

Uncle Stephen

Book 3 of the
Tom Barber trilogy

By
Forrest Reid

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UNCLE STEPHEN

BY
FORREST REID

*'O that I might have my request; and that God
would grant me the thing that I long for!'*
—The Book of Job.

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TO
ARTHUR GREEVES

UNCLE STEPHEN

*They were as companions. . . .
Objects which the Shepherd loved before
Were dearer now. . . . From the Boy there came
Feelings and emanations—things which were
Light to the sun and music to the wind;
And the old Man's heart seemed born again.*

CHAPTER I

Beyond the iron wicket-gate stretched an avenue of yew-trees with, at the end of it, four wide shallow steps, dark and mossy, descending in a terrace to the graves. This avenue was straight as if marked out with a ruler. The yew-trees were straight, trim, and sombre, of a dull bluish-green that was not so dark as the shadows they threw on the unmown grass. They stood up stiffly against a deep ultramarine sky, and composed a picture at once formal and intensely romantic.

That is, if it happened to burst upon your vision unexpectedly, as it did upon Tom Barber's, flooded with a light from Poe's *Ulalume*. Young Tom in his new and ill-fitting suit of rough black cloth, beneath which he had sweated freely during the long drive, was for a minute or two rapt by that instant recognition into forgetfulness of the business that had brought him here. It was but a brief respite, however, and he awakened from it guiltily. Certain muffled and sliding sounds caused him to shrink back. *This* was not like *Ulalume*—this ugly varnished brass-handled box covered with flowers. For the flowers somehow increased its ghastliness. Shoulder-high his father's coffin was carried through the narrow gate and down the avenue, while he followed with Eric and Leonard—the chief mourners.

A feeling of resentment arose unhappily in his mind against everything and everybody connected with the funeral. The solemn wooden faces, the formal clothes, the secret indifference which had allowed hired men to bear the burden, depressed and exasperated him. If anyone had really cared! But all this, and particularly those hideous wreaths with the cards of their donors carefully attached to them, suggested neither grief nor affection, but only the triumph of clay and worms, and the horrors that were already at work out of sight.

The burial service began. Mr. Carteret in his starched yet ghostly surplice stood by the grave slightly apart from the bare-headed group who watched and listened to him. It was as if everything for the moment had passed into his hands, and he were, by some mysterious incantation, sending forth the soul which till now had lingered near its old dwelling on a perilous and distant journey. Tom felt a sudden desire to weep.

He turned away. Deliberately he fixed his attention on a creamy, black-spotted butterfly who had entered the avenue. The butterfly's wavering flight as he flickered in and out of the bands of shadow and sunlight barring the green path seemed purposeless as that of a leaf in the wind. He, too, was like a little soul newly exiled from the body and not knowing whither to fly. The soul of an infant, perhaps. Then suddenly he alit on a stalk of foxgloves and became at once a comfortable earthly creature, warm with appetites, eager, impatient, purposeful, as he explored cave after purple cave, forcing an entrance, greedy, determined. Tom smiled: he very nearly laughed.

His smile faded and he blushed hotly as he encountered the rather dry and speculative gaze of Dr. Macrory. Dr. Macrory looked away, but Tom knew he had been caught. He felt ashamed and miserable. Furtively he glanced round the little group of mourners of whom he was the smallest and youngest, but every face was still drawn to an appropriate expression of apathetic decorum. Only *his* mind had wandered, and yet it was his father they were burying. He was only Eric's and Leonard's step-father; only Uncle Horace's brother-in-law: as for the rest, there were even several persons there whose names Tom did not know.

He heard a faint cawing of rooks, like sleepy distant music. If he could slip away now, away from that raw red gaping hole. . . . He heard Mr. Carteret's voice: 'to raise us from the death of sin into the life of righteousness; that when we shall depart this life, we may rest in him, as our hope is this our brother doth; and that, at the general Resurrection in the last day. . . .' The words fell with a solemn cadence, but for Tom they had neither more nor less meaning than the cawing of the rooks. Any gentler feelings he might have had about death were at present obliterated by its unsightliness. The ugliness of death had been revealed suddenly, much as if he had come on an obscene inscription or picture chalked up on a wall. You didn't hang wreaths of flowers round *that*, or put on your best clothes to mope or to gloat over it. And supposing it was somebody you *loved* who had died—then all this kind of thing would be doubly revolting. . . .

Uncle Horace and Eric and Leonard:—he found himself staring at them with hostility. And at home there was his step-mother, and Jane his step-

sister—Jane, who among all these ‘steps’ was the only one he really liked. He *had* liked Eric—liked him more than he would ever like Jane—but it is impossible to go on caring for a person who shows you he doesn’t want to be cared for. Eric did not like him, and Leonard did not like him, and his step-mother did not like him. The only difference was that he could see Mrs. Gavney—now Mrs. Barber—*trying* to like him, an effort that faintly tickled his sense of humour, which was as odd as everything else about him. Of course, both Eric and Leonard were older than he was—though Leonard was only a year older, and for that matter Tom knew the question of age had nothing to do with it. They did not despise him because he was young but because he was different. And the worst of it was that in all on which they set the slightest value they *were* his superiors. . . .

Tom’s eyes closed for a moment at the sound of the shovelling of earth—the first dull thuds on hollow wood. It was horrible, but it passed quickly: once the coffin was covered there was only a scraping, scuffling noise. And all this squeamishness was not really sorrow for his father. *Was* he sorry—even a little? While his father had been alive he had never felt much affection for him: an atmosphere of coldness and remoteness had, as far back as he could remember, surrounded him. His father had never been unkind, but he had been extraordinarily unapproachable. And after his second marriage—his marriage with Mrs. Gavney, the mother of Eric and Leonard and Jane—he had seemed to think Tom must now have everything he needed—a second mother, companions of his own age. This last advantage had actually been mentioned—during a painfully embarrassing conversation from which Tom had escaped as soon as he could. Well, they needn’t think he intended to go on living in that house in Gloucester Terrace, because he didn’t. Not without a struggle at any rate! If only he were his own master how easy it would be! In that case he would simply pack up and go; for though he knew nothing of his father’s affairs, he knew his mother had left him plenty to live on. His mouth pouted in the incipient and repressed grimace inspired by Uncle Horace’s solemn and proprietary gaze at that moment directed full upon him. Uncle Horace! All this ‘uncleing’ and ‘mothering’ had been from the beginning *their* idea! Uncle Horace was merely his step-mother’s brother, Mr. Horace Pringle—no relation whatever. If it came to that, he had only one true relation in the world, or at least there was only one he had ever heard of, his mother’s uncle—Uncle Stephen. . . .

Tom’s expression altered. The freckled face—redeemed from marked plainness by a pair of singularly honest and intelligent grey eyes—became stilled as the water of a pool is stilled. He might have been listening intently, or merely dreaming on his feet. Probably the latter, for when he awakened it

was as if the hands of the clock had suddenly jumped on, leaving a little island of submerged time unaccounted for. It was strange: a few minutes had been lost for ever: he had been here and yet he had not been here! . . . *Could* you be in two times at once? Certainly your mind could be in one time and your body in another, for that was what had happened—he had been back in last night. But suppose his body had gone back too! Then he would have vanished! Uncle Horace would have said, ‘Where is Tom?’ and somebody would have answered, ‘He was here a minute ago: he was standing over there: he can’t be far away.’ Only, he *had* been far away. As far away as last night—and in his bedroom. This odd experience seemed to make all kinds of things possible. Somebody might come to you out of *his* time into yours. You might, for instance, come face to face with your own father as he was when he was a boy. Of course you wouldn’t *know* each other: still, you might meet and become friends, the way you do with people in dreams. The idea seemed difficult and involved, but doubtless it could be straightened out. Dreams themselves were so queer. When he had dreamed last night, for example, he was almost sure he had been awake. What he wasn’t so sure of was that it had been a dream at all, or at any rate *his* dream. . . .

Abruptly he became aware of a movement around him—an involuntary communication, as of so many simultaneously-drawn breaths of relief—and next moment he found himself shaking the damp hand of a stout elderly gentleman who seemed to know him. Tom’s own hand was damp, with little beads of sweat on it, and his shirt felt moist and sticky against his body. Several other people shook hands with him: Mr. Carteret placed his arm round his shoulder. . . . And the midsummer sun beat down on the hard earth.

Eric and Leonard had put on their black bowler hats, and Tom put on his. They began to retrace their path, walking in twos and threes along the yew-tree avenue, at the end of which the cars were drawn up in a line. Tom came last; he did not want to walk with anybody; but Dr. Macrory waited for him.

Coming out of the gate, Tom halted, moved by a sudden desire of escape. The ruins of the Abbey stood grey and ivy-creeped on a low hill, and down below was the lake, its water a steel-blue, broken by immense beds of green rushes. He heard the thin cry of a snipe. Rooks were still cawing in the distant trees, which stretched away in sunshine on the right; and beyond the lake the ground rose gradually in cornfields and pasture. The thridding of grasshoppers sounded like the whirl of small grind-stones. Tom instantly saw them as tiny men dressed in green who went about sharpening still tinier knives and scissors for the other insects. A blue dragon-fly, like a

shining airman, flashed by in the sun. There were lots of these small airmen, he knew, among the reeds on the lake, where they bred. He had an impression of emerging from some choking stagnant valley of death into the world of life.

Suddenly he whispered to Dr. Macrory, 'Let's go down to the lake. Couldn't we? *You* say we're going. Tell Uncle Hor—; tell Mr. Pringle.'

Dr. Macrory glanced at the smooth back of Uncle Horace's morning coat, at his beautifully creased trousers and glossy silk hat. His own coat, like Tom's, appeared to be the handiwork of a distinctly inferior tailor, and the collar showed specks of dandruff. 'I don't think it would do,' he said. 'You know what they are.'

But he rested a friendly hand on Tom's shoulder which the boy impatiently tried to shake off. His face suddenly flushed and lowered. 'Oh, damn,' he muttered. 'I'm going anyway.'

The doctor's hand closed on the collar of his jacket and grasped it firmly, while at the same moment the clear voice of Uncle Horace inquired, 'Where's Tom?' He turned round to look for his nephew, standing by the big Daimler, holding the door open. Eric and Leonard had already taken their seats at the back.

'He's coming with me,' called out Dr. Macrory, pushing the small chief mourner, whose face was like a thundercloud, towards his own two-seater; and when he had him safely inside, 'That's all right,' he murmured. 'They'll probably take your behaviour for a sign of grief.'

Tom stared straight before him through the windscreen. For all his attitude of friendliness, the doctor, he felt, had let him down. He had wanted to talk to somebody: if they had gone to the lake he could have talked—sitting by the edge of the water. But he did not want to talk now. The kind of things he had to say were not to be said in a motor car and to a person half of whose attention was given to the road before him. He might just as well be in the other car with Eric and Leonard and Uncle Horace. For a moment, among all those people who so definitely were not *his* people, who were and always would be strangers, he had felt drawn to Dr. Macrory. Now he felt completely indifferent to him: Dr. Macrory, though he looked unconventional and adopted a free-and-easy manner, was really just the same as the rest. Tom with a little shrug settled down in his seat.

CHAPTER II

The others had arrived before him, and as he came downstairs after removing the dust of his journey he could hear them talking. They were in the dining-room, so he supposed tea was ready. But the moment he opened the door the voices ceased, and in the sudden silence he stood motionless on the threshold, with heightened colour, his eyes fixed on the assembled faces all turned in his direction. Then the flash of Uncle Horace's smile, and his rather strident welcome, broke a pause which threatened to become awkward, for Tom still hovered by the door, unconscious of the curious effect his reserve and shyness were creating. His step-mother, looking blonde, resigned, and expansive, in her deep mourning, murmured that everything was ready, that they had only been waiting for Tom, and she told Leonard to ring the bell. 'It's raining,' Jane announced from the window.

He suspected, and the impression deepened when they took their seats round the table, that a definite policy in regard to himself must in his absence have been argued out and settled. Leonard actually of his own accord passed him the butter:—'Butter?' he murmured languidly:—and Eric asked him what he thought of Dr. Macrory's Citröen. Tom had not thought of it at all; he hadn't even known it was a Citröen; but he produced what he hoped might be a satisfactory answer; and the conversation drifted to and fro, superficially normal, though with occasional pauses betraying an underlying constraint.

It was during one of these that he made up his mind to risk the question which all day had been in his thoughts, but which, he knew not why, he had felt a strange reluctance to ask. Even now he spoke in a low voice and without raising his eyes. 'Was Uncle Stephen told?' he said.

Nobody answered.

Tom recollected that possibly they did not know who Uncle Stephen was. 'My Uncle Stephen—Uncle Stephen Collet,' he explained. Then, as the silence continued, he glanced up.

What had he said?—for he saw at once that it must have been the wrong thing. His step-mother's hands, grasping the hot-water jug and the lid of the tea-pot, were arrested in mid air, and Uncle Horace was looking at her warningly. Tom stared at them in astonishment, but next moment Uncle Horace replied. 'I didn't think it necessary to tell him. The announcement

was in the papers. As a matter of fact it never occurred to me to write. Perhaps I should have done so.'

Mrs. Barber put the lid back on the tea-pot without having filled it. 'Why?' she asked stiffly. 'Why should you write?'

'Well, I suppose, as the only blood relation——' And again, it seemed to Tom, he flashed his signal of danger.

Mrs. Barber ignored it. 'He was no relation of Edgar's, and there had never been any communication between them.'

'I meant of Tom's,' Uncle Horace murmured.

'He never took the slightest interest in Tom. He cut himself off entirely from his family years before Tom was born; in fact when he was not much more than Tom's own age.'

'Oh, I don't for a moment suppose he would have come. Still——'

'I think it is much better as it is,' Mrs. Barber said, with an air of closing the subject.

For Tom she had merely opened it. 'Why?' he asked in his turn, flushing a little.

Mrs. Barber took no notice, and it was Leonard who spoke, fixing his eyes on Tom's puzzled face in a faintly cynical enjoyment. 'That's the magician, isn't it? It would have been rather sport if he——'

'Be quiet, Leonard!' his mother checked him sharply.

Tom felt the colour deepening in his cheeks. Enough had been said to show him that Uncle Stephen had been discussed before, and unfavourably. What right had they to discuss him! Nevertheless, he was more bewildered than offended. Leonard's mysterious allusion in particular left him in the dark. He knew it was meant to be sarcastic and to annoy him; but why should Uncle Stephen be called a magician? Where did the sarcasm come in? It was at this point that Jane kicked him under the table—a hint, he supposed, that he was to say no more. He obeyed it. After all, what did it matter what they thought! And he dropped into a detached contemplation of the whole Gavney family, induced by the secret knowledge that he would not often again be seated at their table. . . .

They certainly were a remarkably good-looking lot:—Jane, dark and vivacious, singularly unlike her large-limbed, fair-haired brothers; his step-mother, handsome too, in an opulent full-blown way; Uncle Horace, vivid,

sleek, and immaculate, like the men in the pictures in American magazines. He wondered why he had got on so badly with them—or at least with his step-mother and the boys—if it had been as much his fault as theirs? Of course, he had nothing in common with them, but then he hadn't *really* very much in common with Jane either, yet Jane and he were friends. They quarrelled; they quarrelled frequently; but they always made it up again—and sometimes he thought Jane quarrelled on purpose, just for the pleasure of making it up. . . .

He became aware that Mrs. Barber, after a glance round the table to make sure everybody had finished, was rising slowly to her feet. All her movements were slow. They were like the movements of a cow—heavy, indolent, yet not ungraceful. She even suggested milk! This last reflection was quite free from irony; it simply came to him as he watched her standing by her chair in ample profile. Next moment she turned to her brother: 'I think Eric wants to have a little "confab" with you, Horace. Perhaps you would rather talk here, and join us later.'

'Not at all,' Uncle Horace answered dryly. 'I don't suppose Eric has any secrets to tell.'

Mrs. Barber did not press the point, and they adjourned to the drawing-room, Tom loitering behind the others in the hall, for he felt tempted to go to his own room. He wondered if it would do? The fact that Uncle Horace had not gone home to dine, but had returned with them and was evidently going to spend the evening with them, seemed to show that the occasion was regarded as a special one. It was to be a family gathering, a kind of continuation of the funeral. Therefore it mightn't look very civil if he were to disappear, and indeed most likely somebody would be sent to bring him back. Besides, if they were going to discuss Eric's affairs, he supposed he would be allowed to read, or play a game of bezique with Jane.

One glance at the assembled company removed all hope of games. His step-mother looked mournful, Jane and Leonard bored, Eric sulky, and Uncle Horace cross. Not exactly cross, perhaps, but ready to become so. 'Well, what is this important news of Eric's?' he asked, and Mrs. Barber, to whom the question was addressed, glanced encouragingly at her son.

'It's about the bank,' she prompted him. 'Eric has been thinking things over.'

Uncle Horace eyed the thinker impassively. 'I understood all that had been settled months ago and that he was now working for his examination.'

Eric blushed, cleared his throat, and suddenly glared at his uncle. 'I'm going into the motor trade,' he announced in a tone which nervousness rendered alarmingly final.

'It's not that he doesn't appreciate the interest you have taken in him,' Mrs. Barber hastened to explain. 'But you know he's always had this taste for mechanics, and——'

'I know nothing of the sort,' Uncle Horace interrupted. 'It's the first time I've ever heard of his having a taste for anything but cricket and football.'

Mrs. Barber looked hurt, but she continued patiently, though with an implied reproach. 'He put in your wireless set for you. And when the electric light goes wrong, or the bells, as they're *always* doing——'

'A child of six could put in a wireless set. He did it very badly, too; brought down most of the plaster, and the thing never worked from the beginning.'

Mrs. Barber coloured. 'I'm sure the poor boy did his best, and you seemed quite pleased at the time.'

'Well, I'm not pleased now,' Uncle Horace snapped. 'The thing's absurd! Everybody knows the motor trade is overcrowded—all sorts of twopenny-halfpenny firms springing up daily and cutting each other's throats. I've offered to use my influence as a director of the bank, and if he gets in I can look after him and help him.'

'I *know* that, Horace. But you won't listen——'

'Who's going to pay his premium?' Uncle Horace asked bluntly.

'Surely, if the boy has a special talent——'

'Special fiddlesticks! It was a taste a minute ago. Anybody has only to look at him to see he hasn't a special talent. If he has brains enough to pass his bank examination it will surprise most of us.'

And in truth at that moment Eric did look a good deal more angry and obstinate than talented. He had risen to his feet and now stood before his uncle, with a frown on his handsome, sulky face, and his head lowered, rather like a young bull meditating a charge. Yet it was just this vision of him which moved Tom. Forgotten were all the slights and rebuffs he had received. 'He *does* know about motors and things,' he burst in impulsively. 'He helped Dr. Macrory to take his old car to pieces and put it together again. And the other day——'

‘Oh, shut your mouth,’ said Eric roughly. ‘I can look after myself without your interfering.’

