on your right, and a little beyond the tree there is a seat."

"Yes, I have sat on that seat. It used to be a rather popular perch."

"It happens to be empty."

"Let's sit."

It was one of those spacious, autumn days of gold and blue. The pale leaves of the planes were falling. A tug drawing a string of barges up the river, disappeared under the leaping bridge. Over yonder were more trees, and the pleasant and faded stateliness of old houses. Splashes of sunlight, splashes of shadow; masses of white cloud moving across a sky that was very blue. A light wind in the trees, and the river crumpled silver. Children's voices. In the distance the rolling, muffled drums of the traffic.

He could remember a season not very long ago when he had sat on this very seat with a pretty, vapid young thing whose eyes had been as luscious and no more intelligent than a pair of purple grapes. For a week or so he had imagined himself in love with her sensuous surface, until her extreme stupidity and her refined brightness had bored him. To nearly everything he had said she had replied, "Really, how marvellous!" and on the eighth evening he had said good-bye to her empty and lovely little face. Some women were like the vanity-bags they carried, all brocade or coloured beads, with three pennies and a flapjack inside.

He did not speak of this incident to Munda. The confession would have had no significance and the seat no history. Its significance had begun upon this autumn day when his inward eyes could see the river and the sky and the houses, and when he could feel this other woman beside him, this woman whom he would never see in the flesh. How strange it all was, and that she should be so vivid and actual to him, and so much more precious in her veiled self than any woman whom his eyes had seen. But had not his dark world steeped itself in other mysteries, strange spiritual glimpses and illuminations, sounds, scents, the imminence of invisible presences? His blindness was making him a mystic. Having lost one sense he seemed to be developing some super-sensuous and intuitive intelligence. His inward life was realizing a richness that

would have seemed impossible six months ago.

"The blind can see, Munda."

She understood, both his words and the serenity of his face.

"Just as I see in my books. Yes, I suppose it must be much the same. Illumination. Can you feel things, Clive, almost as though you saw them?"

"Yes. I utter the words to myself, and the inward sounds seem to take shape. Sky, water, trees, you."

"So it's good to be here?"

"Very good."

"That makes me happy."

IV

No more unexpected a person than Norah Snade discovered them on this seat. Norah was out for exercise, a woman who was responsible for no house, and whose husband was in hospital and her children at school. Norah was finding it difficult to spend her energy. Rosamund had looked up Marchmont Street on the map, but she had been careful not to give Norah her London address. Hence, when Norah, passing under the plane trees and diverging towards the path leading to the side gate, recognized the couple sitting on the seat, she was conscious of having scored off Rosamund.

Their backs were towards her, and they were sitting shoulder to shoulder like a couple of lovers. The absurdity of the thing! Norah's inward self emitted one of those splurges of braying laughter, but with sudden carefulness she withdrew, and sitting down on another seat observed the pair.

Norah had not failed to register the significance of Rosamund's lack of candour in not revealing to her her London address. This despised sister, becoming strangely celebrated, had also ceased from celibacy, and Norah could be as jealous as Jehovah. Did Rosamund's young husband know that he had married a woman whom no man with eyes had desired? Norah was feeling ironical and bitter. Yes, she would shadow this ridiculous and amorous pair, with the shabby red brick gentility of Marchmont Street hanging round her like a cloak. Rosamund had not yet troubled to make contact with Marchmont Street. Rosamund sublimated her duties into the writing of cheques.

Follow them she did, back over the Albert Bridge, and up Oakley Street to Marietta Terrace. Clive walked with a hand linked to his wife's arm. They had the air of being happily absorbed in each other. Norah loitered to watch them enter the gate

of No. 43. She was sufficiently near to see Rosamund take a latch-key from her bag and open the door.

"So she keeps the key."

And yet another unpleasant simile suggested itself to Mrs. Snade. A blind man and his dog, but the dog was a lady!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Margaret Hayle, who dined with them once a week, might have described her friend's case in the terms of the new psychology, though whether Margaret would have given the apple to Freud or to Adler or Jung might have provided a problem in temperamental selection. Rosamund was in the midst of a renaissance of a sensitive self-confidence. She was becoming what she had never been, save in her prose, a woman who was daring to be friends with herself.

She took her blemished face and her reassured soul out into the world, and without any visible falterings or self-conscious flickering of the eyes, she could enter a shop, or a restaurant or a dance room like a woman who was so sure of her person and her clothes that she could forget them. Sometimes her serenity might be wilful, and her awareness of all those human lenses almost photographic, but nearness, actual or divined, of her blind husband, made her capable of walking without trembling through her old gallery of ghosts.

For she and Clive attracted attention. They appeared in public as a rather remarkable pair, unusual and challenging; he, tall and very fair, and she, almost as tall and brilliantly dark. Infinitely careful of her clothes, she had become capable of carrying them, and Clive was the kind of man to whom some inspired tailor might have knelt, but not to a divine dummy in a window.

People asked questions.

"Who are the couple over there?"

"You mean the blind man and the woman in black?"

"Yes. Notice her face?"

The woman might say, "What bad luck!" and then realize the significance of those sightless eyes, and smile.

"There may be advantages in having a blind husband."

"Think so?"

"He can't see you crumbling, and he can't see other women."

"Not much sign of crumbling in your case, Mavis."

"Thank you. But I take trouble."

A cartoonist was to sketch them for one of the magazines under the tide of "Douglas Gerard and Husband," showing them linked together in a characteristic pose, the female figure dominant and protective. They entered a restaurant or the

foyer of a theatre in just such a way, but though this particular artist was not kind to Rosamund, he failed either to gauge or to express the significance of the male. He drew Clive as a species of slim accessory attached to his celebrated wife, whereas in the secret nature of things Clive was the supporter of the shield. Guided he might be through a world of tables, but to his wife this linkage was a talisman that gave her courage.

On the evening of the Minerva Club dinner she sat in front of her mirror and confronted both her face and the occasion. She was feeling wretchedly nervous and frightened. She had given three days to the preparing of her speech, and in private she was word perfect. But those other faces, those critical and expectant people! What if she had stage-fright and "dried up"? The Minerva audience had the reputation of being the most critical in London. It had scared eminent males into making naïve fools of themselves. She had been so tempted to funk the ordeal, to go to bed and protest that she had influenza. It would be so easy to wire her desperate regrets. But something pushed her towards a confrontation of her crisis. Crisis? Yes, in a way it was, a compelling of her shirking and sensitive self towards the publicity that she had dreaded.

And her wretched face! She considered the reflection in the mirror. Should she try to blot out that blemish? Or mitigate it? Idiot! No, she would brave it out, suffer those other women to infer why Douglas Gerard had chosen to live like a recluse. And did it matter? Those who were worth while would understand. And Clive was so innocently keen for her to go.

Why?

Was he somehow wiser than she knew, and gently impelling her towards human contacts that were good and wholesome? Perhaps? Or might it not be that his sweet sanity was unconsciously serving as a stimulus to her soul? Not with the priggish protest: "You ought to see things, Munda. Good for your work." She knew that she could not have suffered the sententious husband, even in Clive. The subconscious urge should be adequate.

She heard him crossing the landing. He knocked at her door. "Can I come in, Munda?"

"Come in."

He made her think of a lad in his first dress suit.

"Do I look all right, Munda?"

"Yes, dear."

"Hair sitting down properly?"

"Quite."

She had a button-hole on her dressing-table.

"I've got you a white carnation."

"The symbol of complete innocence. Will you fix it for me?"

She rose and slipped the silver-papered stalk into his buttonhole.

"That's lovely."

"You sound like that, Munda."

"Do I?"

"Not feeling nervous?"

"Terribly."

"Oh, you'll have them at your feet."

"Or on my toes!"

"I don't think so."

Eliza was heard on the stairs, for the old stairs of No. 43 Marietta Terrace were vocal with all manner of creaks and crackings. Clive had made a jest of it. You couldn't be surreptitious in No. 43, and Eliza had come to say that the hired Daimler was waiting.

"Tell him we shall be down in three minutes, Eliza."

"Very good, madam."

London had had a day of fog, but after sunset the air had cleared, and in its strange cold brilliancy every light had sharpness and sparkle. The city's constellations blotted out the stars. She sat holding her husband's hand, and under her fur coat her self felt cold and disquieted. Please God she would not make a dreadful fool of herself! Her ego sat shivering and on edge until in a traffic block she saw against the glare of a facia of lights strung across the front of some building her husband's blind face. Emotion that was selfless and compassionate stirred in her. He could not see all this interplay of light and shadow, the great city's spangled cloak.

Clive was conscious of the pressure of her fingers.

"I'm all right now."

"Of course you will be. Do you know what Margaret said about you?"

"Margaret is merciful."

"That you have never postured. That's rather rare."

II

Peradventure, like an inspired child, he had spoken words of wisdom, and if in the world of accomplishment women are more magnanimous than men, the Minerva Club was less formidable than its name. The helmeted goddess was no mistress of

the literary owl. The cheap and trite things that generations of men have said about women were in this case invalid, nor was Douglas Gerard to be the guest of a mere coterie of scribblers. They might represent all the ologies, and yet they had nothing to forgive her, save perhaps her choice of a male pseudonym. Nor, in her hypersensitive humility, did she appreciate how subtly human reputations are assembled, and how the indefinable flavour of rightness arrives like some delicate perfume. She had been accepted as one who was sincere by women who put that virtue to the ordeal of fire. She was to stand before these other women as one who had never given bribes, or truckled, or run perspiring in pursuit of publicity. Unphotographed, unadvertised, save by her works, the pure craftswoman, she had practised no professional bribery, lunched and dined no editors and critics, broadcast no signed copies of her books, nor seized every possible occasion for getting upon a platform or into print. She had neither flattered in order to be praised, nor sat in judgment on her literary rivals. In the somewhat jealous world of the scribblers she was a creature apart.