Tom walked to the window, where he remained with his back to the room, looking out into the wet street.

‘You *are* a beast, Eric,’ Jane informed him dispassionately. ‘I wonder Tom ever speaks to you.’

‘Nobody was speaking to you anyway,’ retorted her brother.

Mrs. Barber rose hurriedly from her chair. ‘You’re not *going*, Horace!’ she exclaimed, for Uncle Horace was already half way to the door.

‘The children will be able to talk more freely when I’m gone.’

‘Surely you needn’t mind about the children!’ At the same time she embraced the entire group in one imploring glance. ‘It was Tom who started it, though I dare say he meant very well. And Jane said she wanted to show you her poem in the school magazine.’

‘*Mother*, what a whopper!’

But it was as if with this too emphatic denial the scene had culminated. There followed an uneasy silence, and as it drew out Tom realized that, like himself, everybody had forgotten and everybody now remembered his father. Uncle Horace returned sulkily to his armchair; his step-mother’s face reflected an odd mingling of consternation and bereavement.

‘Show him your poem,’ said Tom under his breath; and Jane went meekly to fetch the magazine.

‘Oh, Leonard, do stop!’ cried Mrs. Barber tremulously.

The feeble tune, played with one finger, which had begun to tinkle falteringly from the piano, instantly ceased. Leonard got up from the music-stool and he and Eric retired into a corner, where they began to converse together in an undertone. Tom sat upright in his chair. And the minutes grew longer and longer, stretching out till they seemed like hours. Where on earth had Jane gone to? Was she never coming back?

The silence was at last broken by Mrs. Barber, speaking in a half-whisper which perhaps he was not intended to overhear. ‘Do you think I *ought* to write to Mr. Collet?’

Tom pricked up his ears, but no reply came from Uncle Horace.

Once more his step-mother spoke, and this time her voice had sunk lower still. ‘The only thing I’m afraid of is that he may say or do something.’

‘Say or do what?’ Uncle Horace grunted irritably, as if he had not yet got over the matter of Eric and the bank.

‘Well—you never know. And if he gets any encouragement. . . . Suppose he were to take it into his head that he wanted to *see* Tom!’

‘About as likely as that he’ll take it into his head he wants to see you.’

‘You’re so *rude*, Horace, when you’re cross! Yet you complain of the children’s manners!’

‘I haven’t complained of anything. Even supposing he did want to see Tom——’

‘Well, you know the stories there were——’

‘I don’t.’

‘And I told you what Elsie said.’

Uncle Horace made a gesture of fatigue. ‘Elsie! Who’s Elsie? If you’re referring to a lot of servant’s gossip—gossip in this case even more nauseating than usual——’

‘Nauseating!’

‘Well, imbecile then—and libellous—for it was both.’

‘Elsie wasn’t an imbecile. She *came* from Kilbarron, too.’

‘Naturally she came from Kilbarron, or she couldn’t have picked up the gossip.’

But Mrs. Barber was not easily silenced. ‘Some of it may have been gossip,’ she pursued with a quiet stubbornness. ‘All the same, there’s no smoke without a fire, and you can’t deny that he disappeared for *years*. That at least is true, for Edgar told me so himself.’ She paused, to make her next words more impressive. ‘What was he *doing* all those years? Even now nobody knows. There was a scandal of some sort, though it happened abroad and was hushed up, so of course at this time it is hard to say to what extent he was mixed up in it. But he seems to have had some very queer friends, and when he came back it was to shut himself up in that house.’

Uncle Horace had closed his eyes. He now half opened them. ‘All this, I suppose, is on the authority of Elsie. I wonder you ever brought yourself to

part with her. She must have been singularly ungifted in other directions.'

'It isn't on the authority of Elsie. I told you I heard it from Edgar.'

'Then you might have kept it to yourself instead of bringing out ridiculous tales before the children.'

'The children—I'm sure I've never uttered a word to the children,' Mrs. Barber was beginning, when she caught sight of Tom's solemn gaze fixed upon her, and stopped.

'You've uttered a good many in the past five minutes,' Uncle Horace dropped acidly. 'Where do you think Leonard's remark at tea came from? Or was Elsie allowed to unbosom herself to the family in general?' He turned to Tom. 'Your mother thinks you've got an uncle out of a fairy tale, Tom, but I shouldn't advise you to build a romance on that. Mr. Stephen Collet is simply a recluse—which is all we know about him.'

Mrs. Barber looked first at her step-son and then at her brother. 'In my opinion a person who avoids his fellow creatures *must* be——'

But what such a person must be, Tom, to his regret, never learned, for at that moment Jane came back, having found her magazine, and Uncle Horace stretched forth a languid hand to take it. He put on a pair of gold-rimmed eye-glasses, read the poem, and returned it to the authoress without comment.

Jane began to giggle.

'What is there to laugh at, Jane?' her mother inquired severely.

'Uncle Horace thinks it's no good,' said Jane.

'And why should you laugh at that? I suppose you *wrote* the poem to give pleasure.'

'Well, I'm not going to cry if it doesn't,' Jane retorted. 'For one thing, I never imagined Uncle Horace would like it, and for another, I don't expect he knows about poetry:—do you, Uncle Horace dear?'

Uncle Horace, however, without even glancing at her, had again risen from his chair, and this time with an air no one ventured to oppose.

CHAPTER III

Jane had whispered to him not to go to sleep, and he lay in the darkness waiting for her. She was extraordinarily fond of these nocturnal conversations. Things she had plenty of opportunity to tell him through the day would be saved up for the pleasure of communicating them at midnight. Tom could see no sense in it. Sooner or later her mother was bound to find out, and then there would be a fearful hullabaloo. But it was just this element of risk which Jane appeared to find so fascinating, and she took elaborate precautions of a kind that increased the danger. To-night, however, was an exception; to-night he wanted her to come; to-night he really had something to talk about. All the same, he didn't intend to lie awake for hours, and had half a mind now to get up and turn the key in the lock. It was useless to go to sleep without doing so, for she would not hesitate to waken him; and he was still considering the matter when he heard the signal she had invented, a scratching on one of the panels of the door.

That too, of course, was silly; but he was supposed to reply to it with a cough, and if he didn't cough Jane would simply go on scratching until she lost patience and came in. So he cleared his throat, and she immediately entered, a dark figure wrapped in a dressing-gown, and plumped down on the side of his bed.

Tom playfully had hidden under the clothes, but he popped out at once when she began to laugh. 'Don't make such a row!' he whispered angrily. 'You'd think you were doing it on purpose. You might have some self-control.'

'Well, it's your fault. You know if I once begin I can't stop.'

'Then go away: there's nothing to laugh *at*.'

Suddenly his eyes blinked as an electric torch was flashed in his face. 'Now I can see you,' Jane declared complacently.

'Put that out. Where did you get it from?' He made a grab at her hand.

Jane eluded him, but she switched off the light.

'What is it you want to tell me?' Tom asked.

'Heaps of things. We're going to have a really long talk—longer, I mean, than usual.'

‘We’re not; so if you’ve anything to say you’d better say it at once.’

‘I can’t unless you sit up. If you don’t you’ll be falling asleep. I’m going to put on the light.’

‘No,’ said Tom.

‘But what harm can it do? Everybody’s in bed, and it’s so stupid talking in pitch darkness.’

‘I know it is, and I’m always telling you so. If it wasn’t that this is very likely the last time——’

‘The last time! Don’t be absurd! You ought to be pleased and flattered instead of grouching like an old man of seventy.’

‘*Do* speak lower,’ Tom implored. ‘You know what a scene there’d be if ——’

‘The only scenes are those you make yourself. You’re the most frightful little coward—and frightfully conventional too.’

‘If I am it’s you that put it into my head. I’d never have thought about it except for all your hints.’

‘I’m an adventuress,’ Jane admitted. ‘A dark, fateful woman with lovers.’

‘Am I supposed to be one of the lovers?’

‘Though I’d rather be in the secret service,’ she pursued thoughtfully.

‘What secret service! Your mind’s absolutely crammed with rot.’

‘I must say you’re the politest boy——’

‘Well, it’s your own fault, with your dark fateful lovers.’

‘I didn’t say the lovers were to be dark *or* fateful: they may have sticking-out ears and freckles.’

Tom tried to think of a retort, but could not find one. ‘Was this what you had to tell me? Because if so——’

‘I never said I had anything to tell you.’

‘You did: you kicked me at tea: and you told me afterwards not to go to sleep, because you were coming——’

‘Well—so I *have* come. Why don’t you tell *me* something, for a change?’

‘I was going to, but now I won’t.’

‘You really want me to stay a long time, then?’ Jane murmured pensively.

‘No, I don’t: I want you to go away at once.’

‘But I’ve only just come. Tom dear, I can’t imagine one single reason why I should be so fond of you.’

‘Neither can I.’

‘And yet I’m going to give you a kiss.’

Tom moved quickly out of her reach. ‘Can’t you stop fooling,’ he said.

‘I’m not fooling: I’m yielding to affection.’

‘What have you to tell me about Uncle Stephen?’

‘*Uncle Stephen!* Nothing.’

‘Why did you pretend you had, then?’

Jane drew her fingers softly down his cheek, but he pushed her hand away. ‘You did: you know you did.’

‘I’m sorry.’

Tom suddenly sat up and clasped his arms about his knees. ‘Look here, I do want to talk, only——’

‘Only what?’ Jane murmured.

‘I don’t want you to make fun of me.’

‘But I won’t make fun of you:—not if it’s anything serious.’

Tom turned to her doubtfully in the darkness. ‘You mayn’t think it serious,’ he said.

‘Is it about Uncle Stephen?’

‘Yes, it is. I’ve read a book that he wrote. I’ve got it. I bought it. It’s an old book, but Browns’ were able to get it for me.’

Jane’s voice lost its sentimental note. ‘How long have you had it?’ she inquired.

‘Not very long: only a week or two. I’d have told you before, but I knew you wouldn’t read it. It’s all about Greek religion and a lot of it’s *in* Greek.’

‘Why are you telling me now,’ Jane asked suspiciously.

‘Well——’ Tom’s voice trailed away.

‘Did *you* like it?’

‘I liked the bits I understood. There were some bits I didn’t understand.’

‘Is that why you’ve suddenly begun to take such a violent interest in him? I don’t believe it is.’

Tom hesitated. ‘He doesn’t know anything about me,’ he answered evasively. ‘You see, he was my mother’s uncle, and even *she* had never seen him. He’s my great-uncle.’

‘Then he must be as old as the hills,’ said Jane.

‘Not so very old. He’s only sixty-three.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I looked it up. Mother had a family tree. *Her* name’s in it, and mine. I’ll show it to you.’

‘You put yours in yourself.’

‘Well,’ said Tom defiantly—‘why shouldn’t I. . .? Anyway, it was mother who told me Uncle Stephen had written a book: but I never thought of getting it till the other day. She didn’t tell me *much* about him, but I know something happened when he was a boy, and he ran away from home, and never wrote, and for ages nobody knew where he was or what had become of him. And there were stories told about him. At least I think so: your mother said so to-night.’

‘What kind of stories?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘He *does* sound rather fascinating,’ Jane confessed. ‘But of course he may have reformed and become quite ordinary.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Nothing: and if you’re going to be so frightfully touchy about him we’d better talk of Uncle Horace instead.’

Tom hurriedly apologized. ‘Uncle Stephen and I are the only Collets left,’ he said.

‘And you’re not a Collet, you’re a Barber.’

‘It’s the same thing. Besides, mother told me I took after her family. . . . Uncle Stephen was very like me when he was young.’

‘Was he?’ Jane asked sceptically. ‘Did she tell you that too?’

‘No, but I’ve been thinking about it. I wish Uncle Stephen *was* a boy.’

‘Well, if you’re so keen about him why don’t you write to him? He might invite you for part of the holidays.’

‘You saw what happened when I mentioned his name at tea.’

Jane’s surprise was rather contemptuous. ‘You mean to say you’re going to let a thing like that put you off! Especially when you know how silly mother is about everybody who isn’t exactly the same as herself.’

‘They said a good deal more when you were out of the room, getting your poem.’

‘Well, I know *I’d* write, no matter what they said—I mean, if I wanted to. . . . And I bet Uncle Stephen would have written when *he* was a boy.’

Tom sat quiet for a little. ‘I dreamt about him last night,’ he said softly. He waited for a moment or two, looking back at his dream. Then he went on in the same half-hushed, curiously childish voice. ‘It was awfully vivid—just as if he was in the room. But it was dark and I couldn’t see his face.’

‘You couldn’t have seen it anyway,’ Jane pointed out, ‘because you don’t know what he’s like.’

‘He spoke,’ said Tom. ‘He told me not to be frightened, and who he was. He told me where he lived.’

‘You knew that already. . . . *Were* you frightened?’

Tom hesitated. ‘I think—a little—just at first,’ he admitted. ‘That’s why it wasn’t like a dream.’

‘People are often frightened in dreams,’ Jane contradicted. ‘I’ve been frightened myself.’

‘Not in this kind of dream. I—liked it. There was nothing to be frightened about—except its suddenness. He was suddenly there, I mean—in the room, between my bed and the door. And in a dream you’re not surprised when a person is there, are you? It doesn’t give you a start. It doesn’t occur to you that they *oughtn’t* to be there: it seems quite natural. You’re just talking to them, and that’s all. This wasn’t like that. . . . Besides, I don’t think I’d been to sleep,’ he added. ‘I’d been lying awake, feeling rather——’

He broke off, but Jane divined the unspoken words. ‘You mean you were unhappy?’

Tom did not reply.

‘It *must* have been a dream,’ said Jane sharply. ‘If it wasn’t, what was it? I hope you’re not going to be silly about this!’ And she switched on the electric torch to have another look at him. Tom was staring straight into the darkness.

‘If I tell you something,’ he muttered, blinking and frowning in the unexpected illumination, which Jane immediately extinguished, ‘will you swear to keep it a secret?’

‘Do you want to tell me?’

‘Not unless you promise.’

‘All right, then; what is it?’

‘You haven’t sworn yet.’

‘I’ve sworn all I’m going to swear: if you’re not content with that you can keep your secret.’

‘I’m going to Uncle Stephen,’ said Tom.

‘But—— You mean you’re going to run away?’

Tom nodded: then realizing that Jane could not see him he said, ‘Yes.’

There was a pause, followed by a sigh—a sigh which made her next words the more disconcerting. ‘What a perfectly heavenly idea! I’m coming too.’

‘You’re not,’ answered Tom promptly, his voice, in his eagerness, rising to its normal pitch. ‘I’m sorry I told you.’

‘You’ll lend me a suit of clothes,’ Jane went on as if he had not spoken. ‘I’ll get my hair cut short, and I’ll go as your brother. Uncle Stephen won’t know. You might have as many brothers as Joseph for all he knows.’

‘I told you I was serious.’

‘So am I. It’ll be like *Twelfth Night*. You’ll be Sebastian and I’ll be Cesario. Uncle Stephen will be the Duke.’

Tom said no more, but he felt Jane’s arms round his neck, and her lips pressing against his cheek. ‘Dear Tom, *do* let me come. It’s the sort of thing I’ve been dying for all my life. I’ll promise to do everything you tell me. I’ll

not so much as sneeze without your permission. . . . And I want to sneeze now.’ She abruptly dived under the bedclothes and was as good as her word.

‘You’re probably catching pneumonia,’ said Tom gloomily.

‘Well, don’t let’s talk about it. The question is, when are we going?’

‘Of course you can spoil everything if you want to. . . . And you can tell me it was my own fault,’ he added bitterly. ‘It’ll be perfectly true. Anybody is a fool who imagines he can trust a girl.’

There was a silence. Jane withdrew the arm with which she had been claspng his neck. At last she said coldly, ‘You know very well you can trust me. That part of it is merely sentimental—as well as being a lie. It would be much better to say plainly why you don’t want me.’

‘Because we’d be followed and caught at once and I’d get all the blame.’

‘That isn’t the reason.’

‘It’s one of the reasons.’

‘And what are the others?’

‘I want to go alone.’

‘Why?’

‘Because he’s *my* uncle. . . . And anyway I told you. There won’t be nearly so much fuss made if I go alone. Very likely there won’t be a fuss at all. I should think your mother would be glad.’

‘Then you’d better think again,’ returned Jane disagreeably.

‘She *will* be glad. She doesn’t like me.’

‘Whether she likes you or not, there’s a financial consideration, and she likes that. Perhaps it hadn’t occurred to you!’

Tom felt rather shocked. ‘It oughtn’t to have occurred to *you*,’ he said feebly.

‘It didn’t till I heard it discussed.’

‘What!’

‘So you see it won’t be so easy.’

‘Of course, I may come back,’ he mumbled. ‘Uncle Stephen may send me back.’

Jane abruptly altered her tactics. 'It's not so bad here, is it?' she asked in her most coaxing voice. 'I mean, being with us.'

'I don't like it,' Tom confessed. 'And I think I'll like it less after what you've told me.'

'Why?' Jane demanded. 'I don't see that anything I've told you ought to make a difference. It seems to me quite right that you should pay your share. You can afford it better than we can.'

'It's not that. . . . But since nobody really wants me—except you perhaps _____',

'Well, I've explained that they *do* want you.'

'Yes, in—in that way.'

'I think you're being very unreasonable about it. I never said mother didn't want you in other ways too. The only thing I ever heard her say against you was that you were precocious.'

'Precocious!'

'Mother isn't clever. She doesn't understand you. If you were precocious all round she would understand you better. But in most ways you're just the opposite. It's like a baby coming out with frightfully grown-up remarks.'

'Oh.'

'I'm not blaming you. As it happens, I like it. . . . I even think you're rather nice-looking. At least, you've got a very nice expression, and——'

'Perhaps you'd better not explain any more.'

'What I'm saying is a compliment,' Jane persisted. 'Or at any rate what I'm thinking. . . . I think you're the nicest person we know. You don't imagine that if you were just an ordinary boy I'd get out of bed at this hour to talk to you. There'd be nothing to talk *about*.'

'Nor is there: we've finished,' said Tom, and slid down under the clothes again.

Jane had very far from finished. 'We've discussed nothing,' she went on. 'At all events we've settled nothing. When are you going away, and for how long? For ever?'

'I don't know. Very likely Uncle Stephen won't want me either.' Tom drew the bedclothes over his ear. 'Good-night.'

‘You don’t really think that or you wouldn’t be going. You’re the very last person to go where you thought you weren’t wanted. There’s something that makes you think he does want you.’

‘There’s nothing except what I’ve told you.’

‘That dream? I don’t see how you can trust a dream. It seems to me silly. Uncle Stephen mayn’t be a bit like what you imagine. If he isn’t, will you come back here?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘That means you won’t, I suppose. Where *will* you go?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. I wish you’d say good-night: it must be fearfully late.’