The Minerva Club lived in two Georgian houses in Hanover Street, and the architect who had joined them in holy matrimony had contrived to preserve their individualities. A club servant conducted Mr. and Mrs. Strange up the stairs to where two members of the committee were waiting on the landing outside the door of the reception room. Neither of them knew their principal guest by sight, but rumour had gone thus far in allowing the world to know that Miss Gerard had married a blind man, and when these two ladies saw Clive's blind face, the inference was obvious.

"Mr. and Mrs. Strange, madam."

They were friendly and comfortable women, those two, nor was it necessary to stress the subtle implications of a disfigured face.

"We are so very glad you could come."

"May I introduce my husband?"

"Shall we introduce ourselves?"

Through the anteroom doorway Rosamund Strange could see the people with whom she had come to dine. She was conscious of a spasm of absurd terror. She wanted to escape. Her mouth felt dry, her legs like brittle sticks. Why had she consented to come, to expose her silly hypersensitive self to all these strangers? She had lost contact with Clive. He was standing there with a little vague and uneasy smile on his face as though divining her panic mood.

"Oughtn't we to go in, Munda?"

"Yes, dear."

The two committee women exchanged glances. Said one of them: "May I be

responsible for your husband?" and with a smile at Miss Gerard's stricken face she slipped a hand under Clive's arm. It was so gently and delicately done that Miss Gerard was moved to sudden, secret emotion. Her moment of palsy passed. She found herself inside the anteroom shaking hands with the hostess of the evening, a little, grey-haired, freckled woman with peculiarly bright blue eyes, Miss Rhoda Gordon, whose work in Palestine on primitive man had set the experts arguing. Miss Gordon was a most informal person, and so frankly and intelligently kind that the occasion somehow lost its publicity.

"I have always wanted to meet you."

Miss Gerard blushed.

"Thank you so much."

Other people were interested in the guest of the evening. If Miss Gerard had been an enigma, that expressive face of hers explained so much to a room that was not a mere museum of anatomy. There were women present who understood instantly the half-veiled fear upon this other woman's face, and were immediately her friends. Comprehension and compassion. Miss Gerard wore upon her face a little badge of courage. She was smiling now into Miss Gordon's very kind eyes.

"May I introduce my husband, Clive."

Miss Gordon's hand went out to the tentative hand of Clive. His grip was warm and firm.

"So glad to see you here."

Clive's smile had lost its vagueness.

A voice was announcing another guest: "Lady Banstead," and Mrs. Strange moved forward into the crowded room. It was a pattern of faces, but they were friendly faces. Other women moved to meet her. The duality of the occasion intrigued them, the human and suggestive linkage between those two, and Miss Gerard felt herself in contact with a sensitive and kindly crowd. Said someone: "I hope you won't find your evening with us, Miss Gerard, a pilgrimage of pain." She laughed. She was being talked to, and was talking back to people whom she felt she knew. Clive, standing beside her in silence and listening to the many voices, was reassured and touched.

Miss Gerard heard his voice break in.

"My wife's much too modest a person. I'm always telling her that she ought to visualize her public as I do."

Women looked at him kindly.

"How unusual in husbands, Mr. Strange."

"Please don't tease me on that subject or I shall make a speech."

"Would you speak as one in authority?"

"As the official secretary and advertising agent!"

"Does Miss Gerard need publicity?"

Clive laughed.

"Who was it asked me that? No, of course she doesn't. Have you ever lunched a critic, Munda? No, I will swear she hasn't."

Said one of the group about them: "Be careful, Mr. Strange, I happen to be a critic."

Clive turned quickly and smilingly towards the voice.

"May I ask you to lunch?"

"You may, but not as a literary person!"

Very few of them knew that this was Miss Gerard's first public dinner. She had asked to be allowed to have her husband next her at the table, for, as she had explained gently to Miss Gordon, he sometimes needed help with his food, though she did not confess that on this particular evening it was she who needed sustaining. Miss Gordon had spoken to the club secretary, and two cards were transposed at the high table. Clive went in on his wife's arm.

"No need to feel on a platform, Munda. We are not just up for show."

She pressed his arm.

"What are the voices like to you?"

"Good music, Munda."

She found herself looking at all those other tables arranged at right angles to the one at which she sat. There was no possible escape for her now, and again she was in danger of becoming the victim of fear and mental confusion. Would she find herself standing up to speak and unable to formulate an idea or to utter a word? Horrible prospect, with Clive sitting there and sharing her shame! Most devoutly did she wish that she had refused the invitation. She had declined sherry, but would accept champagne. Anything for courage. She was trying to talk intelligently to Miss Gordon on the Piltdown skull and the shading of Lavallois into Le Moustier. Where was her little piece of paper with the notes of her speech? Clive had it. Her husband was making an attempt to talk to his neighbour, and in listening to his voice she realized that Clive was not happy. Who was the woman next him? She peered and saw a portentous profile, blonde hair plastered over a bald forehead, a pug of a nose, a double chin, pale blue eyes that bulged between somewhat swollen lids. Saxe blue and diamonds!

Mrs. Strange appealed to Miss Gordon.

"Please tell me, who is next my husband?"

"Don't you know?"

"I'm very innocent."

"Lady Banstead."

When Lady Banstead's name was mentioned the world of affairs was apt to exclaim: "Oh, that woman!" Miss Gordon did not attempt to explain why the committee of the Minerva Club had invited Lady Banstead. Such things, for various social and financial reasons, had to happen, and Lady Banstead possessed the power of the deplorably rich.

Clive, planked up against this turgid and sultry lady, was feeling very unhappy. He had had trouble with his food, an elusive oyster that had slithered off his fork and remained on the table until rescued by Munda. Lady Banstead was making him afraid both of his voice and his champagne glass. She had one of those voices that gargle with hauteur. Incidentally a professor of economics was providing Clive with periods of peace, and he blessed this unseen friend who was causing Lady Banstead to wonder whether the economist had been placed beside her wilfully. A banker, yes, a banker would have been right and adequate, but this fellow who kept talking about Dialectic Materialism. What was Dialectic Materialism anyway?

She turned upon Clive.

"And what do you do in the world?"

Almost she had said, "Young man," and Clive reacted.

"Oh, I'm just a husband. I propose to type my wife's books."

"Is that so! You don't spill ink yourself?"

"Only as a secretary."

Lady Banstead surveyed the room and its suggestions of studied hostility.

"I am afraid I have not read any of your wife's books."

Clive smiled at her, but she was not looking at him.

"What a pity. They are rather good, you know."

Playfulness! Or was it irony? Lady Banstead snubbed him.

"I have so many serious things to think of. The world allows me so little leisure."

Meanwhile, the business of dining was over, and Miss Gordon was standing to make her speech and to introduce the guest of the evening. Munda had whispered to him, "My notes, Clive." He divined in her acute anguish. So sensitive was the nexus that joined him to her that he was distressed by her nervousness. He wanted to help her. He put out a tentative hand and touched her arm.

She turned quickly, almost irritably, and he withdrew his hand, somehow conscious of having touched her at the wrong moment. She did not need that kind of stimulus. Had it distracted and broken her concentration? Oh, silly ass! And then the

thing happened. In a moment of tremor and confusion he put out his hand for his glass and jolted it. The glass was two-thirds full. It toppled over and, as though sharing the mischievous propensities of the professor, shot its contents nicely into Lady Banstead's lap.

Clive heard a sound of sharp and sibilant protest, a sucking in of the breath.

"I'm most awfully sorry. Has it touched your dress?"

His smothered apologies went unanswered. Lady Banstead was busy with a napkin, and the absurd suspicion that all this was part of a conspiracy. Had she observed the room's secret and delighted smile? But Rosamund had seen Clive's face, and her protective compassion was in arms, causing her to forget her own self-consciousness.

Miss Gordon was making an abrupt end. She had been unreasonably affected by the spilling of Clive's champagne. She had wanted to laugh, and such crude behaviour would have been unpardonable. How incredibly small and silly even the great could be! Miss Gordon proposed the health of the club's guests, coupling with it the name of Miss Douglas Gerard.

Clive, still hot and distressed, and not appreciating Lady Banstead's eminence, was profoundly concerned about her frock. He had made an ass of himself at the very moment when Munda was facing her crisis. Could he offer the lady with the turgid voice a new frock, or suggest that he should pay for the cleaning? Did champagne leave a serious stain? But that preposterous suggestion was never made to one of the world's most wealthy women. He heard a voice calling upon the guest of the evening.

"Miss Douglas Gerard."

Clive sat blind and still. Had that piece of clumsiness spoilt the evening for them both? He heard much clapping of hands, and felt his wife rise to her feet. His own knees were trembling. The short pause seemed to lengthen itself until he began to wonder whether she would be paralysed and mute. He wanted to touch her. Quite suddenly her voice came out of the darkness with an easy, cool clarity that caused him a strange thrill. Miss Gerard began her speech and in a little while Lady Banstead and the spilt champagne subsided into his subconscious. He was listening to a woman of the world speaking with wit and grace to her fellow-women. There was no hesitation, no fumbling, no apologetic pleading. She spoke smoothly, playfully, with delicate, ironic pauses, a woman who could smile at her audience, and transcend her shrinking self. There began to be little freshets of laughter and applause. Her humour was swift, scintillant and strangely sure. She told a tale against herself, and capped it by telling a tale against a certain pretentious and self-appointed

censor of other people's efforts. "I have been called the parlour-maid's novelist. May I say that, without posing, I would prefer the apron of the parlour-maid to the trousers of the bishop's butler!" Clive sat holding a crumpled napkin, but when he realized how exquisitely the thing was being done, his tense fingers relaxed. He could surrender with these others to a woman's wit, even though that woman was his wife.

Miss Gerard spoke for some twenty minutes amid laughter and applause. This was indeed the Douglas Gerard of her books, a poignant, mysterious and scintillant creature, a denizen of the deep woods, but no Minerva's owl. People forgot the blemish upon her face, or accepted it as a singular and expressive characteristic. And not a few divined her courage and saluted it and the rare temper of her self-control.

She sat down. Clive heard the faint crepusculations of her dress, and a deep sigh. Her ordeal was over, and then the applause came. Clive was clapping with the rest of the room, his back turned towards Lady Banstead.

"Splendid, Munda. It was as good as a bit of your books."

She sat faintly smiling, a little confused by the applause.

"Oh, my dear, give me a cigarette."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Punctually at half-past nine a.m. No. 43 Marietta Terrace would become as noiseless as a clock whose pendulum had ceased from swinging.

"Work, Munda. On with the book!"

She understood that for both of them, and especially for him, work was a form of self-discipline, like the care of his chin and finger-nails, but sometimes she would laugh and protest that he was becoming a literary tyrant.

"The day may come when you will drive me upstairs, Clive! Inspiration cannot be whipped."

"But I want to hear more about Barbara and her boarding-house."

"What if I am feeling whimsical?"

"I can be that, too."

His playfulness seemed to cut into the consciousness of her craft and make of it a thing that had become more complex and difficult. She had so many critics to confound—herself, the subconscious urge that moved her, and the tension of secret fear. Life was so vivid to her at the moment that almost it refused to travel in the vehicle of words. She was conscious of being wilful in her work, of hacking too studiously at the marble of her theme. Was the work good or bad? She was not sure. Were those people right who asserted that marriage, and especially happy marriage, blurred the inspiration of a woman's creative work? She had been a somewhat unhappy creature when she had written "A Pilgrimage of Pain." Now, life seemed good to her, and surely the good in life could be creative?

Her very happiness had tensions of its own. She was living two lives instead of one, and the other life had become so near and intimate that she was like a mother to it. Or, she might have described it as a vigorous young child that had found the use of its legs, and was always escaping to pavements and adventure.

"Mustn't live in cotton-wool, Munda."

She knew that he was right, and that she would be a fool to try and tie this life to her desk, or to fuss over it too flagrantly. His insistence upon life as an adventure, and his wilfulness in taking risks were not to be denied him. The only impatience he had ever shown was when she had tried to persuade him not to go out alone and dare the hazards of the streets.

"But I must, Munda."

He was ready to argue the case with her on fundamental lines. Man was always creating new perils for himself, and the modern peril was the menace of the machine. Man and his mechanisms slew on the road and in the air, and she was appealing to him not to potter along pavements!

"I must take risks, Munda. Just because I am blind I can't funk things."

She suffered him to take them.

She refused to allow herself to be the fussy and possessive fool, but the restraint she imposed upon herself clashed with her concentration as a craftswoman. Clive was making a habit of going out while she worked, and of coming back about eleven to his own work or to his lessons with the little teacher from Hampstead who had taken Mr. Viner's place. There were moments when she regretted bringing him to London. Sitting at her desk she would hear the front door close, and she would get up and go to the window and watch him disappear into Phryne Street. She knew that he was on his way to Battersea Park, and always she feared that crossing by the Albert Bridge.

The suspense she suffered distracted her until she hit upon the obvious expedient of shadowing him past the danger point and into safety. She kept a hat and coat by her, and would follow him out and down Oakley Street to the Embankment. Almost always he would find someone to shepherd him across, or to assure him that the traffic lights were in his favour. Then, when she had watched him safely on the bridge she would return to recover her inspiration.

Of course there were other and obvious solutions. She could send one of the maids with him as far as the bridge, or even hire an intelligent small boy to guide him. She made the suggestion.

"Let Eliza see you as far as the bridge."

But he would have none of it.

"I'm not a reckless idiot, Munda."

"Let me go. It would not take five minutes."

"I'm not going to cut in on your work."

She did not confess that she would find the work more easy were she spared this anxiety, and in the end she did the only thing that would give her peace of mind. She followed him, and remained near him like some protective presence until she was assured of his safety. There were mornings when she went as far as the park and shadowed him until he reached the great open space beside the river. She knew that he was safe there, and returning, she would find her mood relaxed and reassured, and ready for its inspiration.

"Eleven o'clock by the first seat, Clive."

It was her custom to meet him there when her morning's work was done. The winter was mild, and when he had walked up and down beside the river for an hour he would feel his way to that particular seat and wait for her. His white stick had become sensitive, like one of an insect's antennæ. He would recognize her footsteps, and instantly he would know by her voice whether the day's work had been happy.

"You can read me some more to-night."

That was yet another urge and a poignant challenge. Not only had she to satisfy herself, but also this blind listener who was so strangely jealous for her work, and not of it.

II

Cynical people, observing this shadow play, might have inferred that the woman with the disfigured face shadowed the blind man for other reasons.

Norah Snade was of that persuasion. A restless and bitter woman, walking the restless and bitter streets while waiting for her little husband to pass over, she happened to witness one winter morning her sister's shadowing of her blind husband. The lure was too strong for Norah. Rosamund had not seen her sister, and Norah, following those two figures across the Albert Bridge, observed this interplay and misread its meaning.

So, Rosamund was jealous! Silly fool! But Norah could assume that a woman like Rosamund would be fatuously silly about a man. Was Rosamund suspecting her young husband of philandering with young wenches on the seats in the park? Rosamund might be very clever and write wonderful novels, but it was obvious that she knew nothing about the managing of men. Mrs. Snade was one of those women whose attitude toward the male was that of a dictatorial mother to an unregenerate small boy. Also, in dealing with the creature it was sometimes necessary to exercise maternal cunning.

The ostensible silliness of her sister provoked Mrs. Snade to further investigations. She had time to spare, and vulgar energy to spend while poor little Herbert procrastinated, and if the impulse to blame and to lecture were strong in her, here was her opportunity. Mrs. Snade's motives, like most motives, were composed in the mass of personal prejudice. She liked to feel superior to other people, and especially so to this sister who had been so impertinently and unexpectedly successful.

She watched this shadow-show for some mornings before arranging to confront Mrs. Strange in the path leading from the park to the bridgehead. Norah was not

subtle in her methods. She blurted things out. Rosamund was turning back after shepherding her unsuspecting husband into the park when she was confronted by Norah, a Norah who was to function as the candid friend.

"Don't you think it is rather unwise, Rose?"

Rather unwise! What did Norah mean? So innocent was Rosamund of any thought of spying upon Clive that she could only suppose that Norah was suggesting that it was unsafe for a blind man to wander as he pleased.

"It's quite safe for him here, Norah."

"My dear, I wasn't meaning that."

Norah's jug of a chin seemed to be brimming with a kind of unction. Rosamund knew that particular expression. It associated itself with the smug halo of the elder sister, and with innuendoes that were so thinly disguised that the very fig-leaf could be an offence.

"I don't think I understand."

She shrank from discussing Clive in any way with Norah. She was determined not to be inveigled into one of those verbal dogfights from which a woman like Norah would always emerge with the éclat of a lady who has flung a dishclout.

"I don't think I understand you. Let us leave it at that."

But Norah was not leaving any such interesting exhibit unlabelled.

"One shouldn't follow a man about."

"Follow?"

"What would the inference be, my dear, if he were to find out? Most unwise of you."

Still, Mrs. Strange's innocence held.

"I don't understand you."

"My dear, you ought to know that a man doesn't like being shadowed."

They were half-way across the bridge, and Mrs. Strange came to a sudden pause as though some unpleasant object lay on the footpath. She gave one glance at her sister.

"Norah!"

"Well, my dear, I do know a little more about life than you seem to do. You may write very clever books, but—"

Mrs. Strange turned from her, and with her hands resting on the iron rail, she stood looking down the river.

"You are suggesting that I am jealous?"

"Well, Rose, under the circumstances—"

What a disgusting mind the woman had! Mrs. Strange stood there above the

water, feeling the breeze on a face that had flushed in sympathy with her inward anger. How utterly nauseating!

"Norah."

"Yes, my dear. But do please understand—"

"Understand!"

She was trembling. How often had Norah reduced her to inarticulate tremors and a feeling of shameful inadequacy! And then, suddenly, she laughed.

"Norah, you really are too funny! That explanation had not occurred to me. But then, you see, Clive and I do not live on that particular plane."

She withdrew her hands from the rail, and looked at Norah with an air of whimsical compassion.

"Shall we go on? I have my work to do. You need not worry, Norah, about my innocence."

How was it that Norah's face suggested a rubber hot-water bottle that had been emptied of its contents? Did crude similes suit crude people? Her secret anger was sublimated into an almost virginal gaiety. Poor Norah! Fancy having to go through life in such emotional tatters, a kind of psychological rag-bag!

"I just like to make sure that he gets safely into the park. Are you crossing here? No, I'm afraid I can't ask you into Marietta Terrace. Work, my dear. By the way, I am going to see Herbert to-morrow."

They parted at the bridge-end, and Mrs. Strange took with her to No. 43 Marietta Terrace a recollection of her sister's face looking thwarted and sullen. Poor Norah, how in her bitterness she did long to hurt people. She had no conception of life as an art, and part of the artistry of life lay in the transcending of people like Norah.

III

But she could say to herself "Don't clutch," which is the rarest wisdom in a woman, and in realizing its ripeness she knew herself to be mature. Yet, how strangely slow could be this process of growing up, and of growing out in those finer serenities and compassions with which one should make contact with humanity. So many people never grow up. Poor Norah had never grown up, but had remained in the crude pettiness and emotional petulance of the half-frocked stage.

Was she jealous of Clive, Clive who was teaching her so much? Was she not grateful to him for his serene sanity, a sensitive wisdom that was sightless, and yet had inward eyes? It was Clive who, when poor little Herbert died, suggested that

they should be partly responsible for the educating of Norah's children.

He was making friends of his own, unexpected friends, odd people whom he picked up in the park. Apparently they were attracted by his blind face, and came and sat by him and talked. There was a supreme naturalness about Clive, a happy simplicity that put simple people at their ease.

She met him one morning walking with a red-headed young man in grey flannel trousers, a purple pullover and no collar. The red-headed young man strolled with a kind of jocund swagger.

"Here's your lady, old lad."

She was introduced to the red-headed young man.

"Munda, this is Mr. Jack Bowker."

Mr. Bowker smiled at her and said, "Pleased to meet you," and after a few moments of bright and desultory conversation, he went off to see a bloke about a dog.