‘I don’t believe I ought to keep your secret,’ Jane began, in a new and ominous tone, suggestive of the sudden birth of scruples. ‘Unless you’ll promise to come back here if Uncle Stephen won’t have you or if you don’t like him.’

‘You mean you’re going to tell?’

‘I don’t want to, of course.’

‘No, of course not,’ Tom echoed scornfully. ‘Look here; if you do I’ll never speak to you again as long as I live. And it won’t keep me from going away either, if that’s what you think. I wish now I hadn’t told you. I needn’t have told you, only I thought it would be rotten not to.’

Both their voices in the last few minutes had risen, and as Tom finished speaking he suddenly became aware of another sound. He sat up, gripping Jane by the arm so tightly and unexpectedly that she gave a slight scream. ‘What——?’ she began, and then said, ‘Oh!’

‘Now we’re for it!’ muttered Tom, while they stared at the door, which opened, to reveal in the light she immediately switched on, the bewrapped and imposing figure of Mrs. Barber.

Jane slid off the bed. ‘You needn’t make a fuss, mother,’ she began before that astonished lady had even time to frame a question. ‘And you needn’t glare at Tom.’

Mrs. Barber glared at Jane instead. ‘Go back to your room at once,’ she commanded.

‘I’m sorry if we wakened you,’ said Jane, still rather defiantly. She moved slowly to the door—but her mother answered not a word, nor did she so much as glance at Tom again, but followed her daughter in a freezing silence. There was a click and the light went out: then the door closed and Tom was left alone.

‘So that’s that,’ he muttered aloud; but though he might pretend to dismiss the matter in three words, he lay with his eyes open, staring into the darkness. The sooner he left the house the better. Not that—except to Jane perhaps—he thought what had happened could make much difference. His step-mother was angry, but probably she would be less angry in the morning, and at any rate he would be going away. She was really not an unkindly person, not sulky like Eric, nor sarcastic like Leonard, nor unaccountable like Jane. She had the best temper of them all, and if her affections were exclusively lavished on her own children, there was nothing strange in that. It would have been stranger if they weren’t, Tom thought, for he knew well enough that on his side he had neither shown nor felt anything more than civility. He was not much better at disguising his feelings than she was. When it had been possible he had avoided the good-night kiss which from the beginning had been one of the proofs that she ‘made no difference’ between him and the others. He couldn’t help it. He couldn’t think of her as anything but a stranger—his father’s second wife—a dull, good-natured, and rather common person. He had even been glad that she looked and spoke and thought as she did, because it shut her out so completely from the soft clear memory of his real mother.

Clear, but intermittent; sometimes for long periods absent, sometimes returning in a dream, or like a ghost. It was as a ghost now that it glided into the silent room, laying its head on Tom’s pillow and taking him into its arms. There had been a time when this ghost had made him cry a little, but now it only made him grave and rather sad. But it still had power to make him wish childish wishes, such as that he could hear its voice. It was strange—very strange—how the sound of a voice had come to be the dearest of his memories. . . .

He knew he was beginning to grow sleepy, which with him at night was unusual. As a rule he was only sleepy in the mornings; at night he dropped asleep without any conscious preliminary drowsiness. But now he knew he was sleepy, very very sleepy, though awake. No voice this; merely the faintest breathing in his ear. ‘Uncle Stephen—Uncle Stephen. . . .’ It was his own breath whispering the words. . . . Uncle Stephen, then, was the only living being except himself who had belonged to his mother. Sleepier and

sleepier he grew; deeper and deeper he sank into a darkness pierced now by fantastic shafts of dream-light. Yet still he was awake, he knew he was awake, though his spirit had gained a marvellous sense of buoyancy and power. An intense happiness gushed up as from some sunken fount within him, filling his mind, which was no longer conscious either of sleepiness or wakefulness. ‘Uncle Stephen—Uncle Stephen,’ he called, half laughing, as if it were a game: and the tall figure dimly visible against the window-blind came noiselessly to his bedside. But in the darkness Tom could not see his face.

‘Tom?’

‘Yes; I am here.’

The faintest grey of glimmering dawn showed in the window-frame. There was a thin awakening twitter of surely the earliest birds. Tom only just noticed these things, sighed luxuriously, and smiled. The freckled, sleep-flushed face turned on the pillow as the small clean body turned between the sheets, and then the drowsy eyelids once more descended. . . .

CHAPTER IV

‘It’s all very well,’ said Jane, ‘but I don’t see how you can go away without clothes. You can’t expect Uncle Stephen to lend you things, and anyway, unless he happens to be a dwarf, they wouldn’t be much use if he did.’

Tom regarded her disconsolately—a not infrequent sequel to their conversations. He was sure she could help him if she wanted to, but this morning she was in one of her least tractable moods.

‘It’s not as if he had invited you,’ Jane went on. ‘Very likely he detests boys. Most people do.’

‘Couldn’t you send some of my things after me?’ he suggested humbly. ‘A small bag would do. And you could address it to the railway station, to be called for.’

‘If the bag is to be so small why don’t you take it yourself?’

‘I might be seen.’

‘So might I.’

‘But you could wait till some time when your mother was out.’

‘And I’m to hang about the house—perhaps for two or three days—till she goes out? That will be *very* pleasant.’

Tom sighed. ‘I can take my pyjamas and what is absolutely necessary in a parcel. If you help me I can hide it in the yard, and then I’ll slip out by the back door after dinner. I must catch the three-twenty-five. The next train would be too late. I don’t know where the house is and I may have a long walk.’

‘How much money have you?’

Tom hesitated. Jane once more had gone straight to the point, and it was this time a point he himself had been alternately approaching and avoiding. She knew it too; he could see that from the stony gaze she had fixed on him. ‘Not very much,’ he admitted.

‘*How* much?’ asked Jane.

‘Three-and-eightpence.’

Jane's expression grew more stony still. 'You're evidently going to walk most of the way,' she said unfeelingly. 'Three-and-eightpence won't take you far, and you've two journeys to make.'

'I can get a through ticket of course.'

'For three-and-eightpence?'

Tom waited a moment, but so did Jane. 'You got a pound from Uncle Horace on your birthday,' he said, 'and you can't have spent much of it.'

'Oh,' said Jane. 'Now I see why I was taken into the secret!'

'Of course if you like to be a beast about it,' muttered Tom.

'Calling names won't do any good.'

'Well, why do you say such rotten things then?'

'They're perfectly true things. You mayn't like them, but that's because you're ashamed.'

Tom flared up. 'I'm not ashamed. . . . You know very well that wasn't the reason why I told you.'

'And even if I lent you the money,' Jane pursued coldly, 'it wouldn't get over the difficulty of your clothes.'

'I tell you I'm going to make up a parcel. I'll do it now if you'll stand outside my bedroom door and keep nix.'

'It would be better if I packed and *you* kept nix.'

'No. Somebody might come along and want to know what you were doing in my room. We'd enough of that last night.'

Jane, for a wonder, yielded to the argument, and he hastened to take advantage of this compliance. But when five minutes later he rejoined her on the landing she cast a sceptical glance at the parcel. 'You don't seem to be taking much!'

'I can't. It has to look like an ordinary parcel.'

'Why—if you're taking it out by the back way?'

'I may be seen from the kitchen window.'

Jane gave the parcel another glance. She had assumed her most patronizing manner. 'Did you put in your toothbrush?' she asked. 'Or was that not one of the necessaries?'

Tom controlled his feelings. 'I have it in my pocket.'

'Handkerchiefs?' asked Jane.

'Yes.'

'Well, they *weren't* necessary: Uncle Stephen probably uses them.'

Tom repressed a retort: he knew she was only trying to annoy him. 'Promise you won't say anything before the others.'

'About what?' Jane inquired.

'I mean make allusions—with double meanings.'

'You don't mind if they've only a single meaning, then?'

Still he was determined not to squabble. 'You know well enough it's the kind of thing you do do,' he muttered.

'I think you're perfectly horrid,' Jane broke out unexpectedly. 'I don't want you to go to Uncle Stephen a bit, though I'm helping you in every possible way, and all the gratitude you show is to call me a sneak, and——'

The sentence ended in an ominous sniff. Now he had made her cry! He felt guilty and uncomfortable, and yet what he had said *really* was quite justifiable. But the weeping Jane had clasped herself to his bosom, her wet cheek was pressed against his, and he could only mumble apologies and tell her he was sorry. He continued to do so, calling himself various unflattering names, until with a disconcerting shock he discovered that her grief had changed to amusement.

'I'm *not* laughing,' she immediately told him. 'At least, if I am, it's hysterical. But, Tom, you *are* a funny boy. No, no—you're a darling. Only I wish you did—even just a little bit—feel sorry.'

'Sorry! But haven't I been saying how——'

'Oh, I don't mean *that* kind of sorry. That doesn't matter. You didn't say anything I didn't deserve. I mean sorry about going away. No, I don't mean that either, because of course you're bound to be glad. I don't know what I mean——'

'But I *am* sorry to leave you, Jane. I like you very much. I——'

'Yes;—you needn't strain your imagination. Tell me what I'm to do with your parcel.'

Tom breathed the faintest sigh of relief. ‘As soon as you hear me whistle (I’m going down to the yard now), I want you to chuck it out of the bathroom window. I’ll hide it somewhere, and it ought to be easy enough to slip out through the yard after dinner.’

‘And when I can I’ll lock and bolt the back door so that nobody will know.’

At this so unexpected and reasonable an attitude Tom had a flash of compunction. ‘You’re being awfully decent, Jane. I’m leaving all the worst part of it to you, and you get nothing out of it. But I don’t want you to think you’ve got to tell lies. If you’re asked directly, you know, you must tell the truth.’

‘I can say you talked about running away to sea.’

Tom stared. ‘But I didn’t.’

‘Yes you did; we’ve talked about it now.’

Tom was speechless for a minute. ‘Oh, well,’ he said at last, ‘I think you can look after yourself.’

But Jane still held him. ‘There’s something I want to ask *you* to do,’ she murmured.

‘What?’ He had hesitated a moment, though only for a moment, because he really wanted to do anything he could.

‘You’ll think it silly. I think it silly myself.’

He waited; and then, ‘I’ll come back when I’ve hidden the parcel,’ he suggested, since she seemed loth to proceed further.

‘I want you to let me cut off some of your hair,’ Jane said abruptly, half defiantly.

‘My hair?’ He looked at her in astonishment. At first he thought she was trying to be funny.

‘I can do it so that it won’t be noticed,’ Jane went on.

‘But what——’

‘Oh, take your parcel,’ she cried impatiently, ‘and come back. I’m *going* to cut your hair,’ she added, as he moved towards the staircase. ‘If you don’t let me I won’t help you or lend you any money, so you can make up your mind which it is to be.’

‘All right; you needn’t get excited about it.’

‘It’s because you’re so stupid: everything surprises you: the least little thing.’

‘Nothing that comes from you does,’ Tom retorted. ‘I didn’t know what you meant at first; I thought you wanted to cut my hair all over. It’s the way you said it.’

‘A scrubby little schoolboy with freckles. I bet nobody else will ever make such a suggestion. What’s more *I* only made it out of kindness. Everything I’ve ever done for you has been done out of compassion, so you’d better get that into your head.’

‘It hasn’t,’ Tom replied, now completely enlightened. ‘And I do understand; I’ve felt that way myself.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ returned Jane loftily. ‘If you want your wretched parcel you’d better hurry down to the yard, because I’m going to throw it out of the window now—at once.’

‘All right; I won’t be a jiff. And I *am* sorry for being stupid. I think it was because it was about *me* that made me not understand. At any rate all I was going to tell you——’

‘I know what you were going to tell me. You needn’t repeat it. Was it Eric’s hair you wanted?’

Tom blushed scarlet. ‘I didn’t want anybody’s hair,’ he muttered gruffly. ‘I wouldn’t be such a fool.’

‘Well, you’d better run downstairs, because I’m not going to wait much longer.’

‘I’m going. But don’t throw it till I whistle: there may be somebody there. And I’ll come back when I’ve finished, and let you——’

‘You needn’t bother: I’ve changed my mind,’ said Jane.

‘Well, I’ll come back anyhow.’

CHAPTER V

The first part of his journey had been accomplished with comparative celerity, but there had been a long wait at the end of it, and now, on the branch line, the ancient train puffed and panted asthmatically through the summer fields as if quite unused to such violent exercise. There were many small stations, and at each the engine stopped to take breath. Then, with an indignant scream, it would jerk on again, till finally it came to rest where there was no station at all.

Tom, sitting upright on the hard, straight-backed, unupholstered seat of what was little more luxurious than a cattle-truck, with his brown-paper parcel beside him, was neither surprised nor annoyed by the delay. The mood of elation, or at least of expectant excitement, in which he had started, was fast ebbing. He had begun to feel nervous, as well as hot and thirsty, but he was in no hurry to reach his journey's end. He was tired of looking out of the window, he had neither book nor paper—nothing indeed to read except the inscriptions pencilled on the opposite wall of the carriage, and which were of three kinds—religious, political, and improper—though occasionally all three were blended in a single sentence. He wondered why such inscriptions were always the same. Even the prurient impulse seemed incapable of anything but monotonous repetition, and the feeble attempts at illustration were still more narrowly limited. He studied the countenance of his only fellow-traveller, a young clergyman who was absorbed in a crossword puzzle. He, too, had a parcel, obviously a tennis-racket, on the shop label attached to which was typed Rev. Charles Quintin Knox. Tom was interested in names. It seemed to him that people were always like their names. They must grow like them, because of course you weren't *born* Percy or Sam or Jim or Alfred. If he ever had children of his own he would be very careful what names he gave them. What would Charles Quintin Knox be like? Rather standoffish, rather English public-schoolish, with cold light blue eyes that betrayed not the slightest desire to make your acquaintance. Tom was certain this analysis was not merely the result of his impression of the young man in the opposite corner, though it accorded with it. Would Charles Quintin Knox be good at games? He could tell from this young parson's eyes that he was good at games, just as anybody could have told from Eric's and Leonard's. Perhaps it was only when you were exceptionally good that your eyes had that particular clearness of vision. But his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of shouted questions, and he

leaned out of the window to learn the cause of the commotion. From all the other windows people were leaning out, and to his surprise he saw what must be either the engine-driver or the stoker seated on the embankment, lighting a cigarette. Tom had taken the stopping of the train in this secluded spot to be a part of the ordinary procedure, but it now looked otherwise, and it was apparently the detached and leisurely attitude of the cigarette smoker that had excited expostulation.

A grimy oil-smearing person in stained blue overalls came walking down on the sleepers. 'There's no use talking,' he announced in good-naturedly bellicose tones. 'The front's dropped out of her, and ye'll either have to get out and walk or wait till another engine comes. Jimmy's away to telephone, and God knows how long he'll be.'

'What's happened? What's the matter?' Tom's parson had dropped his newspaper and was leaning out over Tom's shoulder.

The man in overalls recognized an acquaintance of a superior order. 'It's the engine, Mr. Knox.' He squirted a thin jet of tobacco juice in a delicate parabola, and with a black hand wiped away the sweat trickling down his forehead. 'Sure it was only a matter of time anyway: it's not our fault.'

Mr. Knox rejected the excuse. 'The engine ought to have been examined,' he said. 'There must have been carelessness somewhere.'

'Ah well, you know yourself, Mr. Knox, the less examining you do on this line the happier you'll be.'

Tom laughed, whereupon the man in overalls winked at him and Mr. Knox withdrew.

The man in overalls, after further expectoration, now addressed himself directly to Tom, as the only person who seemed capable of accepting an accident in the proper spirit. 'It'll be above an hour likely before they get another engine,' he said. 'If you're only wanting the next station it would maybe answer you better to walk it: it's not above a mile.'

'I'm going to Kilbarron,' Tom said.

'Ah well then, you'd have a goodish step, and it's a warm day. . . . But sure it's a lovely view you have there from the window, and his reverence for company.'

Whether this hint was sincere or not, it produced an effect. The young clergyman addressed Tom for the first time since he had entered the train. 'I'm going to Kilbarron too,' he said, rather stiffly.

‘How far is it, sir?’ Tom asked.

‘About five miles.’

Tom considered whether he should risk the walk. It was a perfect evening, and though the sun still shone and the air was windless the heat of the day had abated. On the other hand he had never been in this part of the world before and was not very good at following directions.

‘I’ll walk if you will,’ he said—a suggestion which appeared to surprise rather than charm Mr. Knox. He answered briefly that he intended remaining where he was.

‘I knew he was particular,’ thought Tom. ‘Charles Quintin Knox. . . . And he’s got an accent, too.’

He guessed that his own appearance must be grubby in the extreme: it often was: and to settle the question he wet the corner of his handkerchief and drew it down his cheek. The handkerchief had not been clean to begin with, but on the conclusion of this experiment it was distinctly dirtier. The aristocratic Mr. Knox watched the performance with an air of aloofness.

‘I’ve been in the train most of the afternoon,’ Tom explained. ‘I was quite clean when I started.’

Mr. Knox nodded. ‘It’s always a dusty business travelling, especially at this time of year and with the windows open.’ He again took up his paper and pencil so that Tom could not very well interrupt him by further conversation.

He wanted to: he wanted to ask questions about Kilbarron—questions which must lead eventually to Uncle Stephen. Mr. Knox must know Uncle Stephen. Unfortunately he remained absorbed in his puzzle, occasionally filling in a blank—rather tentatively as Tom could see—but more often chewing the end of his pencil.

Tom re-examined the inscriptions and had another look out of the window, but nothing was altered except that now several of the male passengers were on the railway line conversing in more or less injured tones. Their remarks were uninteresting and their suggestions to the guard futile. Tom took off his cap and rubbed an inquiring finger softly over the top of his head. The result was worse than he had expected. Jane *had* made a mess of it! There was a whole patch near the crown of his head that felt quite smooth. It was well she hadn’t done it till after dinner or his step-mother would have been sure to notice. But she must have made an awful mark! Suddenly he became conscious that the young clergyman’s eyes were fixed

on him over the top of his newspaper. Tom blushed and hastily put on his cap. ‘Now he very likely imagines I’ve got ringworm,’ he thought. ‘He’ll be changing into another carriage.’

He decided to explain once more—this time that he was free from contagious diseases. ‘My sister cut my hair,’ he said. ‘At least, she’s not really my sister. I expect it’s pretty awful. I was in such a hurry I hadn’t time to look at it, but she told me it was all right.’ He hoped Mr. Knox would confirm this view, but Mr. Knox remained dumb. He consulted a gold watch, and then produced a pipe, which he filled and lighted. Tom after a brief hesitation produced a crushed packet of cigarettes.

They smoked in silence.

‘You’re not a scout, are you?’ asked Mr. Knox suddenly.

‘No,’ said Tom.

‘I thought not.’