In spite of inward interrogations she had liked Mr. Bowker. She had liked his shrewd eyes, and his hard-bitten, whimsical face. Would Clive explain Mr. Bowker to her? He did. They had met when Mr. Bowker had strolled up one morning and put Clive right when he had gone somewhat astray.

"He's so real, Munda, if a bit tough."

What did Mr. Bowker do in the world?

"O, he has boxed a bit as a pro, and shoved a barrow, and sold newspapers. Just at the moment he's scouting for a bookie. Copy for you, Munda."

She laughed.

"Are you scouting for copy?"

"If you like! But it's life."

He was supremely serious. He contended that his loss of sight had provoked in him other curiosities. "It might have reduced me to a mere creature of appetites, but it hasn't. Thanks to you. Pinch me if I am talking like a prig." He went on to explain that his curiosity had somehow become social, that it desired to make human contacts and to explore the lives of others. As a man with eyes he had accepted so much of life without questioning it, but now that he was blind he was asking life questions like a child.

"I seem to have more time to listen to people, and to think about things. I used to wonder what one was going to do with one's life, but now I can foresee all sorts of possibilities. You won't mind, Munda, if part of my life is my own?"

She pressed his arm.

"Teach me, Clive."

"Teach you!"

"Yes. I have been so shut up inside myself. Let's explore together."

"Of course. Isn't it strange how little we know about how other people live? Shut up in one's own little glass cabinet. Even Jack has shown me things that made me ashamed. The essential kindness of the human animal."

She was to be astonished to find into what queer places Clive's new curiosity would penetrate. She was afraid of crowds and of strange people, and prone to think them sinister, but that was ignorance, and a kind of cowardice. Clive could say to her, "Jack can show me things, the things that a toff is not supposed to know. I've been with him into pubs and slums and doss-houses and queer clubs, and along the Embankment at night. And one can learn a lot outside a Labour Exchange."

She knew that someone had called for him and that he had been going out at night, but she had asked no questions.

"Do these people talk to you?"

"They wouldn't at first, but now they will. I put on an old suit, you know, and somehow my blindness seems to break down barriers. Yes, what they think and try to say, especially the fellows who are out of work. You know, Munda, there is nothing more damnable than having nothing useful to do, and to feel that you are on the scrap-heap through no fault of your own. It does move one to want to help."

She was conscious of feeling profoundly touched.

"I understand, dear. And how—?"

"Oh, one seems to help a bit just by listening. It seems to help people to talk. Why don't you come with me, sometimes, Munda?"

"Wouldn't they be shy of me?"

"Of you? Nonsense."

"They might."

"Well, try."

And so, it came about that she and Clive explored some of life's queer places together, and a new compassion penetrated into the dark corners of her secret self. She could meet Jack Bowker and say to him, "I'm trusting Clive to you," and see his lean hard face light up.

"That's all right, lady. He might go anywhere, like 'Teddy,' and not a soul would lay a finger on his blessed head."

IV

The Stranges were dining and dancing at "The Mortimer." They did not

subscribe to the modern superstition for late dining, for it was pleasanter for Clive when the dance floor was not too crowded. Rosamund had phoned for a table to be reserved, nor was this their first evening at "The Mortimer," and the *maître d'hôtel* knew them. He happened to have a brother who was blind, an Italian soldier, and Luigi kept for them what he would have described as an easy table.

It happened while they were having cocktails in the lounge. The little Italian waiter who had served them, a delicate pale creature, returned, and with a little deprecating bow, presented two autograph books on a salver. Would madam sign them? One book was his, the other a friend's. He had a pen at her service, and Miss Gerard autographed the books, on a pink page and a green one.

"Thank you, madame. I hope you excuse?"

She smiled up at his small, gentle face.

"Thank you for asking me."

Said Clive, "Well, I call that fame! Pretty good for an Italian."

It was a happy evening, and for an hour the dance floor was almost wholly theirs. Then, people began to arrive, and to a particular table crowded a loudly smart party, which included a fat man with a peculiarly pink and complacent face. He had porcine eyes set very close together, eyes that observed the room with a kind of shimmering insolence.

"Hallo, peoples, copy!"

His business in life was to make other humans look cleverly grotesque on paper. He signed his cartoons with a flourish, and chuckled over them with his tow-headed little wife.

"How's that, Pip? Got 'em."

On such a public occasion he was out for prey, and in ten seconds he had discovered Douglas Gerard and Husband. A menu card and a pencil served for the sketch. It portrayed a tall, lean, predaceous woman dancing with a little male figure attached to her like a homunculus.

"Douglas Gerard and Husband."

He passed it round the table, and sat with a smirk on his face.

"How's that?"

The cartoon was damned clever, cruelly clever, and it produced little splurges of appreciation, but that was not the end of the story. *Frivolity* was issuing a series of such contemporary impertinences. The cartoon of Douglas Gerard and Husband appeared in a subsequent number of this fashionable journal, and the world could observe a popular lady novelist dancing with a little pet monkey of a husband dangling from her bosom.

V

Norah Snade had joined a women's club in Blenheim Crescent. Incidentally, her entrance-fee and the first year's subscription had been paid for her by Rosamund. Norah, as a widow, and with her children at school, was seeking some outlet for her energy, and an income that would enable her to rent a small flat to which the children could come during the holidays. Norah was using her club considerably, and attempting to exploit any possible member who might be able to provide her with useful introductions.

Norah was one of the first people to see that cartoon in a club copy of *Frivolity*, and Norah assumed indignation, though her indignation was not completely selfless. How disgraceful! Really, some people were the limit! The thing was an insult! And how would poor Rosamund feel about this venomous piece of ridicule? Douglas Gerard and Husband!

Norah's psychology was peculiarly primitive. She could delude herself with indignation, and allow the emotion to spill over into by-products that were more pleasant and personal. Had not Rosamund snubbed her severely, and laughed, and accused her of not understanding the subtler shades of life? Norah was perpetually offended. Her sister's cheque offended her. Charity! Patronage! And Norah, as a woman, was convinced that her fat fingers could pluck the strings of life with complete cunning. She knew all about men, all about children, wives and mothers and husbands. She liked to begin a conversation with "My dear, let me tell you—"

Norah made a nice little parcel of her exultant indignation and carried it into Battersea Park. No doubt she would be able to find Clive there. She did find him there. Her voice surprised Rosamund's husband as he was walking back to the seat near the Albert Bridge. The sound of it seemed to strike his face like something thrown against a window.

"Good morning, Clive."

Norah! And addressing him as Clive! He was one of those exceptional men who had been born wise as to women, and though Norah was invisible in the flesh, he knew her type with all its stocky, thick-legged bumptiousness.

"Hallo, that you, Mrs. Snade?"

His friendliness was other than it seemed, and Norah turned and walked with him. His sweet innocence asked questions. How were the children, particularly Walter?

"Walter is so interested in you."

"Good taste on Walter's part, what? But perhaps the interest is mutual. I get my

exercise in this way, you know, while Munda is working."

"Another book!"

"Yes, and I think it's her best. I am betting her that it will sell a hundred thousand copies, and make all the bright young men gnash their teeth."

"I'm so glad. Of course we are all frightfully proud of her."

Norah could suppose that she was playing the cat-and-mouse game very delicately, and that Clive would not suspect her of being feline. Besides, was it not her duty to warn Clive?

She said, "Clive, there is something on my mind. I don't know whether you have found out how sensitive poor Rosamund is?"

Yes, he did understand her sensitiveness. But why poor? The ears of Clive's intuition were pricked.

"Something confidential, Norah?"

"Well, yes."

They were nearing Clive's particular seat.

"I think we are rather near my perch. What is the trouble?"

"O, that disgusting thing in that magazine, *Frivolity*."

"What sort of thing?"

"A cartoon."

"Oh, a cartoon! Celebrities have to suffer such things. If you can't write books like Munda, you sneer at her."

Norah looked at him with momentary suspicion.

"Do you know if she has seen it?"

"I don't think she has."

"I'm so glad. But I thought I ought to warn you, Clive."

"Most thoughtful of you, Norah. But, tell me—"

"I think this is your seat. Shall we sit?"

She caught hold of his arm rather like a bossy nurse, and pushed him in the proper direction.

"Just here. That's right. No one else here. As I said, Clive, Rosamund is so terribly sensitive."

"Yes."

"She wasn't quite like other children. She was a problem to us all. I am so afraid that beastly caricature may upset her. Of course, it was frightfully clever, but so cruel. And they might have left out that birth-mark."

Clive's face was a mask of serenity. In listening to that suborning voice exuding false sympathy he was somehow wise as to the ambuscade Norah was laying for

him. The east wind was more kind and clean.

"Did they do that? Rather unnecessary."

"Yes, quite caddish."

"The competitive world seems to be rather full of cads, Norah."

"And you too, Clive, were in it."

"Was I included?"

"Yes, such an insult."

He made himself laugh.

"Shouldn't have thought I was sufficiently important. That's what happens to a man who marries a celebrity. But I don't think you need worry. You see, Norah, Munda and I have a life of our own which nothing can touch."

Did she realize her frustration? Could she shrug her shoulders and say that if Clive felt like that about it she might be wasting her sisterly indignation?

"Well, I thought you ought to know."

"Thanks, Norah. But, as I said, Munda is such a wonderful person that this sort of thing does not make any difference to me. But I will try and keep that damned magazine away from her. Well, that's that. Tell me more about young Walter. What does he want to do in the world?"

Norah was looking congealed.

"He wants to write books."

"Like his aunt! Good for Walter. We can give him all the introductions he'll want, if—"

"I don't think I want my son to be a scribbler. So effeminate. But, really, do you think it is safe to sit long in this east wind?"

Clive apologized for not having thought of the east wind. No, he did not feel the cold, and if Norah would excuse him, he would wait here for Munda. Yes, this seat was the focal point of a perpetual assignation! A woman like Rosamund could help a blind man to find life rather wonderful.

Norah stood up on her thick legs. She was conscious of having been frustrated, but she did find consolation in accusing Clive of being a poor, pusillanimous thing who could not be prodded into male furies when his woman was insulted.

"I think I must be going, Clive. I'm trying to find a little flat, something not too expensive—"

His blind face smiled at her.

"Good hunting. Please don't worry about Munda, Norah. Yes, good-bye."

She went, leaving Clive to that stimulating east wind and his reflections upon family affection. What a bitch of a woman! But he was less concerned with Norah

than he was about the cartoon in *Frivolity*. Had Munda seen it, and shut her lips and not suffered him to suspect that she had been hurt? And why? That he might not be hurt? Or had the thing been so venomous? He must find out more about this cartoon. Possibly Margaret had seen it, and Margaret was not like Norah, planning to rub your soul raw, while assuming sisterly indignation.

VI

He had come in a taxi, and Margaret sat him down by her fire. She liked being primitive in the matter of a coal fire, perhaps as a protest against the too complete eugenist in herself.

"Munda doesn't know I have come. I don't want her to know."

There was buttered toast for tea, and she had arranged a little table close to him so that he would not have to juggle with cup and saucer.

"Thanks, Margaret. I want to ask you something. Have you seen anything about Munda in a rag called *Frivolity*?"

"Yes, my dear, I have."

"Tell me about it."

"Is it necessary? And, by the way, how—?"

She was watching his blind face.

"Yes, our dear friend Mrs. Snade splurged to me about it in the park."

"Norah."

"She was so afraid that Munda would be hurt—"

"And hoping that she would be! I am sorry, Clive, but I cannot be impartial about Norah."

"O, just raw meat. But I want you to tell me."

"Need I? After all, it was only a smart cad's idea of being clever at someone else's expense."

"I want to know, Margaret. Was it very beastly?"

"Yes, my dear, it was."

"Tell me."

"Has Munda seen it?"

"I don't think so. Rags like *Frivolity* don't enter much into her world."

"Well, why bother?"

"Dear Norah might tell her. I won't have her hurt, Margaret. She's too fine for that sort of thing."

Margaret was sitting on a cushion by the fire, and she was silent for a moment.

She said, “So-called friends, my dear, who help to rub in poison are rather pestilent people. Also, these petty vulgarities are for the cheaply clever, and they reach the dustbin in five minutes, and are forgotten. I shouldn’t worry, Clive. Have some more toast.”

“What a healing person you are.”

“It’s my profession.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

But Rosamund Strange saw the cartoon. Some kind friend posted a copy of *Frivolity* to her, with the name and address hand-printed on the wrapper so that its source of origin should remain concealed.

"Douglas Gerard and Husband."

She was shocked by the vile and smirking insinuations of the thing. How very beastly! Was this how the smart world saw her relationship with Clive, that of a haggard highbrow dragging about with her a little, tame, male attachment? She was deeply wounded, humiliated. She could not say as Margaret had said to herself, "I'd have a clever cad like that whipped." This might be life as the smart world understood it, legitimate fun-making or sick-making, but in Rosamund Strange it produced a profound disgust. Thank God, Clive was blind and could not see himself caricatured! She put *Frivolity* on the fire, and while watching it burn, she drew other prides and consolations about her.

Would she ever finish the book which she was writing? Did she want to finish it? This sort of experience made one rather sick of being a scribbler and a so-called celebrity. You paraded like a literary mannequin, or were stuck in a window for the public pleasure. A March sunset stood at her window, flecks of flame in an absolute blueness, roofs and chimneys growing black. She went to the window as though some other and exquisite revelation was being vouchsafed to her. The Spring, Sussex, flaming gorse, a blackbird singing, daffodils blowing in the wind. Dear God, was she not woman, not the poor creature of that cartoon, a mere contemporary she-clown, news, a provocation to the little, bitter people who remained obscure and unsuccessful?

The street bell rang, and she was not aware of it. Clive was out somewhere on one of his explorations. Footsteps came apologetically up the stairs. She heard a deprecating knock, and the voice of Jane.

"So sorry to trouble you, madam."

"What is it, Jane?"

"A young man to see Mr. Strange. He says it is rather important."

"What name, Jane?"

"Bowker, madam."

She went down to find Mr. Jack Bowker standing with his back to a window, a

somewhat self-conscious cap in one hand, a brown leather wallet in the other. His face expressed a kind of whimsical fierceness. His chin seemed to stick out as though daring the world to hit it.

"I've got it back, lady."

She looked from his face to the thing in his hand.

"My husband's pocket-book. I didn't know he had lost it."

"Yes, a bloke pinched it off him the other night dahn at our club."

"He didn't tell me."

"'E wouldn't. That's 'is way. All he said was, 'I expect the fellow needs it more than I do.'"

"And you got it back. How clever of you!"

Mr. Bowker jerked his cap. It could be a conversational cap, and capable of expressing scorn, indignation, humour. He laid the wallet on the table.

"Someone gave me the straight tip, and the chap who pinched it got a sock on the jaw. But I wouldn't 'ave 'ad it 'appen, not for fish and chips. Would you mind counting the money, lady?"

She smiled at Mr. Bowker. She knew that she was utterly ignorant of the Bowker world and of its morals and values and sentiments or lack of them, but her feeling about it was that the Bowker world would not have smeared its cleverness with poison for the sake of kudos and of cash.

"I don't think there is any need. My husband is rather careless about money."

"He told me, lady, that he thought there was two pound ten in it. That's what's in it now."

She reached for a silver cigarette box, opened it, and held it out to Jack Bowker.

"Thank you, lady. I don't mind if I do."

"You see, Clive has such faith in people."

"I've got you, lady. You'll excuse me. I tell you I was mad. I socked that blighter into the middle of next week."

He lit a cigarette, put on his cap with a flourish, and as quickly removed it.

"Sorry, lady. You'll excuse me. You tell him that our crowd will make up the difference if there is anything short in the cash."

She went to the door with Mr. Bowker, and gave him her hand.

"Please don't worry about the money. My husband values other things so much more than money."

His sharp eyes flashed at her.

"God's truth, 'e does! That's what gets a chap like me. Makes one marvel.

There ain't much of that sort of thing in this ruddy old world, lady. You'll excuse me. And thank you. Good night, lady."

II

Could she say that this naïve incident had restored her faith in human nature? But that would be to treat Jack Bowker as a sentimental figure, and she was not feeling sentimental. Other and profound urges seemed to be swelling in her. She had been sitting on so many seats listening to the voices of shabby people, and finding herself astonished that a blind man should have discovered this underworld which could not be described as sentimental. She could remember one woman saying, "I have the bleeding piles, and I haven't got anything else to do but sit. How do I afford to keep clean? I don't." Douglas Gerard could say that she had written one book that was utterly evidential, because this particular book had grown out of her own psyche, but the new world which she was exploring with her blind mate dared her to interpret it in a language that was more physiological.

She was sitting by the fire in the dusk when Clive came in. As she put the recovered pocket-book into his hands she said, "There is a pride in some of these people which pleases me. And he used such a lovely phrase, Clive. He said he would not have had it happen for fish and chips."

Clive knelt down by her and spread his hands to the fire.

"Life does warm one, Munda. Some of these chaps make me feel that the money idea is all wrong."

"Do you know how much there was in the wallet?"

"Two pounds ten, I think."

"Count it."

"Need I?"

"Yes. It's evidential."

"You do it."

He passed her the wallet, and bending down to the fire she examined the contents and found them correct.

"Shall we say O.K., Clive?"

"No, don't. It isn't you. But this touches me. Almost, it seems part of something that has just happened."

"What sort of thing?"

"Will you be shocked? It may sound so damned selfish and primitive. Besides, it is so much more your affair than mine."

"How?"

He moved closer, and leaning against her, said, "Put your arm round me, Munda." She put her right arm over his shoulders, and wondered. What was this primitive thing which was floating on the waters of his consciousness? He was silent for a little while, his face to the fire.

"There seems to be something in the life of the common people, Munda—"

"A reality?"

"Common people! How middle-class! Yes, the reality may be rather terrible at times, but it is there. They are the soil. But I'm funking things."

"What is it you want to tell me?"

He let his left arm rest upon her knees.

"Is life quite complete? I don't know what a woman—you—feels about these things. It isn't that you and I are not complete together, but—"

And suddenly she guessed his meaning. How strange that this elemental thing should come to the surface just when she was revolting from mere artifice! Douglas Gerard and Husband! The highbrow hag! Something in her had rebelled against that beastly gibe. She would be woman.

"I think I should like to have a child."

His head turned quickly. She felt the pressure of his arm upon her knees.

"Munda, how did you—?"

"O, just feeling what you feel."

"You mean, you do want—?"

"Yes."

"In spite of your work and everything?"

"That might seem quite small and sterile."

"O, no, not that. Larger than ever. But, I did funk—"

"For me? Well, if the whole world consisted of sterile celibates! But, my dear, what more can a woman give, if her comrade—? I mean, it's so adequate—"

"I don't want it unless you want it."

"Strange, my dear, but somehow I do. Not sentimentally or because I can say, 'I'll give my man his child.' I didn't understand before that there is a sort of primitive justification in all this. Most women are so bumptious about their children. I understand now why. It must seem so much more important than giving birth to a book."

III

So, while this other life was being moulded in her, flesh of her flesh, and blood of her blood, her half-finished book hung fire. She found herself reading, dreaming, and reflecting instead of writing, and when she read, the book was not a novel. The thing which was being created within her seemed so much more important than any novel.

Clive might say, "Not writing, Munda," and she would answer, "Not feeling like it, just now."

He was troubled.

"What have I done?"

She could laugh and reassure him.

"This conception is not a fake."

Yes, fake. She did not confess it to him, though she did confess it to herself that the craft of the scribbler had become somewhat repulsive to her. Fiction! Fake! This Ouida business! Puffs in the papers, the whole, venal scramble for notoriety and sales. Read what Mr. So and So says about So and So. Recommended by the Book Society. Suborning critics. Mr. Blank's New Great Novel. Superb. Magnificent. The Book of the Year. Though she had shrunk from the competitive scramble and the pomposities and insincerities of this competitive world, she had not been without her reactions to it, and now, with this other life within her, she was conscious of sensitive nausea. She asked herself whether she had expressed anything that was of any fundamental value. How few books were utterly inevitable, perhaps half a score in the course of a century. This business of living upon books! There was something indecent and false and futile about it, unless some furious urge in you cried out to be expressed. How many authors were justified by that urge?