Tom felt snubbed. But if this parson believed scouts never smoked he must be jolly innocent. He felt inclined to tell him so. His cigarette wasn’t half finished, and he had only three more, but he chucked it out of the window.

‘Why did you do that?’ asked Mr. Knox.

Tom was embarrassed. ‘I thought you didn’t like to see me,’ he said.

Mr. Knox puffed for a minute or two without speaking. Then he removed his pipe from his mouth. ‘I rather fancied that was the reason. It was an uncommonly gentlemanly thing to do. If ever you *should* think of becoming a scout I’d like to have you in my troop. But I don’t expect you belong to these parts.’

‘No,’ Tom murmured, his embarrassment increased by Mr. Knox’s approval. ‘I’ve never been here before.’

‘And you’re coming on a visit to Kilbarron? I wonder if I know your name—your surname, I mean—I think I know nearly everybody in this neighbourhood.’

‘My name is Thomas Barber.’

‘Then I’m afraid I don’t know you. Thomas, is it, or Tom?’

‘Tom.’

‘My name is Knox. But perhaps I know the people you are going to stay with.’

‘I’m going to stay with Unc—with Mr. Stephen Collet.’

The effect of this was delightful. It caused Mr. Knox to look at him with a vastly increased interest. In fact, he seemed more than interested.

‘You see I’m his nephew,’ Tom went on. ‘Or at least I’m his grand-nephew. But he doesn’t know anything about me. He doesn’t know I’m coming. He was mother’s uncle, and when father died I thought I’d come to him. I haven’t written or anything. I told you I was going to stay with him, but I shouldn’t really have said so, because I don’t know yet. He mayn’t let me stay: he mayn’t even believe I am his nephew.’

Tom poured out this information in an uninterrupted stream, which ceased abruptly, leaving Mr. Knox looking more surprised than ever.

‘But—— You mean you’ve run away from home—is that it? Or is it that you now have no home?’

‘I ran away from my step-mother’s. . . . She’s quite decent,’ he hastily added. ‘You mustn’t think there was anything—any *cause*. It was just because—Uncle Stephen belonged to mother.’ The last words came in so low a voice that they could barely have reached his companion.

That they *had* reached him, however, was apparent in his own altered tone when he replied, ‘I understand.’ After which he paused, and Tom read in his face a genuine kindness. Indeed he could hardly have believed it was the same Mr. Knox whom he had watched doing crosswords, who had rebuked the engine-driver, and who had rejected the invitation to walk to Kilbarron. ‘I have only spoken to Mr. Collet once,’ this new Mr. Knox went on, ‘but I think it very likely he will understand too.’

‘Then you *do* know him?’ said Tom, a little wistfully.

Mr. Knox hesitated, but finally, and as if reluctantly, shook his head. ‘There’s no use pretending. Of course, I have only been at Kilbarron a little over a year, but I don’t think that makes much difference: I don’t think *anybody* knows Mr. Collet. I don’t think anybody has been given the chance. Ever since he came to the Manor House—or at least so I have been told—he has kept entirely to himself. . . . A recluse.’

Tom recalled Uncle Horace’s similar description. ‘But if he is—so reclusive as all that——’ he pondered doubtfully.

Mr. Knox had a further pause. Then he seemed to make up his mind. 'Not a bit of it,' he replied briskly. 'And you won't find him really an old man either. His eyes are as young as yours. They're very remarkable eyes—very deep and blue and clear—extraordinary. . . . I won't say that some boys mightn't be a little afraid of him at first (he doesn't look, and he isn't dressed quite like other people), but I've a notion you won't be. I rather imagine he's the very uncle for you, or, if you think it should be put the other way, that you're the very nephew for him.'

Tom turned to the deepening glow of sunset. 'I'm glad you like him,' he said softly.

There was just the faintest, faintest stressing of the 'you', but Mr. Knox looked pleased. 'Ah,' he as softly replied, 'you *are* his nephew.' And then, as Tom's gaze fixed itself on him in a kind of questioning muteness. 'Don't bother,' he added. 'I *did* mean something, but I'm not myself sure what. At all events it had nothing to do with outward appearances, for you aren't in the least like him to look at—even after making every allowance for all the years between you.'

'You don't think——' Tom began. 'You don't think he'll be angry with me?'

'No. . . . And, if you should meet anybody else—I shouldn't ask questions about him.'

Tom gazed, feeling not very sure what this meant. 'I don't think I understand,' he said.

'I mean, when you reach Kilbarron. Go straight to Mr. Collet.'

'Of course,' said Tom, though he was still puzzled. 'That's what I intended to do.'

'Well, that's all right then. You'll have no difficulty in finding your way: I can put you on the road.'

'Ought I not to have asked *you* questions?' Tom said, after a longish pause in which he had been turning the matter over.

'Yes, of course. I only meant——' Mr. Knox, however, found it hard to express what he had meant. 'Kilbarron is a small country town,' he went on. 'With two or three exceptions the inhabitants belong to the semi-educated class, and a good many of them are not even that. Among such people you usually find a good deal of narrow-mindedness and bigotry: also, I'm afraid,

superstition. Quite a number of them believe in charms, and fairies, and that kind of rubbish, for instance.'

Tom had already picked up the drift of these remarks. *That* was why he wasn't to ask questions. 'You mean they don't like Uncle Stephen?' he said.

'They know nothing about him. It's enough for them that he never comes out from his own house and grounds, and that there is something in his appearance slightly unusual:—not that the vast majority of them have ever even seen him. And by the way, it's quite possible, in fact it's practically certain, that you'll find Mr. Collet alone in the house. It's a bigish place, too, with a lot of trees, and it will be dark, I dare say, when you get there——'

'I know,' said Tom quietly.

'What do you know?' Mr. Knox's eyes were fixed earnestly on him, but it was, Tom imagined, an expression not uncommon to them. He thought Mr. Knox took things very seriously and would not easily see a joke. He was that kind; but Tom liked him.

'I know that you think perhaps I'll be frightened, and that you don't want me to be, because there's nothing really to be frightened about.'

'There *is* nothing.'

'Well, I won't be. I mean, I won't show it. It's not that kind of thing I'm afraid of.'

'What kind of thing are you afraid of?'

But Tom did not answer. He could not explain to Mr. Knox that he would be afraid of nothing so long as Uncle Stephen was really Uncle Stephen, and that if he should find he wasn't, it wouldn't then much matter what else he was—or matter about the house, or the darkness, or the trees, or the villagers, or anything.

CHAPTER VI

About two hours later they rattled into Kilbarron station where, having got wind of the accident, quite a number of persons had assembled. Tom's arrival thus became a rather public matter. Everybody stared at him as he walked to the exit beside Mr. Knox, who also accompanied him down the main street, and then, on the outskirts of the town, pointed out his way. He was to go straight on for about a mile and a half, when he would reach a bridge crossing the river. Here he was to take the first turning on his left—Tinker's Lane, it was called—a short cut which would bring him out close to the house. He would see a wall, and he was to follow this wall till he came to a wooden gate; he couldn't make a mistake for there was no other house near.

So along the road Tom trudged, swinging the famous parcel, his shoes white with dust. The sun had almost reached the horizon, leaving a green liquid sky against which homing birds were black as ink. And not a soul did he meet till he drew near the bridge, where a young man stood facing him, with his right arm stretched along the parapet. It was perhaps the solitude of this unexpected figure which caused Tom, though only while one might draw a breath, to slacken his pace. The attitude of the loiterer was graceful and indolent, he might have been standing for his portrait, yet somehow at that first glance Tom had received a faintly disquieting impression, which the dark eyes fixed on him intently did nothing to remove. He thought of gipsies, for this young man, in his rough homespun jacket and leather leggings, did not look like a farm labourer, though he might have been a gamekeeper; but his deeply tanned complexion and the bright scarlet neckcloth he wore loosely knotted round his muscular throat were very much in keeping with Tom's conception of a gipsy, and he wondered if there was a camp in the neighbourhood.

And all this time he continued to advance, though with a growing embarrassment. For the young man's stare was persistent, and Tom could not escape from it, even though he kept his own gaze averted. Nor did he altogether like the brown surly face upon which short black hairs showed a weekly shave to be nearly due. There was something in its expression to which he was unaccustomed—something boldly investigatory, vaguely predatory. He himself kept his eyes fixed on the landscape, nor was it till he was actually abreast of the figure leaning against the parapet that the latter spoke. 'Evening!' he said.

Tom replied with equal brevity, and had passed on a few yards, when an unaccountable impulse made him turn and ask, 'Is this Tinker's Lane?' He pointed to the only lane there was, branching off on the left, and which he knew very well must be the one he wanted.

And instantly he knew that the young man knew he knew. He did not even trouble to reply, but their eyes met and Tom blushed crimson. Then, with a smile that was only just sufficient to show a gleam of very small and very perfect teeth, the young man asked, 'Who'll you be looking for?'

'I want the Manor House.'

'Collet's? You going to work there?'

'No,' answered Tom, and pursued his way.

He had not gone more than twenty yards before he heard footsteps behind him. He was startled, though there was no reason why he should be, except that the young man on the bridge had presented a picture of a kind of feline laziness not likely to be abandoned without a purpose. Tom's inclination was to walk more quickly, but pride and annoyance prevented him from doing so, with the consequence that in two or three minutes the young man was by his side though not actually abreast with him.

'Beg your pardon, sir: I made a mistake; but there's no offence I hope.'

Tom, without turning, replied that it was all right; yet his companion did not drop behind. On the contrary, they were now walking in step together, the young man having accommodated his stride to the boy's. 'My mother's Mr. Collet's housekeeper,' he said, in a deep, slightly husky voice. 'But she doesn't sleep there. Deverell's her name—and mine. Our cottage is across them fields.'

This time Tom did not answer. Out of the tail of his eye he could see that young Deverell's face was turned to him, and he had again the unpleasant sense of being subjected to a prolonged and very searching scrutiny.

'I thought I'd better tell you, because unless something's kept her working late you'd maybe be knocking a long while and nobody hear you. The girl—Sally Dempsey—she doesn't sleep in either. . . . You'll be a friend of Mr. Collet's perhaps?'

'Yes,' said Tom, quickening his pace.

The young man's stride—noiseless, effortless—still kept step with him: he might as well have tried to out-distance a leopard or a wolf.

‘I don’t mind seeing you in these parts before. Would the old gentleman be expecting you to-night?’

‘No,’ Tom replied.

‘Then he mightn’t hear you knocking, and him reading in his books. So if you’d come to the cottage mother would go back with you.’

‘I think I’ll go on to the house, thanks. Your mother mayn’t *be* at the cottage.’

Tom spoke, or imagined he spoke, coldly and distantly, but he was not very good at producing such effects, and his companion seemed to notice nothing amiss. He continued to walk close by his elbow. ‘You’ll be staying on a visit with Mr. Collet, likely?’ he suggested.

‘I dare say. I don’t know.’

To make it perfectly plain that he wished to be alone, he stepped aside, and began to walk along the grass close to the hedge. But this manœuvre was unsuccessful: he caught his foot in a bramble. He tripped, and would have fallen had he not instantly been steadied by a firm grasp round his body. There was something so miraculously swift in the movement which had saved him that even through his annoyance Tom felt a reluctant admiration.

‘It’s not easy seeing in this light,’ Deverell said quietly. ‘You’d best keep to the middle of the road.’

Tom, a little out of countenance, accepted the advice. Between the high banks, topped by still higher hedgerows, the light had deepened to twilight. Moths were astir; a white cloudy moon was rising; and when they came to a stile he caught a glimpse of the river, its winding course indicated by a faint mist that hung above it. Tom paused and looked out across the fading meadows, while Deverell waited beside him.

But it was getting late and he stood there only for a minute or two. ‘I’ll take this for you,’ said Deverell gruffly, possessing himself of the parcel without paying any attention to Tom’s refusal.

And they walked on again, now in silence, except that Deverell had begun to whistle softly and in a plaintive minor key. It would be lighter, Tom supposed, when they got out of the lane, which seemed to grow deeper and deeper as they proceeded, that solitary stile being the only gap they had yet come to. The faint scent of brier and meadowsweet was pleasant in the dusk.

He kept his gaze fixed on the track before him so that he might avoid treading on the snails.

And by and by he took the paper of cigarettes from his pocket and offered it to Deverell. 'You may as well have them: I don't want to smoke any more.'

The lane had been bearing all the time to the right, and now began to wind uphill. They must soon reach the end of it, Tom thought, and indeed before Deverell had finished his cigarette they emerged on to a road which he knew was the one he wanted. Along one side of it ran a stone wall higher than his head, and beyond the wall rose the trees of what must be the Manor estate. At this point Deverell stopped and held out the parcel. 'I think I'll be bidding you good-night here. The gate's just round that bend.'

Tom took the parcel shamefacedly. 'It was very good of you to carry it, and to come all this distance out of your way.'

'You're welcome,' said Deverell.

Tom fumbled with the string of his parcel: he wanted to say something more—something that might make up a little for the suspicions he had shown; but all he could think of was, 'My name is Tom Barber'.

In the shadow, where they had halted, he guessed, rather than saw, that Deverell's dark eyes were looking at him—guessed really from his attitude more than anything, for he had put his hands in his pockets and was standing, with his legs slightly apart, directly facing him. 'What were you frightened of?' he asked unexpectedly.

'Nothing,' answered Tom. 'I thought you were——' He was on the point of saying 'a gipsy', but checked himself in time, though he could hit on no politer explanation of his behaviour.

'Still, you *were* frightened, and then about half roads down the lane it stopped.'

'That's quite true,' said Tom simply. Then he added, 'How did you know?'

'I knew well enough.'

'You mean——'

'Ay,' answered Deverell laconically.

It was not much of an answer, but Tom knew it was all he should get, and for the first time since their encounter he laughed. Deverell did not echo

his amusement (he was, Tom guessed, in his own way, quite as serious a person as Mr. Knox), but none the less their relation had undergone a modification of some kind when he said, 'Good-night, Mr. Tom.'

'Good-night,' Tom replied.

Next minute he was alone, and the minute after had broken into a jog-trot, for it really *was* very late, far too late to be arriving at a strange house. A most alarming thought occurred to him, that perhaps Uncle Stephen went to bed early. People living in the country often did, and though no doubt he would be able to waken him by hammering at the door, he did not think he should have the courage to do this; he would rather spend the night in the open air. He would be pretty sure to find some kind shelter, and at any rate it was quite warm.

He stopped, and in the brightening moonlight looked at his watch:—twenty-five past ten. Here, anyhow, was the gate—a white wooden gate—very likely the back entrance. But he pressed down the latch with a fluttering heart, for all his misgivings had returned, accompanied by not a few new ones.

In the avenue he had to proceed warily. The moon was not yet clear of the tree tops, and it was so dark that more than once he found himself blundering into the bushes. The black trees towered above him; everything was black—and alarmingly still. He was sure now that Uncle Stephen would have gone to bed, and the prospect of spending a night out of doors was much less attractive than it had been only a few minutes ago. He wanted to hurry, but that was impossible. It was difficult enough, even when walking slowly and carefully, to keep to the path, which wound this way and that way, so that there was always a wall of trees directly facing him.

Then suddenly he saw the house. It was there, in the moonlight, dark and solid, and though from this distance he could make out no architectural details apart from two projecting wings and a flat roof, there *was* a light, there were several lights, warm and bright and friendly.

Tom crossed the intervening silver-grey lawn, and on the broad gravel sweep stood still. The porch was wide and deep, but before mounting the two shallow steps leading to it he had to summon up all his resolution. It was a brief struggle, however: he entered the porch, and began to search for the bell. He could not find one, but he found a knocker, and gave two lamentably timid raps.

They were hardly loud enough to have disturbed a mouse, let alone to have waked up Uncle Stephen, yet barely had the discreet sound subsided when he heard footsteps in the hall, and next instant the door opened wide, letting out a flood of light, through which he faced a small, fragile, elderly woman—Mrs. Deverell, he supposed.

‘Does Mr. Collet live here?’ he was beginning nervously, when his question was interrupted.

‘Why, it must be Master Tom! I’d given up expecting you, Master Tom, and was getting ready to go home.’

‘I know I’m awfully late. I couldn’t help it.’ He stopped suddenly in the bewildering realization that he had been expected. He gazed with astonished eyes at Mrs. Deverell, but the housekeeper had replunged into her own explanations.

‘You see the master wasn’t quite sure which day you’d be coming, and it was only this morning he asked me had I got your room fixed up. And then, even if you came by the last train, I made sure you’d be here by nine o’clock. But your room’s all ready, sir, and your supper’s ready. So you walked from the station! Even so, the train must have been terribly late. And they’ve never sent on your things: it’s just like them! However, you’d better go and speak to the master first, and then I’ll show you your room. I kept up a fire, thinking you might like a bath, so the water will be nice and hot. Leave your parcel there on the hall table and I’ll take it up. Just follow me, sir.’

But Tom had not yet regained sufficient composure to follow her, or even to produce any very intelligible speech, though he did manage to say the engine had broken down. It was as if he clung to this as the one comprehensible fact in a maze of unreality. Then it flashed across his mind that Jane might have sent a telegram to announce his arrival. But why should she? It wasn’t a bit like her to do such a thing. Besides, if there had been a telegram Mrs. Deverell would have known definitely he was coming.

And all this time she was waiting, and had even begun to peer at him rather anxiously. ‘Uncle Stephen *expected* me?’ he said, with an effort forcing his conflicting thoughts into a coherent question. Yet involuntarily he added, ‘How *can* he have expected me? How can he have known?’

Mrs. Deverell continued to look at him, while an expression of uncertainty slowly deepened in her own eyes. ‘Didn’t you write him a letter,

sir?' she murmured. 'Or him to you?' Her frail and faded features seemed to beg him to answer 'Yes'.

'I hadn't time. I——'

'Ah, well,' she caught at this as better than nothing, 'that's why he couldn't say whether it would be to-day or to-morrow.' And her manner struck Tom as carrying an odd note of not wishing to push the matter further. 'You'd better come with me now, sir, and tell him you've arrived.'

The hall, of whose appearance Tom was only beginning to take in a conscious impression, was square and carpeted; and half way down it, against the panelled wall, a grandfather's clock ticked with a homely, comforting sound. Beyond this was a wide low staircase, branching off on the first landing to right and left, where it was backed by three tall narrow windows. From the foot of the stairs dimly lit passages also extended to right and left, following the lines of the upper flights. It was towards the passage on the left that Mrs. Deverell by the gentlest push now impelled him, and halfway down it she knocked on a door, opening it, however, at the same time. 'Here's Master Tom now, sir,' she said in a toneless voice, her thin hand grasping Tom's sleeve as if to prevent him from running away.

There had been no summons from within, but firmly Mrs. Deverell pushed him forward, while simultaneously she herself withdrew, closing the door softly behind her, and leaving Tom, dumb and motionless, on the threshold of what was the longest room he had ever seen, and which in fact must have covered nearly the whole area of the east wing of the house.