She remembered a lad writing to her. He had been taking a literary course with certain people who proposed to teach their aspirants how to write novels and short stories. The lad had been told to read every short story in a dozen different magazines, and to analyse and codify them, and to attempt to copy them.

In his letter to her he had said, "I should like to tell you that I am going back to doctoring. When I see a magazine or a novel, I feel I want to take an emetic. Please don't take this yelp personally. Your work is so different."

Different! But, was it? Just playing with words, hiding behind words. Her scribbling had been conceived in cowardice. She had been afraid of life, too craven and hypersensitive to express it by living it, and she had locked herself away in a little world of words, dreaming, faking, fooling herself and others.

She could smile over the revulsion.

Was she in revolt against word-faking, because this new life was so very real and evidential in her?

She was not going to funk this mother-business.

Nor did she think that she would wish to attempt to put so sacred a thing on paper.

Clive was not a little troubled about this substituting of one creative process for another. Munda might have fooled him by pretending to be at work, but she would have had nothing to read to him. As a teller of stories she had become mute. Clive felt so responsible for this muteness that he secretly consulted Margaret Hayle.

"I wish you would have a talk to her about it. Or do you think it is only a phase?"

What an unjealous creature he was, a husband who worried about a wife's professional future!

"Oh, just a mood, Clive, I expect. Some of us have whimsies, at this time."

Margaret did not think she would discuss the matter unless Munda mentioned it, but Rosamund did confess to her friend that the words of the unco-wise seemed to be applicable to her case.

"When a woman becomes physiological does she cease to be cerebral?"

Margaret laughed.

"I give you nine months or a year. When one urge has satisfied itself, the other will recur."

"I don't know that I want it to. I might preach."

"My dear!"

"And when a teller of stories gets into the pulpit—"

"You won't."

"I am not so sure. I have come to feel that this fiction business is a fake, and such a solemn and pretentious fake in some cases."

"What do you want to be, sociological or philosophical?"

"I think, at present, I want to be woman. So far as finance goes we have enough to live on."

Margaret had a point to score.

"There's Clive to be considered. You can't put your secretary out of a job. And he doesn't regard you quite as a faker."

"Must I go on writing to satisfy my secretary?"

"And, let us say, millions of readers. I'm really serious, Munda. It isn't guff. Your work does matter."

"Not like yours."

"O, yes it does. You will have things to say after this, and they will seem inevitable."

"I wonder!"

IV

During the first few weeks when she was carrying Clive's child she could say that she had never felt in better health or more serene in spirit. She was the victim of no moods, save that she sometimes questioned her own happiness and challenged it with the gentle scepticism of a woman who had suffered. Even when she read Mr. Hugh Walpole and discovered that he was praising her work ironically by the mouth of the village idiot, she could laugh. Pontifical interference! But this new serenity. Surely, in the vulgar parlance, there must be a snag somewhere? The conventional world might hail her as a woman who was supremely blessed. She had fame, wealth, a devoted husband, and she was about to become that most beatific of creatures, a consenting mother.

If her sackcloth had become silk, did circumstance hold some malicious jest in reserve, to be sprung upon her like *Frivolity's* cartoon? She could say to Margaret, "Assuredly some dreadful overdraft is piling up against me in the books of fate," and Margaret had scolded her. "That's rank rhetoric, my dear; utter superstition."

Yet, it was to happen.

She had not seen Norah for some weeks, a Norah who was still pursuing a hypothetical job and failing to find it. Absurd, but she was feeling a little responsible for Norah, and she wrote to her sister and asked her to tea. Clive would be at the Westminster Library working as a voluntary transcriber, for he was giving three afternoons a week to his fellow blind.

Norah came, and Norah's eyes were instantly and vulgarly wise as to her sister's condition. Her smug scrutiny was so patent, that Rosamund made haste to sublimate the sin by confessing it.

"Yes, I am going to have a child, Norah."

Norah's face puzzled her. It was so solemn, and yet seeming to suppress secret giggles.

"Well, really, fancy you, Rose!"

She felt something in herself grow chilled.

"I happen to be a woman, Norah."

Norah sat with folded hands, and in her eyes gleamed an inspired malevolence.

"I do hope it will be all right, Rose. Isn't it rather rash?"

"Why?"

"Well, I do hope the child won't inherit—Those wretched marks are hereditary,

aren't they?"

The poison had been instilled.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The thing became with her a ridiculous obsession. She could not escape from the fear of transmitting to Clive's child the miserable blemish which had caused her so much suffering. And since the state we describe as sanity is like a path skirting the edge of a wood, and wavering between light and shadow, her moods seemed to vacillate between fear and scorn of that fear. Was she going to give way to this absurd phobia which had been cast like a curse upon her by an ignorant and malicious woman? Yet, the thing seemed to grow with the child she was carrying, and to associate itself with the signs and symptoms of pregnancy.

She could say, "I suppose I am not quite normal. Why not confess to somebody, Margaret, and be reassured?" But could Margaret reassure her? And somehow, she shrank from exposing this obsession. It would be like admitting some mental taint which her rational self loathed and feared, and so she tried to shut the fear away, and so made it appear more sinister and poignant.

Moreover, her old sense of inferiority, her feeling of being different from other people, returned to her. She was struggling to overcome these moods of depression, and to conceal them from Clive, but there was a brittle brightness in her voice that troubled him. Was Munda worrying about anything? He was on the alert, but he refrained from fuss or interference.

This strange obsession! Was it possible that her very fear might somehow stamp the very thing she feared upon the body of the child she carried? How was it that she came by the conviction that she had to sacrifice to fate, propitiate sinister, unseen forces? Yes, she was not quite sane at the moment, yet this illusion is familiar to those who are wise as to the workings of the human psyche. The impulse to scourge, wound, abase the secret self. Propitiation, sacrifice.

This other obsession grew with her fear of bearing a disfigured child. It remained with her like some perpetual pain, provoking her to find some means of assuagement. Sacrifice? If she could tear something precious from herself, and cast it as an oblation at the feet of the blind god, Nature? But what? And then the fantastic inspiration came to her. If she could kill a thing that she had created, not the live thing that was in her. But what? The creation of her conscious self, the dream child of her old cowardices, the product of a craft that almost she had come to despise!

Her unfinished book!

A kind of strange, feral rage was roused in her. She could not kill herself, but she could kill this other thing that she had created. Sacrifice! Was not sacrifice in the blood and bones and womb of woman? To suffer, that some other self might live!

The impulse came to her like a sudden flame leaping up in the darkness of her delusion, and to her unhappy self it manifested as a piece of ritual, a sacred and symbolic gesture. She would burn the manuscript of her unfinished book, make of it a sacrificial offering.

II

The impulse possessed her. A little redness low down near the floor told her that the fire was still alive in her working-room. She switched on the light and closed the door. She had left her desk in meticulous order, and its very neatness was an added challenge to this self that hurried to destroy. She saw the manuscript lying there in its blue silk cover. She had been rather fastidious in these details, cultivating a craft-pride. She knelt down by the fire and began to stir it into life. More coal. She used her fingers for the coal. But the fire was too slow in its response. She took her manuscript and crushing it down upon the coals, found an old copy of *The Times* and, spreading it across the grate, held it there to create a draught.

So absorbed was she in the symbolical slaughter of the thing that was so essentially herself that she did not hear Clive's footsteps on the stairs. He opened her door, and stood savouring the room's silence, knowing her to be there, and perhaps sensing something strange in the silence.

"Munda—"

She turned swiftly on her knees.

"Clive!"

In that moment of inattention a little flame caught the newspaper, and running up it touched one of her hands. Illogical impulse made her try to crumple the burning sheet down upon the hearth. Some metallic object fell upon the tiles. His blind face seemed to grow quick with comprehension. She was at the fire. Why?

"What are you doing, dear?"

She rose from her knees and stood looking down at the crumpled blaze on the hearth, and at her manuscript about which the flames were beginning to curl. Why didn't the wretched thing blaze?

"Just burning rubbish."

He was never able to explain to her afterwards how he divined what she was doing. He went deliberately to the hearth, bent down, groped, touched something.

She stood there quite still, staring like one paralysed. His hands seemed in among the flames. He was rescuing her manuscript from the fire. It lay on the hearthrug, emitting smoulders of smoke. She saw him slip aside, turn up the rug and smother out the little charring flames.

She seemed to come alive. She was down on her knees beside him.

"Clive, your hands!"

But he was not concerned with his hands.

"The book—?"

"Yes."

"Why did you do it?"

"O, my dear, never mind about the book. Let me see your hands."

"My hands are all right. Munda, why did you do it?" Something gave way in her.

"Oh, my dear, I'm such a failure. Don't ask me. I just—"

He had his arms round her.

"Munda, don't be absurd. Tell me."

And suddenly she clung to him. Her whole body seemed to shake.

"I can't."

"O, my dear, what is it? Has anyone been hurting you?"

"Just cowardice, I suppose," and her words and breath seemed to come in little gasps; "I have had a feeling that there must be something fatal about me. A kind of obsession."

"But, why?"

"I felt I couldn't tell you."

"You must tell me, Munda. Don't you know that—"

"I'll tell you, dear. It began with something my sister said."

"Norah!"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"She hinted that the child might—But I can't tell you any more, dear. Don't ask me. I haven't been quite sane."

He held her head against his shoulder.

"Leave Norah to me in the future. But why—?"

"It will sound so silly to you. I felt that if I sacrificed something—"

"The evil eye would be flouted? I think I understand. But, my dear, you should have told me. Your work is just as—Wait, look at the manuscript. I want to be sure."

He let her go, and turning back the rug, she examined the mass of paper. Cover

and edges were charred, and some of the pages discoloured, but the script itself had not suffered.

"No damage done."

"Blessed be the gods."

"But your hands, Clive?"

"O, just beginning to smart a bit."

She caught his wrists and examined his hands.

"O, but you have burnt them quite badly. We must do something at once. I'll get some lanoline. And a doctor."

"I don't think it is as bad as that."

"O, yes, it is. I know; Margaret. I'll phone for Margaret."

III

Margaret Hayle was one of those physicians, who, mingling the subjective with the objective, can react to atmosphere while observing material facts. She asked no immediate questions. The fender was a mass of charred paper, and on the floor Douglas Gerard's latest manuscript exhibited itself for the illumination of the wise. Margaret could infer that this particular object had been rescued from the flames, and that Clive's hands had suffered in the adventure.

Clive's hands. She examined them, without asking how Munda's manuscript had reached the fire. The burns were limited and superficial, painful of course, but the damage would be transitory.

"We'll dress you and put you to bed."

"Why, bed? I object."

"Objection upheld. Pass me my bag, Munda. Would you rather wait, dear—?"

Rosamund Strange put her hand to that disfigured cheek.

"I'll wait for you downstairs."

Said Margaret to Clive, as she applied dressings to his hands, "Will you tell me, or shall I leave it?"

Clive considered that question.

"I think it is her privilege, if she chooses. But I want you to talk to her, Margaret. She's been wounded."

"And who—?"

"Norah."

"What a hag that woman is. Do you know quite how?"

"She was too sensitive to tell me everything. It was something about the child."

"Nice person."

She finished off a bandage, gave Clive's hand a pat, and turning, bent down to pick up her friend's manuscript. She replaced it gently on the desk.

"Much pain now?"

"No, just some smarting. Do go and talk to her, Margaret."

"I will."

Salves for both skin and souls! Margaret found her friend sitting by the drawing-room fire. Her face had a kind of haggard serenity, but her eyes looked up defensively at Margaret.

"Is it serious?"

"No, my dear."

"Thank God. I want to confess. I want you to be utterly honest with me."

Margaret sat down by the fire.

"Well—?"

"Can a disfigurement such as mine be transmitted to a child?"

So, that was the poison.

"You mean, is such a thing hereditary?"

"Yes."

"Absolutely no, dear. I am completely sure it is not. But, who—?"

"O, Norah."

"You mean, she suggested—?"

"Yes."

"The disreputable hag!"

"My dear—!"

"I mean it. Language is sometimes inadequate. And you got this thing on your mind?"

"A sort of obsession. I haven't been quite sane. It may sound ridiculous to you —"

"It doesn't."

"It sounds ridiculous to me now. And yet, I shall go on feeling secretly afraid."

"Put it out of your head, Munda."

"I'll try to. I have always been rather a coward. I had a feeling that I had to destroy something. That must sound absurd to you from the lips of a woman who should be—civilized."

"That is just what we are not, my dear, or only in bits of our grey matter. The old, submerged, secret self. I understand. But I do assure you that your fear is an illusion."

"Can an illusion, dwelt upon too morbidly, affect that strange growth, inside me?"

"No. Just superstition. But what you must do, Munda, is to laugh and let yourself be loved. That's about the most eugenic state for a prospective mother."

"You are a healing person, Margaret."

"So is Clive. Leave it to him."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Whatever the modern spirit may have to say about marriage, Rosamund Strange surrendered to the gentle autocrat in her husband. Clive issued his orders. There was to be an exodus into Sussex where Munda would be reasonably secure from assaults by cynical careerists and ugly sisters. Clive took both Jane and Eliza into his confidence, and though his candour was contrary to the precepts of the punctilious, it did not miscarry. Mrs. Strange was to be protected from all provocation, and Jane and Eliza were the women to do it. He told them so, and in assuring them of his faith in their loyalty, made them his.

"Jane, do you happen to know the handwriting of Mrs. Snade and Mrs. Prodgers?"

"I should do, sir."

"Well, we are going to censor particular letters. I want you to be in charge of the postbag, and put aside for me anything from the family. I think you understand why this is necessary."

"We'll do our best, sir, to see she isn't worried."

Knoll Farm in May, and a May that was being kind. As she stood at her window on that spring afternoon she remembered one of the most pregnant of Margaret's sayings. "In a world that is infected with fear, this England of ours stands fearless."

She had discovered a beautiful strangeness in this familiar place. Its colours, scents and sounds were the same, and yet different. They had driven down into Sussex on this perfect day, to find old Will mowing grass, and humanly awaiting praise. With the smell of the mown grass in her nostrils she could salute the good conscience of the worker and say, "Will, I have never seen the garden looking more lovely. You do stay put." His very blue eyes had agreed with her. If not exactly god, God was a valuable co-operator, but Will did feel that he was an improvement upon Adam.

Beauty, and how differently she savoured it now, the serene trees on their green hill, the late flowering gorse, diaphanous distances of sea and landscape, the garden poignant with the colours of the young year. Yes, if one could put fear out of the world, fear out of oneself.

Clive was unpacking his belongings in the room below, for a nice independence and a deliberate orderliness were part of his philosophy. She went downstairs,

feeling this old house full of a pleasant friendliness.

"Clive."

"Hallo."

"Let's go up to the hill before tea."

"Yes, let's. I have just finished parading my shaving tackle."

In the loggia he paused, holding lightly to her arm.

"The wallflowers are out."

"Smell them?"

"Rather. And tulips?"

"Will's mixture. Every sort of colour, save blue. But that's in the forget-me-not."

He laughed.

"I always wonder who gave flowers their names. Country people. Simple souls. Not our professors."

"Learned jargon! Poor little plants. Life's rather like gardening, an art. But don't let's be sententious. A tulip's so inevitably a tulip that it should put the highbrow in one to shame."

"Beastly word that, Munda."

"Highbrow?"

"Yes. One of the silly dishclouts we humans throw about, like Bolshie, and capitalist, and all the controversial stuff."

They passed out through the Italian gate, and climbed the hill to the sailing firs, but on this still day the tree-ships lay becalmed. Sea and sky met in a dim blueness. Leaning lightly against him, she stood at gaze.

"Yes, life's an art, Clive, though a different temperament may use its colours and brushes differently. One thing astonishes me."

"And that?"

"What a mess some of the very clever people make of life. Superciliousness is their fatal sin. They would label old Will as a clod, and I am beginning to be sure that old Will is wiser than they."

II

She woke to a familiar sound that renewed in her memories of a year ago. The siren of the lightship, wailing like some stricken beast, was filling the air with melancholy unrest. Fog at sea, and fear in the air, and these lamentations somehow reviving in her old dreads and discords.

On just such a morning as this, youth had crashed into her life, and she felt that

she could not lie in bed with that melancholy voice throbbing through the house. She got out of bed, and going to the window, raised the blind upon a world that was all white mist. The air struck cold. The mist was like a sheet upon which the shadows of her troubled self were projected.

Fear! But fear of what? She found herself saying, "Don't be neurotic. Must you always be creating ghosts?" and even as the words shaped in her she heard movements in the room below. A door opened. She divined someone coming up the stairs.

"Munda."

"You, Clive? Come in."

She saw her door open and her husband standing there in his blue and gold dressing-gown. She thought how young he looked, such a boy, but his preoccupations were not those of a boy. He closed the door, and came to join her at the window. There was nothing between them to threaten his deliberate, blind progress.

"Fog."

How did he know that the morning was all white mist? He seemed to divine the unasked question, and he answered it.

"I can feel it on my face. It's cold, Munda. Back to bed."

She humoured him, and he turned the clothes back over her, and sitting on her bed, smiled.

"I heard you get up. Something made you afraid?"

She put out her hands and drew him down to her.

"Just lie there a moment, dear. One's silly, irrational self will out."

"That old lightship screaming?"

"Yes, in a way. And the mist, and a surging up of the things—"

"I know. But they don't worry me at all. I must be growing fat and fatherly."

He felt her arms contract.

"O, there is just one thing, Clive."

"What?"

"Promise me you won't go beyond our hill, not without me."

"Afraid of my going blundering over the cliff edge? I'm too pleased with life for that."

"Well, I won't ask you to promise."

"You needn't, because I won't."

"Not to go near—?"

"Was I ambiguous? Well, I promise."

III

Spring shaded into summer, and though she felt herself surrounded with a protective peace, that irrational dread of bearing a disfigured child remained with her. She spoke of it to no one, not even to Heberden, who came every week to see her, and who was to shepherd her into motherhood. Dr. Heberden might be completely consoling, and assure her that she was a normal woman, yet the secret fear seemed to stand and wait in a dark corner of her consciousness.

She remembered saying to Clive, "I have heard nothing from Norah." Why worry about Norah? She was not told that Clive and Jane had intercepted two of Mrs. Snade's letters, and that Clive had replied to both of those letters. Norah! She had written, "My dear, I do hope that what I hinted at won't come true." A rather incredible person, Norah! How would Miss Gerard have made her seem adequate and convincing in a book? Clive had answered Norah in neat type.

"*Dear Mrs. Snade*,

I am glad to say that Munda is well. As you will see I am very much her secretary, and answering all her letters. She gets so many, you know. The garden is looking lovely. Roses very good this year. My love to Walter—"

It was Clive who ordered old Will to keep the main gates locked as in the Douglas Gerard days, and Munda, discovering these defences up, questioned both the fact and Will. He looked her straight in the face with his very blue eyes. "Lot of pikies about, Miss, this time o' the year. I guess we don't want they in among the bush-fruit." She had not seen any gypsies, but Will could assure her that two vans had been parked for the night on the piece of waste down by the old hammer pond. She accepted the explanation and Will's cynicism, with the smooth resignation of a woman who, somehow, was finding a protective forethought good.

About ten days before the child was expected, Margaret Hayle came down to spend the week-end at Knoll Farm. She found her friend outwardly serene, and suffering less than most women have to endure at such a time. Clive was the one who appeared to be tense and on edge, and to be worrying about Munda's ordeal.

"How do you think she is, Margaret?"