He had, in his nervousness, a blurred impression of high book-lined walls, of a soft floating light that dimmed and shaded off into a surrounding darkness, but above all, though at what seemed to be an immense distance from him, of a figure seated by a table, a figure whose grave, kind face and silver hair were surmounted by a black skull-cap. There was a perceptible pause and an intense silence. The room rapidly became brimmed with this silence, which passed over Tom in wave after wave, so that he might have been deep down under the sea. His heart was thumping, his cheeks burned, and all at once an unutterable misery swept over him. His mouth quivered; he was at that moment on the very verge of tears; but he forced them back, biting on his lower lip. At the same time the seated figure had risen, looking tall, though slightly stooped, in a black costume that vaguely suggested an earlier period than the present, and which showed only a touch of soft white linen at throat and wrist. But this movement seemed to have the effect of decreasing the distance between them, and Tom advanced. It was all strange

enough, for no word had yet been spoken, and Tom came forward slowly, step by step, his arms hanging by his sides, his head drooping a little. He came on and on till at last he felt a hand resting on each of his shoulders, and at this he looked up into eyes of the darkest deepest blue he had ever beheld. His own eyes were misty and again he was biting on his lip, but he felt a hand brushing lightly over his head, and then more firmly, so that, obedient to its pressure, he tilted it back a little, and at the same time closed his eyelids. The hand came to rest, still pressing lightly on the tumbled hair, and Tom all at once had the oddest and loveliest impression. He didn't know whence it came—perhaps out of the Bible—but he knew—and it was as if he had never known anything so deeply, so beautifully—that Uncle Stephen had blessed him.

He felt suddenly at rest: he felt happy: he even smiled faintly—shyly—but contentedly—after a little, rather sleepily. And still he said nothing:—nor did Uncle Stephen. Thus, in fact, Mrs. Deverell found them when she came back. It seemed to Tom as if she had been gone only an instant, though it must have been longer, much longer. She had come to say that Master Tom's room was ready, and that she thought he'd better have his supper now and go to bed, after which she herself would go home.

Tom held out his hand to Uncle Stephen, and they said good-night: then Mrs. Deverell took him off to the dining-room.

He obeyed her in a kind of dream. It had all come about so wonderfully that by now he had ceased to question anything. He supposed he should understand in time, but not to-night—nor did it matter if he never understood. Strangest of all perhaps, was his sense of having plunged into a world utterly unknown to him, but in which he was not unknown, and which appeared to have been always there waiting for him.

And, if he did not understand, he at any rate knew; for this *was* Uncle Stephen—*his* Uncle Stephen. He had seen him before—twice—though it was only to-night he had seen his face. And he had known the sound of his voice—known it before he had heard it bidding him good-night. Moreover, he thought Uncle Stephen knew too. . . .

'You're dropping asleep on your feet, Master Tom,' Mrs. Deverell said as he smiled at her. 'And little wonder after the day you've had. The minute you've finished your supper you must go straight to bed.'

He had forgotten how hungry he was, but he realized it when he sat down at the table. Mrs. Deverell had prepared nothing elaborate for him, but there was cold chicken and ham, a fresh green salad, and rolls and butter.

While he ate she sat knitting, and more than once, when he glanced up, he caught her eyes fixed on him in a mildly speculative gaze, as if she were searching for an answer to a riddle his advent had suggested. She did not tell him that a delicate moustache of milk marked his upper lip, that there was a sooty smudge down one of his cheeks from temple to chin, that his hands were shockingly dirty. Of the last fact, before the end of his meal, Tom himself became conscious. ‘I say, I shouldn’t have sat down like this,’ he apologized.

‘Well, I *was* going to take you upstairs,’ Mrs. Deverell answered, ‘but I hadn’t the heart to keep you starving any longer. You’d better wash your hands and face though, before you get into bed, or I don’t know what my sheets will be like in the morning. I suppose they’ll be sending up your luggage first thing to-morrow.’

‘They won’t,’ answered Tom, his mouth full of lettuce. ‘I mean, I haven’t any. Except that parcel.’

Mrs. Deverell suspended her knitting to look at him. ‘But bless you, child, there’s nothing in your parcel except your pyjamas and two or three handkerchiefs and collars and an old pair of flannel trousers!’

‘I know. You see I couldn’t bring anything that would be missed. I came away unexpectedly.’

‘Unexpectedly!’ Mrs. Deverell resumed her knitting and for a time the clicking of needles and the munching of lettuce leaves provided the only sounds in the room. At last, however, she spoke, ‘I don’t rightly know what “unexpectedly” means, nor if I’m intended to know, or just to mind my own business.’

‘You don’t even know my name, do you?’ said Tom.

‘Not your second name,’ Mrs. Deverell admitted, ‘unless it’s Collet?’

‘It isn’t: it’s Barber; but my mother was a Collet. . . .’

‘She’s dead,’ Tom added, after finishing his milk, ‘and my father died last Friday.’

Mrs. Deverell at this laid down her knitting. ‘Oh, you poor lamb!’ she cried. ‘And me sitting here asking you questions. Now don’t you be bothering about anything I may have said.’

‘But you *haven’t* said anything,’ Tom assured her. ‘You haven’t asked a single question. I ran away, but that was really only because I thought my

step-mother wouldn't let me come. I mean, I would rather have asked her, only I couldn't risk it.'

'And have you told your uncle that?'

'Uncle Stephen?'

'Yes: you must tell him: you'd have been better to tell him at once when you were having your talk to-night, but it will do in the morning.'

'All right, I'll tell him in the morning.'

'And I must say I hope your step-mother will allow you to stay. Because your uncle has taken to you: that's very plain. And I won't deny I had my doubts about it beforehand—when he first told me you might be coming. He's never had visitors of *any* sort so long as I've known him. And a boy seemed the last in the world. . . .'

'But I'm his nephew,' said Tom.

'Nephew or no nephew. Well, as I say, it's easy to see he's taken to you, and it will do him a world of good to have somebody.'

Tom wiped his mouth, brushed the crumbs from his waistcoat, and said, 'I met your son on the way here.'

Mrs. Deverell looked up without a smile. 'Oh, him!' was all she replied, with a slight shake of her head.

'He wanted me to go back to your house, because he thought I wouldn't be able to get in here. He thought you'd be at home.'

'You needn't be paying much attention to what he'd think or not think. I suppose he begun asking you questions.'

'I asked *him* one first.'

'Well, I wouldn't bother your head about him. Mr. Collet wouldn't want you to be making friends with him. I'm his mother, and perhaps oughtn't to say it, but it's little good he's ever done either to himself or anyone else. If you've finished, Master Tom, I'll show you your room, for it's late and I must be going. I'll leave the things here for Sally to clear up in the morning.'

Tom jumped to his feet, while Mrs. Deverell turned down the lamp. 'You're room's right over this,' she continued, as she preceded him upstairs, 'and your uncle's is at the end of that other passage.' She paused to point it

out before opening Tom's door. 'Your uncle thought you'd like this room best, it being so bright and cheerful and getting all the sun.'

'It's lovely,' said Tom, looking round him, 'and it must be bright with so many windows.' All of them, he noticed, had cushioned window-seats, and he admired the four-poster with its flowered chintz counterpane on which, looking absurdly small on that immense expanse, his pyjamas were laid out. 'I never slept in a bed like this before. It will be like going to sea in a Spanish galleon.'

'Well, so long as you don't get lost in it,' Mrs. Deverell said. 'And you've a bathroom to yourself—through that door there. But you're not to take a bath to-night, after all that supper. There's a hot jar in your bed, though it's such a warm night perhaps you'd be more comfortable without it. I only put one blanket on, so if you feel cold you can spread the eiderdown over you.'

'Oh, I won't feel cold: at the present moment I'm boiling. What time am I to get up?'

'The master has his breakfast at nine. But Sally will wake you in the morning. She'll be bringing you a cup of tea, and if you leave your clothes on a chair outside the door she'll take them away and brush them. I brought you a pair of the master's slippers, but I doubt if they'll be any use unless you can manage to tie them on. And now good-night, Master Tom, and I hope you'll sleep well. I must be off.'

'Good-night, and thank you very much.'

But Tom, left to himself, did not at once begin to undress. He first went to the windows and pulled up all the blinds Mrs. Deverell had drawn down: then he made a tour of inspection, opening and shutting drawers and doors. In the big carved rosewood wardrobe there was a mirror in which he could see himself from top to toe. The carpet was thick and soft under his bare feet as he padded about, and at last, having heard the hall-door closing behind Mrs. Deverell, he got into his pyjamas. Now he and Uncle Stephen were alone in the house. Not a sound, not a murmur, either outside or within. It was queer, it was really rather thrilling.

Tom opened his bedroom door cautiously and looked out. The passage was dim, lit only by the light that floated through from his own room, for Mrs. Deverell had taken away the lamp. He carried a chair out and hung his clothes over the back of it; then stood for a moment or two listening. But there was nothing to hear, except the remote ticking of a clock, and he tip-

toed—a small pallid figure—along the passage to the staircase, where he hung over the banisters gazing down into the hall. A broad river of moonlight stretched from the landing windows down the central staircase. Tom knew that, according to the way he allowed his thoughts to turn, this silent house might become a place haunted by fear, or by a spirit of extraordinary peacefulness and beauty. But there was no fear in his heart. What actually kept him hovering there in the cool though not cold darkness was a desire to go down to Uncle Stephen. What prevented him from going down was the thought that Uncle Stephen might be displeased if he did. And beneath both the impulse and its repression was the memory of a time when his mother used to come to say good-night to him after he was snugly in bed. That was long ago, but now he wanted—wanted most awfully—Uncle Stephen to come. He remembered his dream. Would there ever be a time when he should be able to talk to Uncle Stephen about it? Why did things never really come right except in dreams? But perhaps they did—here. There had been those minutes—he did not know how many—in the room downstairs, before Mrs. Deverell had returned. . . .

The mellow chiming of the grandfather's clock rose from the hall, dispersing his reverie. 'Dickory, dickory, dock,' Tom chanted. The spell somehow had been broken, and he ran back to his room, where five minutes later he was sound asleep.

CHAPTER VII

Tom, wakened by a knocking on the door, opened his eyes drowsily to see another pair of eyes regarding him with a frank and friendly curiosity out of a rounded, fresh-coloured, pleasant face, and concluded that this morning vision must be none other than Sally Dempsey. The vision, the moment he took notice of it, retreated to the landing, only to reappear again, carrying in first a small tray with tea and biscuits, which was placed on the table beside his bed, and then his clothes more neatly folded than they had been since leaving the tailor's. Sally next went into the bathroom, where he heard her turning on the water.

Tom found such attentions as delightful as they were novel. He ate all the biscuits, and drank all the tea contained in the little china pot with its pink and green sprigs. He lay in his bath luxuriously as a frog. Nor was it a cold bath, as he had feared it might be, and it was so deep that the whole of him was covered at once. He raised and lowered himself from his middle to make warmer waves pass over him, while outside the birds sang and through the open window the sun shone.

But when it came to dressing he looked at his clothes with distaste. He had been obliged to come away in his black suit, and the jacket he *must* wear, since he had no other. But he discarded the waistcoat and the trousers, putting on his flannels. With a clean collar, and his hair nicely brushed, he felt himself to be a much more presentable as well as a good deal more comfortable person than the sticky travel-stained Tom who had arrived last night.

Coming downstairs, he paused on the landing overlooking the hall, where the front door stood wide open. Out in the porch he could see Uncle Stephen, and after a moment of shyness he ran down the last flight to join him. They shook hands, said good-morning, and then stood waiting, Tom supposed, to be summoned to breakfast.

A gong sounded and they went in. Uncle Stephen's place was laid at the head of the table and Tom's at the side. Looking out through the window, he had a view of a man mowing the lawn, swinging his scythe in a slow rhythmic sweep, while the tall grass toppled over and lay still as the blade passed through it. Sometimes a ray of light was reflected from the bright flashing steel on to the ceiling.

Tom was not a great eater—his step-mother accused him of picking at his food, a habit which had much annoyed her—but Uncle Stephen kept a less critical eye upon him, and there being no Gavney boys to create an unfavourable comparison, he did not do so badly. Uncle Stephen, at all events, seemed satisfied, and towards the end of the meal said, ‘I think, Tom, you had better tell me everything that has happened.’

Tom thought so, too; but it was difficult to make a beginning.

‘I dare say I can guess most of it,’ Uncle Stephen helped him out, ‘only, I should like to know exactly where we are before taking any further steps. And some further steps, I suppose, will have to be taken.’

Tom looked out at the summer morning and at the mower; then he looked at Uncle Stephen. Too easily, perhaps, he had jumped to the conclusion that everything was settled; for now he remembered Uncle Stephen really had said nothing about keeping him. The preparations might mean no more than that he was to be a visitor for a few days! He lowered his head and sat there without a word.

Uncle Stephen glanced at him. ‘What is the matter?’ he asked. ‘What is troubling you?’

‘Nothing,’ Tom replied; and after a moment proceeded to give an account of yesterday’s adventure. The account was fragmentary and at times obscure—particularly in all that had led up to the actual journey—but Uncle Stephen did not interrupt him. When Tom had ended he merely asked, ‘What are your own plans?’

It seemed to Tom that his plans had been very plain indeed. At any rate he could not express them more openly until he knew they were Uncle Stephen’s also, and now he supposed they weren’t. For a moment he saw himself returning to Gloucester Terrace—but that at least should not happen. He remained silent. His knife dropped to the floor and he was a long time picking it up.

Uncle Stephen was watching him closely. ‘Perhaps that was not a good way of putting it,’ he said. ‘What I really meant was, that I suppose, until you have given it a trial, you won’t be able to tell me whether you would like to stay on here or not. You see, by “stay here” I mean live with me, looking upon this house as your home. You are bound to find it very quiet—and not only quiet, I’m afraid, but dull; for the quietness wouldn’t matter if you had a companion of your own age. Unfortunately there is nobody—at

least I know of nobody. There are young people of course, but they're not of your class.'

'That doesn't matter.'

'Doesn't it?' Uncle Stephen seemed more doubtful. 'Perhaps you're right: I don't know.'

'Do you want me?' Tom asked, his bright eyes on Uncle Stephen's face. 'Please tell me truly.'

'I thought you had made up your mind about *that* part of it last night!'

'Yes I did.'

'And what conclusion did you come to?'

Tom coloured. 'I thought you wanted me,' he said.

Uncle Stephen allowed a few seconds to elapse before he replied, 'Well, Tom, nothing has happened since.'

'Then you *do* want me?' said Tom with a little sigh of relief.

'Of course I want you, but it isn't only what I want that has to be considered.'

'It is—if I want it too,' Tom answered.

Uncle Stephen looked out of the window. 'I suppose I shall hear from your step-mother to-day,' he said. 'I shall write this morning to ask her to send on your things. Temporarily, I don't expect there will be any objections made. Unless, of course, the question of school should arise—I was forgetting that.'

'It won't arise,' said Tom. 'I wouldn't have been going back before the holidays even if I'd been at home. The holidays begin next week.'

'Even so,' Uncle Stephen pursued, 'holidays can't last for ever. What we want to reach is a permanent arrangement—something which will prevent the whole question from being reopened in a few weeks' time. You see, if you are to become my boy, I should like you to live with me—all the time—not only during your holidays.'

'Yes,' said Tom, 'of course. I *will* live with you.'

'But in that case it will have to be settled properly—definitely. And we must find you a tutor.'

‘Couldn’t *you* teach me, Uncle Stephen? I wouldn’t give you any trouble: I’d do everything you told me.’

‘I don’t think that would be a good plan, though we might sometimes read together if you would care to.’

‘I’d love it.’

‘But we’ve got to remember that in two or three years you’ll be going to a university, and therefore there should be somebody who can direct your work along the usual lines. I can’t. I never was at a university, and even if I had been, my experience would now be out of date. My own training was special and entirely *unusual*. It would be well to have all this part of it as cut and dried as possible. We might speak about it to your curate friend.’

‘Mr. Knox?’

‘I know even less about him than you do: still, if he is willing to coach you, I think his qualifications ought to be sufficient. You don’t require a *great* deal, do you: you’re clever enough to do the real work yourself?’

‘Yes,’ said Tom.

‘So if you called to ask him to come to see me, we might sound him on the point. I’ve an idea that it would be as well to get hold of him as soon as possible.’

‘I can go this morning. I know where he lives; he showed me the house.’

‘The more practical our plans are the better. That is, of course, supposing certain difficulties *should* be raised.’

‘Yes.’ Tom had no very precise notion as to what kind of difficulties were meant, but he had a complete faith in Uncle Stephen’s wisdom.

‘There’s a good deal,’ Uncle Stephen went on, ‘about which we are still in the dark.’

‘Yes,’ said Tom again, though this time he added as an afterthought, ‘Is there?’

Uncle Stephen laughed. He pushed back his chair, and Tom slid off his own seat and came and stood beside him. Then he sat down on the edge of the chair and Uncle Stephen, taking the lobe of Tom’s left ear between his finger and thumb, pressed it gently. ‘You don’t believe there will be any opposition?’

‘But I’m here now,’ Tom replied.

‘Yes, you’re here, and we’ll hope that in this case possession will be nine points of the law. It’s the tenth point that may be troublesome. You see, Tom, your father must have made a will, and it’s quite likely he appointed somebody to be your guardian.’

‘Uncle Horace?’ Tom suggested, though without conviction.

‘Uncle Horace perhaps—the particular person doesn’t much matter. What matters is that any such arrangement will leave us awkwardly placed.’

Tom weighed the proposition for half a minute. ‘I don’t believe there *is* such an arrangement,’ he declared. ‘To begin with, I don’t believe father liked Uncle Horace. And there’s nobody else except my step-mother. Besides, anyway, what can they do?’

‘That,’ said Uncle Stephen, ‘remains to be seen. I imagine legal proceedings could be taken if I refused to give you up. It would depend on whether they thought it worth while.’

‘You mean a trial?’ said Tom, and the idea amused him greatly.

‘Not a trial exactly—though goodness knows what a lawyer mightn’t make out of it. You never can tell. We must make inquiries of our own lawyer, who will be Mr. Flood. I’ll have a talk with him about it: in fact you might leave a note at his office when you go to see Mr. Knox.’

His eyes rested on his nephew’s, and there was in them an odd light of half-amused complicity which instantly recalled to Tom the description Mr. Knox had given in the train. ‘But what can they *do*, Uncle Stephen,’ he persisted, ‘even if they do go to law about it?’

‘I hope nothing, but I expect they would begin by trying to prove me an undesirable person to have charge of you.’

Tom was unimpressed. The one important thing to him was his acceptance by Uncle Stephen, and in the light of this the hypothetical struggles of Uncle Horace and Mrs. Barber to regain custody of his person struck him as negligible. ‘All we’d have to do would be to prove you *were* desirable, and I could easily do that.’