"Everything's normal."

"Yes, so Heberden says, but I have a horrid feeling that she is worrying about something. I have heard her get up in the night and walk up and down."

"Women do, at such times."

"Just for—?"

"Change of position. Leave well alone, my dear."

"Oh, I won't fuss her. Do you think it saucy of me, Margaret, but I'm afraid I have intercepted dear Norah's letters."

"Quite right. And she doesn't know?"

"No."

"Keep all that sort of thing from her until it is all over."

"I shall. Frankly, I shouldn't be surprised if we had Norah down here. I'm keeping the gates locked. Eliza and Jane understand."

"I rather wish Norah would make an attack while I happen to be here."

"You'd tackle her?"

"I should rather like to say certain things to Norah."

IV

Two sisters had been in consultation upon a problem which they chose to consider as a family affair. Mrs. Snade was spending the week-end with Mrs. Prodgers, and it was Norah who suggested that Rosamund's young husband was behaving in a way that was both offensive and sinister. "She doesn't answer my letters. I believe he keeps them from her." But if Clive was blind, how did he contrive to act as censor? "That makes it worse, my dear. It may mean he gets one of the women to read them." How disgraceful! Showing sisterly letters to servants! Phœbe had a way of referring to her maids as menials. She too had written letters to Rosamund, and been replied to by Clive. Rather suggestive, all this secrecy. Rosamund was a wealthy woman, and if anything unfortunate should happen, this young filibuster of a husband might be planning to make the world safe for posterity.

"I think we ought to go down, Phœbe, and insist upon seeing Rose."

"Excellent idea. Why shouldn't we drive down to-morrow? My licence is good again. Tom can get Jack Holtby to drive him to golf."

So, these two very vigorous women set out upon their crusade. The seaward roads carried their usual Sunday crowd, and Phœbe drove with her characteristic disregard of all other users of the highway. It was not that she was reckless. She would chatter while she was driving, and look at her companion, and assume that on all occasions the right of way was hers. In taking a short cut and emerging into a major road, she did not pause to look, but swung well out round the corner and into the middle of the road.

Someone's brakes squealed. Two other cars had to perform contorted and

frustrated antics on the road. A big blue coupé loomed up on Phœbe's flank, and a very angry man lowered a near window and cursed her.

"You bloody fool!"

Well, really! What manners! But the angry person had not finished with Phœbe. He accelerated, took the road ahead of her, slowed down and boxed her in. Another car drew up on Phœbe's tail. Two equally angry men emerged and came to talk to her.

"Haven't you mannerless wenches any sense?"

"If you do that sort of thing often enough you will be with the angels. But it's the other people you'd smash up who we'd be sorry for."

Phœbe looked sick and haughty. She said. "If my husband was here, you cads wouldn't—"

The two men eyed each other and laughed.

"Quite a hopeless case, I think."

"Quite."

"May I ask how long you have driven a car, madam, and how often you have had your licence endorsed?"

Phœbe became even more haughty.

"Kindly move your car. I wish to go on."

They continued seawards, sharing a mutual indignation that reinforced the spirit of their crusade. What disgraceful language! Mrs. Prodgers of Oxshott called a bloody fool! Had modern men no chivalry or self-restraint?

"Road-crashing cads!"

"My dear," said Norah, "it is perfectly disgusting, this modern selfishness."

"I wish Tom had been with us."

"Men don't know how to handle these affairs. They just shout fool and bloody and damn."

"But he called us mannerless wenches! Us!"

"No sense of humour, my dear. Men just rave."

The incident did not appear to exert any chastening effect upon Phœbe's chauffeuring. She drove just as before, mostly in the middle of the road, and at varying speeds which adjusted themselves to her flow of conversation. She smoked a succession of cigarettes, and with a white adjunct pendent from her purple mouth, waggled one perfunctory finger as an occasional signal to the world behind her.

"Rotten driving, these days. How these people hog it."

"Just the spirit of the age, my dear," said Norah.

Phœbe was holding the middle of the road, and an impatient person hooted at

her.

"There's a fellow trying to pass. Just listen to him hooting."

"I should keep him there for a while, as a lesson."

Phœbe did.

It was shortly before twelve when the Prodgers' car climbed the steep lane to Knoll Farm. The blue gates were shut, and Norah, getting out to test them, found that they were locked. So that was Clive's game! Norah knew of the back gate by Will's cottage, and taking the path to it she found herself balked a second time. Norah gave tongue.

"Hi, hallo, anybody at home?"

Will Spray was giving an hour to his own private flower-border, and hearing the voice of Norah, he went to the gate.

"Who be there?"

"Mrs. Snade. I have come to see my sister. The front gates are locked."

Will rubbed the back of his neck.

"I'll go and tell 'em."

"Open the gate, man. I can come in this way."

But Will was wilfully deaf.

The first person he met was Clive, Clive whose quick ears had heard the sound of the Prodgers' car.

"Who is it, Will?"

"Mrs. Snade, Mr. Clive."

"Oh, I see."

"She came round to t'back gate. I left she there, and on t'wrong side of it."

"Thanks, Will. That's splendid."

Rosamund was resting in a long chair in the loggia, with Margaret camped beside her, reading the Sunday paper. Clive had met Will at the head of the drive. He made his way back round the house, and knowing that Munda had her back to him, he made a signal which Margaret picked up.

"Just a moment, dear."

Clive had drawn back round the angle of the house, and Margaret found him in a little recessed place among the flowering shrubs.

"Margaret."

"Yes, my dear."

"It's Norah. Didn't you hear the car?"

"No."

"She tried the back gate, but Will was wise. I'm not going to let her in."

"Quite right."

"I suppose I have authority of a sort, Margaret, but if a more impartial person were to rebuff her, professionally."

"Good idea! I think I am included in that category. I'll try the front gates first."

Norah, meanwhile, had returned to the main gate, and found Phœbe still sitting in the car, and expecting to drive in and be retained for lunch.

"All locked up. Pretty fishy, my dear. I got hold of the gardener."

"Looks as though he kept her locked up."

"We shall see, my dear, we shall see."

Margaret heard these two voices as she walked down towards the blue gates, and Margaret was a woman who liked to weave a pattern out of life, and to so plan and order its happenings that it was not all ravelled ends and shabby futility like some highbrow play. If a dramatic moment came to you, why not seize it, and treat it as high comedy, and not be afraid of controlling a coincidence? Norah was not exactly a coincidence, but one of the ugly sisters in a Cinderella saga, and providing the sentimental story with experiments in realism.

Margaret came to the gates.

"Hallo, is anybody there?"

There were rare occasions when Margaret assumed a professional voice, and she used it now. She was answered by Norah.

"It's Mrs. Snade and Mrs. Prodgers. We have driven down to see Rosamund. Who's that?"

"I'm sorry, but Mrs. Strange is not receiving visitors."

Visitors indeed! And who was the formal person on the other side of the gate? A nurse? Norah had not recognized Margaret's professional voice.

"We are not visitors."

"Oh!"

"We're her sisters. I must insist—"

Margaret was smiling.

"I'm sorry; I am afraid you cannot see Mrs. Strange."

"But—that's ridiculous! We have driven all the way from—"

"I am afraid it is not ridiculous, but her doctor's orders."

"Indeed! In that case I shall go and call on her doctor and make it plain to him who we are. It's the man at the next village, I believe."

"I am afraid you will be wasting your time."

"I beg to differ. And may I ask who you are, the nurse?"

"No, I happen to be Mrs. Strange's medical attendant. I'm sorry to have to turn

you away, but the responsibility is mine, you know. Good morning."

Margaret lingered there, listening to the indignant voices of the two sisters, and to the restarting of the car's engine. She had gathered scraps of conversation, and exclamatory comments upon the situation, and she was wise as to the next move upon the stage. She waited until she heard the car being backed down the lane, and then she returned to Clive.

"A repulse, my dear. But I want to ring up Dr. Heberden at once and make a confession. Come with me."

"Why Heberden?"

"Oh, I purloined his shoes for the occasion, and I want him to be a partner in the conspiracy. And then, peace, perfect peace."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

On the September night when Rosamund was bearing her child, Clive waited for Heberden at the foot of the stairs. For to Clive's sensitive ears the house seemed ominously silent, as though it was smothering primitive pangs and little moanings, for which, somehow, he was responsible, while feeling that he as man was helpless and superfluous in a world that belonged to Heberden and the women. Was Munda suffering very terribly? How severed from her he seemed, a mere creature of inarticulate suspense, a blind suppliant waiting in a darkened doorway!

Presently, Heberden came down to him.

"Everything is as it should be."

"Will it be long, sir?"

"Some hours yet, I think. Better go to bed, Clive."

"And you?"

"I am going to have a nap on the sofa. Nurse will call me."

But Clive did not go to bed. The September night was serene and still, and taking his raincoat from a peg in the passage, he made his way up to the knoll and its crown of firs. A heavy dew had fallen, but under the trees the grass was dry and, sitting down with his back against a tree trunk, he listened to the sea making a rhythmic and gentle surge over the rocky ledges below the cliff.

Shortly before dawn Munda's child was born, a girl. If she had suffered other anguishes than those of the flesh, her inward eyes could dare to look through torn veils at reality.

"Doctor."

"Yes, my dear?"

Her small, tired voice mingled itself with the vigorous and protesting outcries of her small daughter.

"Is she all right?"

Heberden patted her hand.

"Well, listen."

"Yes, but what I mean is, she isn't like I am?"

For the moment Heberden looked shocked, not only by her words, but by a certain blindness in himself that he could not excuse.

"Nurse, just a moment."

He took the child from the nurse, and holding her in the hollow of his arm, displayed her to her mother. The blind was up, the curtains drawn back, and the daylight shining in. Rosamund Strange looked steadfastly at the funny little face and at the head with its shading of pale brown hair. Then, she sighed, put out a hand and touched the child.

"That makes me happy."

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Chapter 28, Section III, first paragraph: the word *a* has been inserted between *that she was* and *normal woman*.

[The end of *Blind Man's Year* by Warwick Deeping]