‘Yes. I don’t know that your desires would be exactly the point in question—still, they might have some weight. The real difficulty, Tom—the thing we can’t get over—is that during all the fifteen years of your existence I never once showed the slightest concern for your welfare. This *does* give the others a claim. There is no use denying it, and it will be quite open to

them to ask why, when I never showed an interest in you before, I should begin to show one now. You might even ask that yourself.'

Tom shook his head.

'Haven't you wondered?'

But it was hardly a question; or, if it was, it was addressed to himself rather than to the boy, who however shook his head once more; then thought for a minute or two, and at last seemed to catch at something. 'It was because——' He stopped there, trying to read the remainder of his sentence in Uncle Stephen's face.

'Because of what?'

Tom coloured. 'Because it wouldn't have been the same,' he said.

Uncle Stephen did not reply. Tom saw, indeed, that he was lost in thought. What that thought was he could not guess, but it left his eyes rather stern. A lock of fine white hair dropped down below the silk skull-cap over the delicately moulded temple. Tom noticed the tiny blue vein that ran up beneath it, the curve of the ear, the cheek, the mouth, the nose, the hands. He called up for comparison pictures of all the other people he knew, but there was nobody in the least like Uncle Stephen. That grave and impenetrable countenance, which was only partially turned in his direction, so that he saw it little more than in profile, seemed to him as strange as it was beautiful. But it *was* beautiful: Uncle Stephen really was a beautiful old man. And it was quite certain that he liked Tom, which, so far as the latter was concerned, settled every difficulty. He felt indeed settled for life. He was utterly determined to resist whatever authority, legal or domestic, might be exerted to take him away. If both Uncle Horace and his step-mother were at this moment to drive up to the door he wouldn't care.

'Uncle Stephen,' he said, and put his hand on Uncle Stephen's arm, giving it a small pull to bring him out of his reverie. It was odd how he could at once not understand Uncle Stephen and at the same time understand him so well, for he knew immediately that this little touch of familiarity had pleased the old man. 'Uncle Stephen, it wouldn't have been the same if I hadn't come to you of my own accord, would it?'

'You mean if I had gone to fetch you?'

'Yes—or if you had written. Of course, you knew I was coming, but even so——'

'Well—even so?'

‘If I hadn’t come of my own accord you wouldn’t have wanted me.’ Tom had made it all out at last clearly. ‘My coming the way I did showed you it was all right—that I was right—the right kind of boy for you. It doesn’t sound conceited for me to say that, does it? I mean I hope it doesn’t sound as if I thought a lot of myself; because I don’t.’

‘We’ve wandered a good deal from where we started,’ Uncle Stephen replied, ‘which was not whether you were the right kind of boy, but whether I was the right kind of uncle.’

He looked at Tom, who immediately answered, ‘It’s the same thing. If I’m right for you you *must* be right for me. . . . And of course—anyway—I knew last night.’

CHAPTER VIII

While waiting for Uncle Stephen to write the notes Tom went out, but he found the lawn deserted, and attracted by the sound of voices wandered round to the back of the house. The mower was there, having come for a drink, and Sally Dempsey, standing by the open kitchen door, was disagreeing with him, if not actually quarrelling. Her face was flushed and she did not look at all so good-tempered as the person who had awakened Tom that morning. Her companion, on the contrary, turned to him with a broad grin, and a warning that the atmosphere was dangerous. 'You'd better keep your distance, Master Tom; she's as cross as a bag of cats because young Deverell come to the house this morning.'

Tom looked from one to the other doubtfully, aware that he had appeared at an unpropitious moment. 'I was talking to him last night,' he said. 'He walked part of the way with me.'

'Well, don't you have anything to do with him, Master Tom. You couldn't trust him; he's sleekit; any time he was round here there was always something missing afterwards.'

'Oh now!' the man with the scythe expostulated, but his good humour was wasted.

'It would answer you better, George McCrudden, to mind your own business and not be standing up for an idle young lout that never did an honest day's work in his life but is content to let his mother keep him!'

George winked at Tom. 'He was never one for the girls, Master Tom: that's why he's having a bad character put on him.'

Sally tossed her head. 'It's little any decent girl would have to do with him; and the black looks he'd give you out of the side of his eyes when he'd meet you on the road.'

'He knows too much about them,' George continued humorously.

'And he knows what the inside of a jail's like,' Sally retorted.

At this George ceased to grin. 'Come now,' he said, 'you've no call to be setting Master Tom against him, just because you've been having words and lost your temper. You'll be saying something you'll regret if you're not careful. Poaching isn't anything so very sinful, and that was all they had

against him.' He turned to Tom and added good-naturedly, 'There's Master Tom himself, I dare say, has gone after apples and such, and there's no great difference.'

'No great difference! You can say that, and you a man getting on in years with a family of boys growing up that would maybe listen to you! Putting such notions into Master Tom's head, too! Hasn't he his own apples—as many as he wants—without you'd have him stealing other people's!'

George sighed. 'I'm not saying——' he began: then gave it up. 'Anyways Master Tom knows what I mean, and that things is sometimes done for sport that wouldn't be done otherwise.'

'Well, you'd better be getting back to your work if that's the kind of talk you have. I didn't know you'd got so great with Jim Deverell.' And Sally retired into the kitchen, slamming the door.

The discomfited George stood staring at the spot she had vacated for at least a minute. He drew the back of his hand across his forehead, scratched an ear, and looked at Tom. 'I'm not great with him,' he announced, 'and there's maybe a bit of truth in what she says, though it's just because she's taken a skunner against him. Women's always like that. If she had a fancy for him he might do all the poachin' he wanted an' she'd be at the jail door to meet him coming out. Not that he's any friend of mine, for he was always dark in his ways, even when he was a young limb—never joining with the other lads when they'd be jokin' the girls, but keeping to himself. An' when he was no more'n a wee fellow he'd be going into the woods alone at night, and his mother thinking she had lost him. Ay, an' I mind him going away with some tramp he'd picked up with. He come back a month after, an' would say nothing, where he'd been or what he'd been doing. The schoolmaster he give him a leatherin' an' the young devil bit him so that he had to carry his arm in a sling for above a week. After that he was always runnin' off and comin' back. Sometimes he'd do a job of work, but he'd never keep a place, and at the latter end nobody would employ him. I tried giving him a job myself in the garden, but it was no good, you couldn't depend on him. Still, Sally had no call to be sayin' what she did. But you'll never get a woman can keep from bletherin'. They're all alike. What I say is, a man may know plenty, but he keeps his mouth shut. Isn't that so, Master Tom?'

'Well, you've told me a few things about him yourself, you know,' Tom replied, anxious to be fair.

'No, Master Tom, I haven't. A man can always keep his mouth shut.'

‘But hang it all, you gave me his complete family history. I don’t mean to say I didn’t want you to. But there’s no use pretending it came from Sally, because Sally told me nothing except that he’d been in jail.’

George looked at him reproachfully. He fumbled in his trousers pocket and produced a black-handled single-bladed knife and a quid of tobacco from which he cut off a portion. This he placed in his mouth before saying a little grumpily, ‘Well, I gotta get back to my work.’

He clumped out of the yard, accompanied by Tom as far as the hall-door. The notes for Mr. Knox and Mr. Flood were ready, and, having inquired from Uncle Stephen what time he was to be back for dinner, Tom set out to deliver them.

For a short while he stood watching George at work. Tiny blue butterflies hovered near the trees, and the scythe passed through the ripe tall grass with a faint swish. A puff of warm soft wind lifted the hair from Tom’s forehead: the day was going to be hot, like yesterday.

George was already hot: Tom could see the sweat glistening under his hair. His hands and forearms were brown as oak bark; above the elbow his arms were white. The blue dye of his shirt was half washed out, and had acquired a pleasing tint that harmonized with his surroundings. His trousers were of a neutral earthy hue, and Tom wondered how he kept them up, for he wore neither braces nor a belt.

Leaving George, he sauntered down the dark avenue and took the road he had traversed on the previous night. But everything looked different now, particularly Tinker’s Lane, which was deep in sunshine and zooming with wild bees. There was the stile he had looked over, and there the river—no longer veiled in mist, but bright as a snake between its green banks. Not only was there this change of aspect, but the walk itself seemed shorter—no distance at all compared with the tramp he had found it last night.

Mr. Knox was out, so he left the note with his landlady, and was free to do some sight-seeing. To most people sight-seeing in Kilbarron would have proved rather dull. It was an ordinary little country town, without a past and without a future, but Tom discovered attractions. He loitered in the market-place, which was smelly and more or less deserted; he came out into the High Street. He inspected the bank, the town hall, and the post office, as conscientiously as if they had been buildings of European fame. Lower down the same street he came on the Unionist Club and the offices of R. P. Flood, solicitor (*their* solicitor, his and Uncle Stephen’s), where he left his second note; while just round the corner was the Royal Cinema, whose

coloured posters he stopped to study in the company of a red-haired message boy—a butcher's boy, as the parcels in the carrier on his bicycle showed. The butcher's boy was less interested in the posters than in Tom, though this interest partook of suspicion. Eventually, however, a desire to talk of the film overcame distrust of the stranger. The butcher's boy had seen it on the previous night, had in fact seen it twice, and soon they were in the thick of its entanglements. Tom gazed at a distraught female clinging passionately to a cold and aloof young man. 'Is she his love?' he asked, for he had these quaintnesses of vocabulary.

The butcher's boy stared stolidly at the lady. 'What d'you mean, his love?' he presently said. 'She's a tart.'

'Oh,' said Tom.

'Can't you see he's spurning her?' the butcher's boy continued. 'He's got a girl already. His girl's the other girl's sister.'

'What other girl?' asked Tom.

'The tart. His girl's the tart's sister, but he doesn't know that, because she calls herself another name.'

'Who does—his girl?'

'No, the tart. What would his girl change her name for? Have a bit of wit.'

'But why should the tart change hers?' asked Tom, bewildered.

'Ah, you're silly. Tarts always chooses fancy names—foreign names. I don't believe you know what a tart is.'

'Yes, I do.'

'Well then, what you talkin' about.' The butcher's boy gave him a scornful look, mounted his bicycle, and rode away, leaving Tom to pursue his tour alone.

His next pause was before a stationer's window filled with paper-backed novels showing pictures of masked men in evening dress pointing revolvers at persons of both sexes also in evening dress. Occasionally the man with the revolver was not in evening dress, and then Tom recognized a detective. A small sprinkling of wild-west, and idyllic pictures interested him less, though he read all the titles and the names of all the authors, and after he had done so could have given each one of these correctly. With a like thoroughness he worked his way through the dismal vulgarities of a row of

comic postcards. There was never a smile on his face; the feebly bacchanalian, or timidly salacious jests did not amuse him in the least; but he accomplished his task. . . . He went into a confectioner's and bought some chewing-gum. Then he asked for a drink of water. . . . He bought a fishing line and some hooks; he would have bought a rod only his money—Jane's money, he remembered—was not sufficient. He lingered to watch a young man in difficulties with a motor-bicycle, and when, after a succession of horrible detonations, the bicycle started, he took up a position on a weighing-machine. He did not put a penny in the slot, but his slim brown hands grasped the sides of the machine, while he jerked himself violently up and down, making the pointer on the dial jerk too, until an enraged hairdresser, brandishing a pair of scissors, rushed out to dislodge him. Tom apologized and proceeded on down the street. He came to the rescue of a lady whose dog was fighting with another dog, and when the animals were separated—not without clouds of dust, furious barks, and considerable risk of bites—he decided that it was time to go home.

At the gate he caught sight of Uncle Stephen, who had come out to look for him, and Tom broke into a run. Together they walked up the drive.

'Well, what mischief have you been up to?' Uncle Stephen asked.

Tom told him. He prattled happily of everything he had seen and done. He found Uncle Stephen very easy to talk to. 'But Mr. Knox was out so I just left the note.'

'In the meantime your telegram has arrived,' said Uncle Stephen. 'It came an hour ago.'

'My telegram?'

'A telegram about you.'

Tom was delighted. 'What was in it? Did Jane tell?'

'That I can't say. It was merely to ask if you were here.'

The telegram itself was on the hall table when he went in, and Tom read it. He brought it in to dinner with him and read it again, aloud. 'Pringle,' it was signed, and Tom accentuated the name, which for some reason he found amusing. Also he saw in it a sign that battle was imminent, and the idea of battle, with himself and Uncle Stephen fighting on the same side, pleased him extremely.

'They won't get your letter till to-night,' he said gaily. 'Or perhaps to-morrow?'

‘To-morrow, I fancy. But I’ve sent a telegram too. Indeed, Mr. Pringle very kindly pre-paid a reply. “Tom arrived safely am keeping him.” Was that right?’

Tom considered. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘that ought to do it. At least, it may.’

‘Do what? Not, I trust, create annoyance.’

‘Oh, it will do that all right. But “Am keeping him permanently” might have been better.’

Uncle Stephen looked at him. ‘I’ve been quite clear about the permanence in my letter,’ he said. ‘I’ve asked your step-mother to send on your belongings—all your possessions—books, clothes, everything.’

Tom had a vision of the arrival of this letter, of its being opened by his step-mother, of her face as she handed it to Uncle Horace, who would be standing, fussy and angry, on the hearthrug. The scene appealed to him. If the letter arrived in the morning she’d take it to the bank, though visits to the bank were rarely risked, Uncle Horace having expressed himself strongly on the subject.

After dinner he followed Uncle Stephen to the library. He wondered if he might suggest going down to the river. The river attracted him, and as yet he had only seen it from a distance. On the other hand, Mrs. Deverell had told him Uncle Stephen rarely, if ever, went outside the Manor grounds. Before he could make up his mind Uncle Stephen himself settled the question. ‘It is just possible Mr. Knox will call this afternoon. I didn’t mention any time to him. Do you think you can manage to amuse yourself?’

‘I don’t mean in here,’ he went on, as Tom turned to an examination of the bookshelves. ‘It’s far too fine a day for that. Why not go out and explore the place? It’s all pretty wild—a regular jungle—but there are paths, and even an old garden, if you can find it.’

So Tom went out alone, though he determined to leave the exploration of the grounds for another day, and to go down to the river. There was an easy way to get to it, by Tinker’s Lane, but when he reached the gate he decided against this. The bridge at Tinker’s Lane was more than half a mile oft, and though the river was not visible from where he stood, he was certain he could reach it without going near the Kilbarron Road. At any rate he would try. So he scrambled through a gap in the opposite hedge, and skirting a tract of ploughed land, made for the meadows beyond. The grass was long here—all these fields were hay fields—and Tom supposed he ought not to trample it down, but to keep close by the hedge. Anyway he liked hedges, and this

was the finest he had ever seen, eight or nine feet high, a double hedge, with a narrow ditch in between, dark and green and cool, having a trickle of water at the bottom of it, which he could hear, though a dense tangle of vegetation—cow-parsley, vetches, convolvulus and brambles—hid it from sight. Here and there the hedge was broken by a beech-tree, its dark corrugated branches showing through the golden-green leaves. Honeysuckle was in bud, and the fresh young bracken gave out its peculiar, cold, slightly astringent perfume. On his left the trees of the Manor woods looked almost blue.

The sun beat down on the wide meadow. The ripened grass, heavy now with seed, trembled, though to Tom the wind stirring it was imperceptible. And in contrast with the green path by the hedge, where he walked partly in sunlight and partly in shadow, the colour of the meadow was a tapestry of infinitely delicate shades—greys and browns, pinks and mauves, gold and crimson, flecked here and there with the vivid whiteness of dog daisies.

Tom had never seen anything so like his idea of a prairie. If he had waded out through it the grass would have reached almost to his thighs. Small blue butterflies like those he had seen in the morning—nearly the same colour as the speedwell flowers and nearly the same as the sky—hovered in the quivering air, close by the hedge. The shrill hidden orchestra of grasshoppers played their ancient Greek melody, through which, from somewhere behind him, the two notes of a cuckoo broke monotonously—the dullest of all bird songs, Tom thought, really not much better than the clocks.

Once or twice, as he proceeded, he fancied he heard a sound on the other side of the hedge, but when he peered through the dark trellis he could see nothing. It came, he thought—this stealthy rustle—from the field beyond, and he stopped to listen. Again he heard it—a sound of movement, but certainly not made by a horse or a cow. This was the movement of a much smaller beast—a dog perhaps, or even a cat—come out hunting—for not a few creatures must have their homes and their runs in this hedgerow—rabbits, birds, mice, and hedgehogs. Tom whistled, but no dog appeared.

He cut himself a rod from an ash-tree, and went on his way. From the beginning he had been ascending a continuous though very gradual slope, and when he reached the brow of this long low gradient he saw the river beneath him, about two hundred yards distant. Tom decided to bathe. He ran down the gorse-splashed hill, which on this side was much steeper; found between two ancient whins an undressing-place; and three minutes later was in the water. The current was sluggish, dragging its winding course by beds of willow-weed, loose-strife, and flowering-rushes; the water was warm on

the surface and of a sweetish taste. He was drifting and splashing luxuriously when he remembered the warning, so often impressed upon him, that to bathe within an hour or two of a solid meal was always dangerous, and frequently fatal. Something or other happened inside you and you expired in agony. Was anything happening now? He couldn't *feel* anything. But something *might* be going on inside him all the same. Anyway, it wasn't so nice as bathing in the sea. The water had a slightly oily feeling against his skin—particularly against the tips of his fingers; it was as if he were bathing in milk. And it wasn't only the feeling; it was partly the smell—a sleepy, sticky kind of smell—not a bit invigorating like the smell of the sea. The sea produced sharp little prickles all over you, but the river clung to you like syrup. It, too, was pleasant enough, of course—in a lazy, water-lizard kind of way, and when you got used to the green weeds trailing round your legs, which at first felt slimy. Tom, standing up to his knees in the shallow water at the edge, slowly picked them off his body and limbs.

He lay on his back in the grass, and the hot golden sun licked his body, poured over and penetrated him. He shut his eyes and tried to imagine the sun as a God. Or a God might come to him out of the river. He would not open his eyes until he had counted fifty slowly, and then——

He opened his eyes. . . .

It would be pleasant if the old tales were true—or some of them. He would read Uncle Stephen's book again. Uncle Stephen seemed to believe, not exactly in the stories, but in something behind them—powers, influences, a spiritual world much closer to this world than the remote heaven of Christianity. Was that why Leonard had called him a magician?

He sat up. The river glistened in the brooding sunshine. He would come here to fish, he told himself, for *The Compleat Angler* had been one of his school prizes, and this river reminded him of it. He did not see any fish, but probably by bathing he had frightened them away. It *looked* a good place. Only, as he had never fished in his life, this judgment was perhaps not worth much. What he *did* see were dragon-flies—bright, strange, metallic creatures, iridescent in the sunlight. And they carried his mind back to the afternoon of his father's funeral. All *that* seemed now infinitely remote; he had a feeling that his whole life had changed since then. He remembered he had been unhappy, but this unhappiness was now like a far-off cloud barely visible on the horizon. It disappeared entirely when he heard a plop on the farther side of the river and saw a small animal swimming straight towards him.

Tom laughed. The God, as usual, was taking a strange form, for this was a rat. Eric and Leonard had once gone out hunting rats with another boy and a couple of terriers. That was supposed to be sport. Why? This rat, at any rate, must have made up his mind that Tom was not a sportsman, because he landed among the rushes within two yards of the spot where he was sitting, his hands clasped round his knees. There was a slight movement among the rushes, a slight rustle, and the rat was gone. 'This place is swarming with wild life,' said Tom.

It was an optimistic view perhaps, for half a dozen dragon-flies, some water-grigs, and a rat, comprised the entire fauna he had as yet observed. But now he saw a frog, a very small one, reclining on the leaf of a water-lily. Tom bent down and gazed at him. The frog did not return his gaze, did not seem to do so at all events, for his black unblinking eyes were fixed on the sky. He was as still as if he had been carved in bright stone; yet now and again Tom could see him breathing. And suddenly it struck him with a little shock of surprise that this frog was one of the most lovely things he had ever beheld. He *was* lovely. In his shaping there was a delicacy and a perfection that could hardly be possible in so large a creature as a human being. Or was it that most human beings were faulty specimens, did not come nearly so close to their own perfect type as frogs and other animals did to theirs? Why was that? He remembered the line of a hymn, 'And only man is vile.' So *that* was what it meant! He had known the line all his life and never guessed its meaning till now. He had always supposed it to refer to people who weren't religious. But this new meaning must be the real meaning, the meaning it had had for the author of the hymn, who quite possibly had been looking at a frog when he wrote it. Tom thought of another line:—'And every prospect pleases.' He gazed round him, and with delighted recognition saw that this was equally true. There was not a single thing he could see that wasn't beautiful. What a fine hymn it must be! As if to put it to further proof he ran to a spot on the bank, where, beyond a bed of rushes, the water brimmed clear and cool and still. And there he stood gazing down at his own image reflected in the stream. The image of man's vileness! Well, it certainly wasn't much to boast about. Not exactly vile perhaps, but absurdly unprotected-looking, as if anything could hurt it. Even a snail without its shell would not look so much at the mercy of its surroundings. But there were boys who didn't look like that when they were naked. Eric and Leonard didn't.

Tom returned thoughtfully to his clothes and began to dress. He was halfway through his toilet when a shadow fell on the grass beside him, and looking up he saw Deverell. Tom was not startled, but he was surprised. Not

only was Deverell there, but he was accompanied by a liver-and-white spaniel, and both must certainly possess the gift of moving noiselessly as phantoms. Then he remembered the sounds he had heard before—the sound on the other side of the hedge. That might have been the spaniel—a little less noiseless than his master. Tom now suspected that Deverell had been following him all along.

He was annoyed. He hated slyness. It was so unnecessary too—and stupid. It annoyed him, moreover, because it reminded him of what Sally Dempsey and George McCrudden had said. Meanwhile a smile had been dawning slowly on the young poacher's face. He had shaved, Tom noticed, and his dark eyes had a much less sullen expression.

‘Nice day, Mr. Tom. You been in for a swim?’

‘Yes, I have,’ answered Tom rather crossly. ‘I suppose you were watching me.’ The spaniel began to snuffle at him with a blunt, pinkish nose, and Tom scratched its ears.

‘I seen you,’ Deverell admitted, ‘but I thought maybe you wouldn't like me to come down. Would you a' minded, Mr. Tom?’

‘No,’ answered Tom, rather less crossly. ‘But I do mind being followed.’

‘I wasn't following you.’

Tom looked across the river. ‘I think you were. I think you were on the other side of the hedge.’

Deverell stood without speaking for a minute or two; then he sat down on the bank beside the boy. ‘Not much doing round here, Mr. Tom, is there?’

Tom looked straight before him. ‘I suppose that depends on what you want to do. I should have thought there was plenty.’ The spaniel thrust his head against Tom's shoulder, trying to attract further caresses, but Tom was not pleased.

‘Dingo his name is,’ Deverell went on. ‘He's made friends with you already. Dogs always knows the right sort.’

‘The right sort for them, perhaps,’ said Tom ungraciously.

‘The right sort for them *is* the right sort.’

‘For you?’

‘Yes an' for everybody. You ever had a pal, Mr. Tom?’

Tom did not answer. He was on the point of getting up to go home when it struck him that he was making a great deal of fuss about nothing—in fact behaving very much as he had behaved last night in the lane. What if Deverell *had* followed him? Was there any great sin in that? He remembered the way he himself had hung round after Eric in the mere hope of receiving some sign of friendliness.

‘You angry with me, Mr. Tom? I did follow you, but it wasn’t because I was spyin’ on you. I’d have joined you that time you whistled only I didn’t like—I didn’t know. I knowed it wasn’t me you was whistlin’ for.’

‘I’m not angry,’ said Tom.

‘Then why is it you won’t answer me?’

‘About having a pal? I don’t know what you mean by a pal.’

‘I mean what you mean.’

The question was indeed one Tom had often enough considered, and it recalled various attempted friendships—always abortive, always ending in disappointment, always ending in regret that they *had* been attempted. ‘Well then, no,’ he said grumpily.

‘You wouldn’t be one, I’d think, to choose a pal just because he had fine clothes on him,’ Deverell continued.

‘Nor would I choose him just because he hadn’t,’ Tom replied.

Deverell was silent, and the spaniel, who had been nosing among the furze bushes, suddenly put up a couple of birds, which rose with a loud whirring noise.

‘Partridge,’ said Deverell.

Tom said nothing. Deverell probably knew all about birds and animals and plants. He would like to know about them too, and he took a sidelong glance at his companion. The young poacher puzzled him, although deep below the surface he had a secret understanding. And it was mixed up with that other feeling—not actually of distrust, but such as might have been awakened by the advances, say, of a friendly leopard, who should have strolled unexpectedly out of the jungle. Stranger still, this dubious element attracted him. He even had a desire to see the leopard put out his claws, hear the faint low growl at the back of his throat, see the yellow flame flickering in his eyes. All this was very wrong and inexplicable.

‘I suppose they bin’ gaving me a bad character up at the house,’ Deverell presently muttered. ‘That’s what makes you unfriendly like.’

‘I’m not unfriendly,’ Tom protested. ‘As a matter of fact I never *am*—even when I want to be. I’ve been friendly with people I detested.’

Deverell listened, and then asked simply, ‘What they bin sayin’ about me?’

‘What makes you think they said anything? Why should they?’

‘Because I know they did. Sally Dempsey wouldn’t lose the chance. She as good as told me so this morning. She knows I come a bit of the way home with you last night. There’s one thing—she never seen me the worse for drink the way her oul’ lad is every Saturday night, and him a sexton of the church.’

‘Well, let’s talk of something else,’ said Tom. ‘It doesn’t matter what she says.’

‘It matters to me, Mr. Tom. What call has she to be taking away my character? There’s not much difference between characters if all was known.’

Tom shrugged his shoulders. This was the kind of thing he hated.

But his unresponsiveness seemed to embitter Deverell. ‘Yes, some’s hypocrites and some’s not—that’s the difference.’

‘Then you think everybody is equally good?’ said Tom coldly. ‘Or, I suppose, your real meaning is that they’re equally bad?’

Deverell did not answer, but his face darkened. He looked straight before him with sullen unhappy eyes. Then he muttered, ‘Perhaps you’d a’ got into trouble yourself, Mr. Tom, if you’d belonged to a different station of life.’

Tom flushed. ‘You don’t mean to say you think I was alluding to *that!*’ he exclaimed disgustedly. ‘You must have a beautiful opinion of me!’

‘Well——’ Deverell dug his heel into the grass, but his countenance was still clouded over.

‘Look here,’ Tom burst out. ‘I hate this kind of thing. It never leads to anything, but goes on and on for ever. Why are you so suspicious? I know you’ve been in jail, but I wasn’t thinking of that at all. I’d forgotten all about it. As a matter of fact I don’t *care*: not if it had happened fifty times. Also what you say about me is perfectly true: I might easily have got into trouble,

as you call it: nothing is more likely. But I don't see why we should be talking in this way—just as if I had accused you.'

Deverell tore up a handful of grass. He put his arm round the spaniel, who sat between them with his tongue out and his eyes half shut, except when now and then he snapped at a fly. 'You see I took a likin' to you, Mr. Tom,' he said rather shamefacedly.

'Yes, I know.'

'It was that made me follow you.'

'I know. It was only because you hid I was cross.'

'But I told you I didn't like——'

'You didn't hide last night.'

'I didn't know who you was last night.'

'Well, it's all right now, isn't it?'

'Yes it is, Mr. Tom. . . . Mr. Tom, I took a great likin' to you.'

Tom did not answer, because there seemed to be nothing to say.

'You like me to show you how to set snares for rabbits, Mr. Tom?'

Tom shook his head, and Deverell's voice went on, close to his ear. 'There's plenty up there in the old magi—in your uncle's woods. I wouldn't say but I might find someone as would buy them from you too. Keep you nicely in pocket money, Mr. Tom, not to mention the sport.'

Tom shook his head again.

'A shilling each I might get for them, and there'd be no trouble in findin' a score or two.'

'I couldn't,' said Tom. 'I hate killing things. Anyhow, I never heard putting down traps called sport before; most people think it rather beastly.'

'But rabbits has to be kept down, Mr. Tom, without you want them to be overrunnin' everything.'

'Well, I'm not going to keep them down.'

'Perhaps you'd fish, then? I know a place where you might kill a trout or two.'

'I bought a fishing line this morning.'

'Well, if you'd kill a fish, why wouldn't you kill a rabbit or a hare?'

‘I don’t know. . . . I don’t believe I’d care for fishing either.’

‘You just think it over and I’ll meet you any time. There’s no harm in it.’

‘The more I think it over the less likely I’ll be to do it.’

‘But if there’s no harm——’

‘I know you *think* there isn’t; and it’s not *that I’m* thinking of either. It’s really only because I like these things. There was a frog I was looking at before you came. Well, I liked it; it seemed to me a lovely thing—now, do you see?’

Deverell appeared to be wrestling with a point of view which remained incomprehensible.

‘Hang it all,’ exclaimed Tom impatiently. ‘I don’t see why you can’t at least *understand* it. I understand *you*. Besides, you must have felt sometimes like that yourself. You say you like *me*, and I suppose that means you don’t want to hurt me.’

‘No, I wouldn’t hurt you, Mr. Tom, nor let anyone else hurt you.’

‘Well, there you are then: it’s just the same.’

‘No; it’s different.’

‘Why is it different? There isn’t any difference. The feeling you have is exactly the same.’

‘No, it isn’t.’

‘But it is. I mean, the feeling itself is. The only difference is that I’m a boy and the other animals are frogs and rabbits and hares.’

‘It’s not the same.’

Tom’s forehead wrinkled. He thought it over once more. ‘At any rate it’s *partly* the same,’ he concluded. ‘I know it’s not *all* the same, but there’s a great deal of it the same.’

‘But you can’t be fond of *everything*, Mr. Tom.’

‘No,’ Tom admitted, ‘I’m not. There are some insects I’m not fond of. Still, I don’t think there’s any advantage in that. I don’t object to wasps, for instance, and it must be much pleasanter to be that way than to jump every time one comes near you.’

The young poacher was now smiling at him. He looked wonderfully different. All the darkness and sullenness had passed from his face. He

looked quite happy.

‘I think, you know, I ought to go back soon,’ Tom said. ‘I’ve been out nearly all day.’

‘It’s early yet; you’ve plenty of time.’

‘But I ought to see if Uncle Stephen wants me.’ He got up, but the young poacher did not stir.

Tom stood for a moment looking down at him: then he said, ‘Won’t you walk back with me?’

Instantly Deverell sprang to his feet. A slight flush had come into his swarthy face, and Tom, with rather mixed feelings, saw that he was extraordinarily pleased. He was glad, of course, that he was pleased; but he didn’t want him to be as pleased as all that, because really he had meant no more than a mere politeness.

They returned by another route. The field path Tom knew bore round to the left, but Deverell took him straight on in the direction of the Manor woods. This surely was a roundabout way, Tom thought, unless he actually climbed the wall and took a short cut through the grounds: and he wondered if he might propose doing so.

‘Will you be coming down to the river to-morrow, Mr. Tom?’

‘I don’t know: Uncle Stephen may want me.’

‘But if he doesn’t want you.’

‘I don’t know: I’d rather not make any promise.’

‘Well, I’ll come along on chance.’

‘But you mustn’t. It’s not worth while: I’m almost sure to be doing something else: there are lots of things I have to do.’

‘Yes, I’ll come.’

Tom could say no more, and they scrambled through the hedge and down on to the road. The Manor wall faced them, and Tom looked at it and looked at Deverell. ‘I say, wouldn’t it be a short cut if I got over here?’ he asked. The top of the wall was some three feet higher than his head, but he could climb it all right if he were to be given a leg up.

‘It might,’ Deverell replied.

‘I think I’ll try it. Do you mind?’

‘You’ll have a long drop on the other side; it’s lower than it is here.’

Tom could not tell from his manner whether Deverell minded being left or not. It was ridiculous thinking of such things. Why *should* he mind? Nevertheless, it was on the tip of his tongue to say that after all he would go home by the road, when he felt himself suddenly lifted in the young poacher’s arms. He scraped with his toes for a foothold, found one, and next moment was astride of the wall.

He smiled down at his companion. ‘I say, you’re jolly strong,’ he exclaimed admiringly. ‘I wish I was like that.’

‘I’ll make you like that: all you need’s living in the open for a bit; you’re tough enough.’

‘Only metaphorically speaking,’ Tom replied.

The poacher’s sombre eyes were fixed upon him; he really was a frightfully serious person—far too serious for comfort. ‘You won’t laugh at my jokes,’ Tom said. ‘I don’t call that being a pal.’

Slowly—very slowly—a faint smile dawned on Deverell’s face. ‘All the same, I like them, Mr. Tom.’

‘Then I’ll prepare more for next day. . . . Are you sure you don’t mind my leaving you?’

‘Not the way we are now, Mr. Tom.’

‘What way are we now?’

‘We’re friends.’

‘Yes, of course we’re friends. And if I don’t see you for a day or two, I’ll see you soon. Good-bye.’

With this he dropped down into the tangled wilderness on the other side.

CHAPTER IX

It was a wilderness. Not a sign of a clearing anywhere. He would simply have to break a passage through. Long streamers of goose-grass attached themselves to his jacket and trousers; he was soon covered with down and pollen and cuckoo-spit, and, to protect his face, was obliged to hold aside the branches with both hands while his feet stumbled among hidden roots and creepers. The branches were tough and elastic, the briers and thistles painful, the nettles stung him even through his trousers; but he was determined not to go back, though very soon he had lost all sense of direction, and when he looked behind him could see how hopelessly crooked was the path he had beaten down. The important thing was to get out of this jungle as quickly as possible, for the ground was becoming soft and muddy, and in wet weather must be little better than a swamp. Fortunately there had been no rain for a week or two, yet even as it was the sticky black mud more than once rose above the tops of his shoes. He struggled on, now quite blindly, and when eventually he did emerge into a comparatively open tract of higher ground, he was hot, breathless, and smeared all over with a protective colouring of vegetable matter.

He cleaned his shoes in the grass and removed some of the less tenacious dirt from his clothes, but the fact that his trousers showed several large green stains and his new jacket had acquired a jumble-sale appearance did not trouble him. More immediate discomforts were the scratches and stings which seemed to leave not an inch of him without its own particular smart. And where was the house? He hadn't the remotest idea. It might be to the right of him or it might be to the left, but what actually faced him was a low wall—either a very ancient or a very badly built wall, for there were gaps everywhere, many with young trees thrusting through them. This surely must be the old garden Uncle Stephen had referred to—a separate inclosure within the main grounds, cut off from the surrounding woods for a definite purpose. And in fact, threading his way between giant boles of trees, he presently came upon what had once been an avenue though now a thick carpet of mossy grass covered it. Whither did it lead, and what was this place upon which he had stumbled? He had a sense of breaking in upon some private and secret spot. But not forbidden, since Uncle Stephen had sent him out to look for it. The intense silence of the woods rose up around him like a flame.

Chequered bands of golden fire splashed on the moss-dark sward. A stilled loveliness breathed its innocent spell. Then suddenly a hare bounded across the path, and the trilled liquid pipings of hidden thrush and blackbird broke on his ears like the awakening of life. The music came to him in curves of sound. All the beauty he loved best had this curving pattern, came to him thus, so that even the rounding of a leaf or the melting line of a young human body impressed itself upon him as a kind of music. The avenue turned, widened, a house was there.

It was long and low, thatched with pale yellow straw over which climbed trailing boughs of Old Man's Beard. The strangest house he had ever seen, built of wood and thickly covered with a dark, small-leaved ivy. Up the sides of the porch, looping and twining all about it, grew this Old Man's Beard; and the roof, jutting out to form a narrow cloister below, was supported by trunks of trees—the natural, unhewed trunks, bulging and crooked—and they too, like the walls, were densely coated with layer upon layer of ivy. The unusual depth of this vegetable growth was what indeed gave the house its strangeness, its at first sight startling suggestion of life. It *was* alive. Watching it intently, Tom imagined he could see the walls—though ever so slightly—swelling and contracting in a slow breathing. The woodwork round door and windows had once been painted white; the three chimneys were of different heights, and set between them in the straw thatch was a latticed dormer-window, dark and uncurtained. The window was open. Tom saw nobody, yet he had a feeling that someone was watching him, and he never lost consciousness of this, though presently he turned his back on the house. A narrow lawn of moss-thickened grass sloped down from the stained door-steps to a grass terrace, where a further flight of balustraded steps descended to a pool rimmed with stone. On an island in the middle of the pool stood a naked boy holding an urn tilted forward, though through its weedy mouth no water splashed. The fountain was choked. A tuft of grass had found a roothold in the hollow of the boy's thigh; and on one side of him crouched an otter, on the other was an owl. All round the pool were rough grey boulders coated with mosses, dark green creepers, and trailing weeds. Between the stones sprang scarlet and yellow grasses, hart's-tongue fern, and bushes of cotoneaster, berberry and lavender. His garden must have been blown to the fountain boy by wandering winds, or dropped by passing birds. On the dark surface of his pool floated the flat glossy leaves of water-lilies, and the lonely little sentinel gazed down at them, or at his own black shadow, or perhaps he was asleep, awaiting the spell-breaker.

Tom knelt on the rim of the pool and dabbled his hand in the water. It was warm and viscid, its faint smell not unpleasant. He let it drop from his

fingers, and on the back of his hand tiny snail shells glistened. He wondered for how many creatures this choked fountain was the whole world. The moon would turn it to silver, and the first arrows of the rising sun would turn it to gold. In autumn dead leaves would drift over it; in winter it would be frozen to ice and its small guardian be turned to a snow-boy. Tom's busy mind, and perhaps busier emotions, began to weave a story round the solitary urn-bearer. Being of his own composition the story followed the dictates of his temperament, just as a drifting branch will follow the current of a stream. He was always making up such stories, in which he lived his secret life of waking dreams and sleeping dreams, and the hidden current deepened day by day and year by year, as its soundless flow bore on inevitably to a predestined sea.

Some instinct made him look round at the house and immediately the web of fancy was broken. For at the open window he saw not a boy in a story, but a real boy, looking down at him through a screen of green leaves. Tom's eyes grew round as 'O's. He was very much surprised. It had not been this kind of watcher he had expected—of humans he had felt sure the house was empty. Yet this boy was no ghost, he was as real as Tom himself. He was staring straight at him too; their eyes met; and Tom, conquering a shyness which always overtook him at inopportune moments, smiled. He could not be sure whether the other boy smiled back or not, he was gone so quickly, leaving the window blank and dark. Tom wondered if he were coming downstairs or merely hiding.

But the situation was altered. With the knowledge that there were people living in the house Tom bumped back sharply to earth and to the fact that he was trespassing. He got up and began slowly to retrace his steps, casting every now and again a glance behind him, and once, while still within view of the house, pausing deliberately. He waited, just in case the boy he had seen *should* be coming out, but nobody came, and after a minute or two, rather mournfully, Tom decided nobody would. He continued on his way, oddly disappointed.

Uncle Stephen would be able to tell him what this house was and who lived in it. Though it was strange, Tom thought, that he had not already done so, for surely he must know, since the house was in the Manor grounds. He couldn't know there was a boy there, however; otherwise he would not have said there wasn't a companion for Tom. The boy must be a visitor.

But a visitor visiting whom? For Tom knew the house had looked empty—looked, moreover, as if it had been empty for years. He had a sense of something dream-like and mysterious. True, he had not approached very

closely, not closely enough to see inside: but those curtainless windows, those green door-steps, that choked fountain, those signs everywhere of dilapidation and neglect! And not a thread of smoke from any chimney! What kind of people would live in such a place? It would be almost easier to imagine he had made a mistake, had seen nobody at the window. . . . Only he *had*.

And he now, quite unexpectedly, caught through the trees a glimpse of the Manor House. The two houses, he guessed, were really not far from each other, though there was either no direct path between them or else he had missed it. For it was through the shrubbery that he emerged on to the lawn, and at the same time he saw Mr. Knox, on a bicycle, riding up to the hall-door. The curate dismounted, leaned his bicycle against the window-sill, turned round, and catching sight of Tom, waited for him.

‘Well,’ he asked, ‘how are things going?’ But he gave Tom no time to answer before he drew him gently but firmly away from the porch. Mr. Knox, holding him by the arm, led him past the side of the house. ‘Grass just been cut!’ he murmured. ‘Delightful smell—so fresh! I suppose you’ve no idea what Mr. Collet wants to see me about?’

He asked the question not exactly in a whisper, but certainly in a voice dropped to confidential pitch, and he still kept his arm firmly beneath Tom’s, as if there were a danger of his taking to flight.

‘Yes, I have; it’s about me,’ Tom replied. ‘Only we’d better go in, because it must be nearly tea-time and it will take me ages to clean myself.’

‘Oh, you’re all right,’ said Mr. Knox. ‘That’ll brush off easily.’

‘I hope so, for I’ve no other clothes here.’

Mr. Knox pulled out an old and very handsome gold watch which he wore fastened to a silk ribbon, and which, instead of telling him the hour, appeared to present him with an arithmetical problem. He was behaving very oddly, Tom thought; much less like a parson than a schoolboy who has been summoned, he isn’t quite sure why, to an interview with his headmaster. This impression was not diminished when the curate suggested, ‘Perhaps I’d better slip away and come back later.’

‘But Uncle Stephen *wants* you!’ Tom exclaimed. ‘He’s been waiting for you all the afternoon! Besides, he may have seen us from the library window and it will look so silly.’

Mr. Knox glanced back at the house. ‘Yes,’ he admitted doubtfully.

‘Uncle Stephen *likes* you,’ added Tom.

This unexpected encouragement caused Mr. Knox to smile—somewhat sheepishly. ‘At any rate, you’re quite the *kindest* boy I’ve ever met,’ he said.

And whether it was the kindness of Tom’s remark, or something else that influenced him, he altered the direction of their walk. He turned abruptly back to the house, where, ten minutes later, they were all three seated at the tea-table, the curate opposite Uncle Stephen and Tom between them.

To the smallest member of the party it was deeply interesting—this confrontation of his two friends—particularly in the light of Mr. Knox’s earlier reluctance to be confronted. But he had got over that quickly, and Tom noticed how, once the ice was broken, it was he who did most of the talking. Uncle Stephen listened. And even in their ways of listening there was a marked difference between them. Uncle Stephen listened with a kind of quiet attentiveness, and always there was a slight but distinct pause before he replied. Mr. Knox’s ‘listening’ was much more like Tom’s own, charged with a restrained eagerness to interrupt.

It was Mr. Knox who talked, but it was Uncle Stephen who provided subjects. It was like that game in which you scribble a line on a piece of paper and the other person fills it in, making it a horse or a man or a cat or a boat. Tom, as usual, saw it like this, in a picture. He was alert and observant, a spectator, or perhaps still more an actor who was not on in this scene, which he watched from the wings. He had a feeling of being with his own people, his own kind (though Mr. Knox was less his kind than Uncle Stephen), a feeling he had never had at his step-mother’s, where all the talk had consisted of a series of statements and contradictions, and everything was either a fact or a lie.

It was not till the meal was over, however, and they had retired to the library, where in a big armchair Mr. Knox made himself comfortable and lit his pipe, that the really important subject was broached. Then Uncle Stephen said, ‘Tom and I were wondering if by any chance we could persuade you to help him with his studies. But first I had better tell you our whole plan, because there may be difficulties we haven’t thought of.’

There weren’t—none that mattered, Tom said to himself; but outwardly he sat quiet as a mouse, at the open window, though he had turned his chair round so as to get a view of the room. He could see from where he sat only the top of Uncle Stephen’s head above the back of his chair, but Mr. Knox’s face was turned towards him, and he watched it closely while the situation

was being explained—with a certain slowness and deliberation—in Uncle Stephen's low yet very clear voice.

When that voice ceased the curate bent down to the grate to knock the ashes out of his pipe. Then he sat up and looked hard at Tom as if an inspection of his proposed pupil might help him to reply.

Apparently it didn't, for it was with an air of embarrassment that he turned to Uncle Stephen. 'It's awfully good of you, but—well—I don't quite know how to put it——'

Tom's hopes sank. It looked very much as if what Mr. Knox didn't 'quite know how to put' was a polite refusal. The ominous silence was filled with his disappointment. And then again Mr. Knox spoke.

'You see, I only got a second, and that was four years ago. I was always better at games than books, though not much of a swell at either.'

'Of course I don't expect you to reply definitely till you've had time to think the matter over,' Uncle Stephen explained. 'Indeed, nothing can be settled till we have heard from Tom's relatives. It was merely the possibility I wanted to discuss. Apart from the point you have raised—and which I don't think we need regard as a very serious one—is there anything that makes you disinclined to accept?—You don't, for instance, find the idea in itself distasteful?'

Mr. Knox shook his head. 'Not at all: far from it: I'd say "yes" like a shot if I'd had the least experience and didn't feel my Latin and Greek to be so extremely rusty.' He smiled at Tom, who at this point clambered out through the window, feeling that the further discussion of Mr. Knox's qualifications might be carried on more happily in his absence.

He strolled up and down the lawn, out of earshot, but within sight should he be wanted. He half hoped he would be wanted, but evidently he wasn't, for he waited a long time and nobody called him. Mrs. Deverell and Sally appeared, and he watched them walking together down the drive on their way home. Another quarter-of-an-hour passed, and he was growing very tired of doing nothing, when the hall-door opened, and Mr. Knox came out, followed by Uncle Stephen. They stood for yet a further minute or two talking in the porch; then they shook hands, the curate got on his bicycle, and Tom ran across the grass to intercept him.

Mr. Knox jumped off, but he continued walking, wheeling his bicycle while Tom paced beside him. He looked pleased, and Tom at once felt that a

solution must have been reached. 'I suppose you want to know the result of the conference,' Mr. Knox began.

'I think that means it's favourable,' Tom answered.—'I mean favourable to me.'

'Well, we'll hope it will be favourable all round. At any rate there's to be a preliminary canter—a sort of trial trip. I made *that* a condition. So one of these mornings I'll come over to find out what it is I've actually let myself in for.'

'I'll promise to do as well as I can,' said Tom. 'I'm no good at "maths", but I'm tolerable at Greek because I like it. The other things I suppose are about average. When they send on my books I'll be able to show you what I've been doing.'

'In the meantime I can teach you your catechism,' said Mr. Knox.

Tom received this as a joke. 'I know some of it already, I know the bit about my pastors and masters.'

Mr. Knox glanced at him. 'Yes, I dare say you do—so long as the pastor and master happens to please you. However, we'll see. As for your Greek, I believe Mr. Collet intends to look after that himself: he has views on the subject which make it quite impossible for me.'

'I hope that doesn't mean they'll make it impossible for *me*,' Tom replied. 'It sounds jolly like it.'

'No; you possess a natural aptitude—or so Mr. Collet thinks. You'd better remember that you are regarded as much more than a nephew—as a kind of spiritual son. . . . And here's the gate and here we say good-bye. I've got a meeting, and unless I can ride a mile and a half in two minutes I'm going to be late for it. But come to see me soon: it's the first kidnapping case I've ever been mixed up in.'

He *was* rather nice. . . . Tom watched him out of sight, standing in the middle of the road, his eyes screwed up a little as he faced the setting sun. He liked Mr. Knox. Mr. Knox was as safe and simple as a glass of milk. Half unconsciously he was contrasting him with Deverell.

Then he turned round and through the gate looked into the green avenue from which he had just emerged. Within *there*, was something not so simple. While he lingered there deepened in him a strange impression that he was on the boundary-line between two worlds. To one world belonged Mr. Knox and his meetings, and Tom was standing in it now, as it might be on the

shore of a pond. It stretched all round these stone walls, but within them was the other, and as soon as he passed through that gate he would become a part of the other. Here he was free to choose, but if he took a step further all would be different. What he should enter seemed to him now a kind of dream-world, but once inside, he knew it would become real. In there was the unknown—mystery—romance: the ruined garden, the stone boy holding his empty urn above the pool, the boy he had seen at the window, Uncle Stephen. As he stood at the gate Tom at that moment was not very far from seeing an angel with a flaming sword guarding it. His body thrilled when the call of a bird rose through the silence. He took a little run forward, tugged at the bar, pushed: and the latch dropped back into place as the gate clanged behind him.

CHAPTER X

‘That was a near thing!’ Tom breathed, only half pretending. But he knew when he had carried such play far enough (because it wasn’t all play—not by any means), and now deliberately he tried to shut the doors of imagination. It was the spiritual equivalent to shutting his eyes and digging his fingers in his ears, but it must be done; and as a preliminary he thrust his hands in his trousers pockets, assumed a slight swagger, and raised his voice in the Soldiers’ Chorus from *Faust*. What could be more blatant, more idiotic than the Soldiers’ Chorus?—yet somehow it was not successful. Perhaps he was making too *much* noise. He stopped singing abruptly and ran at the top of his speed towards the house.

He entered the library breathless, with flushed cheeks and shining eyes. Uncle Stephen was standing by one of the bookcases and there was a pile of books and papers on the floor. He turned to Tom, and instantly all Tom’s wandering fantasies and dilemmas were at rest. Uncle Stephen loved him. . . . ‘I’ve cleared a table for you,’ he said, ‘and that big cupboard in the corner, and this shelf for your books.’

Tom was very pleased. ‘But you shouldn’t, Uncle Stephen,’ he expostulated, his face lit up with happiness. ‘I could quite easily have kept my things in my bedroom.’

‘I want you to use this room:—do your lessons here, bring everything here, make as much mess as you like. Only I don’t know yet what you *do* like.’

‘I like reading,’ said Tom, ‘and I like drawing, and I like some kinds of games, and I like making things.’

‘Is that all?’

‘I like gramophones, if I can choose the records myself. But you haven’t got one.’

‘No; but perhaps that means the records will be better when we do get one.’

‘Of course I’d get some that you liked, too,’ said Tom.

‘They’ll be the wrong ones—eh?’

‘But you’re not musical, Uncle Stephen, or you would have had a gramophone already.’

‘I suppose so. The idea never occurred to me.’

‘I know. That’s what I mean.’

‘As for “making things”—does that refer to carpentering?’

‘Yes. I’ve only done it at school, but I liked it awfully.’

‘Well, you can’t do *that* very well in here. We’ll have to fit up a workroom for you: half the rooms in the house are unoccupied.’

‘What I’d like to make first would have to be done in the open air.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, it’s a raft. I thought of it this afternoon. I’d like to make a raft to go on the river—the way Bevis and Mark did. . . . They’re two boys, you know, in a book. I’ll lend it to you when my things come. It’s about exploring on a lake, and swimming, and camping out.’

‘Does it tell you how to make a raft?’

‘No—not altogether. At least, I’m not sure. But I think I could do it. Bevis made his out of a packing-case.’

‘He had the other boy to help him, though, hadn’t he?’

‘Deverell would——’ But Tom stopped suddenly. ‘Uncle Stephen, there *is* another boy,’ he said.

The silence that followed seemed to lend his words an odd significance. He looked up quickly.

‘Who?’ Uncle Stephen asked.

For a moment Tom, ever sensitive to the unspoken mood, had thought—— He did not quite know what he had thought, but at any rate it was all right. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I wondered if *you* would know. I wanted to ask you before, but when Mr. Knox was here I couldn’t. I saw him this afternoon. He was in that other house, looking out of the window. I didn’t know there *was* another house. You didn’t tell me, and when I found it I thought at first it was empty.’

‘You mean the lodge? Not really a lodge of course, but that was what it was called to distinguish it from the Manor House.’

‘I suppose so. It’s in the wood over there.’ Tom pointed. ‘There’s a fountain, but it’s choked up. The house didn’t *look* as if anybody was living in it.’

‘Nobody does live in it,’ Uncle Stephen said. ‘I doubt if it’s habitable. There are still a few sticks of furniture, but nobody has lived there for a long time.’

‘But I saw him.’

‘And what was he doing?’

‘I don’t know. Just standing at the window. He wasn’t doing anything really, and as soon as he caught me looking at him he went away.’

‘You didn’t venture inside, then?’

‘No, of course not. I thought there must be people there. Very queer people too, to leave the place like that. Who is he, do you think, Uncle Stephen?’

‘Anybody could get in,’ Uncle Stephen replied. ‘I expect most of the window-catches are loose, and I know the back door isn’t locked or bolted.’

‘Why?’

‘There isn’t a key. The key is lost.’

‘You think, then, he may have been a boy from the village?’

‘He may have been a boy from anywhere.’

‘But why had he gone there?’ Tom reflected for a moment. ‘And he wasn’t a boy from the village—or the town, or whatever it calls itself.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Well, he wasn’t a message boy, or a farm-boy, or anything like that.’

‘And as soon as he saw you he disappeared?’

‘He went away from the window. I thought perhaps he was coming down, and waited a bit.’ Tom had a further cogitation before he said, ‘Supposing I see him again, Uncle Stephen?’

‘If you see him again you can ask him his name.’

‘Then you don’t mind his going into the house?’

‘Not in the least. Why should I?’

Uncle Stephen was busy with the lamp and Tom waited till he had lit it. ‘Still, it was rather cheek,’ he said slowly.

‘Then you’d better warn him off. I leave it entirely to you. You can do exactly as you like.’

‘He was trespassing,’ said Tom.

‘Yes, I suppose so.’

There was a brief silence, during which Tom was conscious that Uncle Stephen was looking at him closely. He did not know why, but he had begun to feel vaguely uncomfortable. ‘He *was* trespassing,’ he mumbled.

‘Yes. Well, I’ve given you full authority to act.’

‘You know you don’t want me to act,’ said Tom unhappily.

‘I know you don’t care a fig about trespassing, if that’s what you mean.’

Tom hung his head. He turned away. ‘Shall we have a game of chess, Uncle Stephen?’ he asked.

‘Very well,’ said Uncle Stephen, and Tom went to a table in the corner, whereon the red and white ivory pieces were already set out.

He carried the table over into the lamplight. He lifted the red knight. It was quite heavy, for these were the largest chessmen he had ever seen. ‘Are they *very* old, Uncle Stephen?’ he asked. ‘Have you always had them?’

‘No, but I played my first game with them.’

‘When you were a boy—at home?’

‘When I was a boy; but not at home. It was in Italy.’

‘Then they’re Italian?’

‘They belonged at that time to an Italian, but they’ve belonged, I expect, to a good many people. There’s a name on the box—Nicolo Spinelli. That was some ancestor of my friend’s, for his name too was Spinelli. But the chessmen were made in China, and their first owner probably was a Chinaman.’

Tom had placed the table in front of Uncle Stephen’s armchair: he now brought up a chair for himself and sat down. He looked across the table and suddenly smiled: the tiny cloud had passed.

‘Shall I move first?’ he asked.

Uncle Stephen nodded assent, and Tom lifted a white pawn. But he held it poised in the air. 'Wouldn't it be queer, Uncle Stephen, if all the people to whom these chessmen had once belonged came in now to look on?'

'Very queer. I think we're better without them.'

'They'd be ghosts, of course, and we wouldn't know they were there.'

Then he stopped talking, and with bright eyes watched Uncle Stephen's move. The game proceeded with a profound gravity. Beyond the clear circle of lamplight was a deepening darkness, and in the darkness the open windows were visible, for the curtains had not been drawn. From time to time Tom looked up from the table and out of the window behind Uncle Stephen's chair. Dimly he could see the black branches of trees. In the distance he heard a corncrake.

'It would be quite possible, Uncle Stephen, that they were watching us, wouldn't it?'

'Quite—so far as I know.'

'You see,' Tom explained, 'I wasn't going to move my bishop at all, and then somebody gave me a hint.'

'That must mean he wants you to win,' Uncle Stephen replied gravely, 'because it was an excellent move.'

Tom gave him a quick glance. 'He had a pigtail, and long wide sleeves with little sprigs of flowers worked on them in coloured silks.'

'That was Fu Kong,' said Uncle Stephen.

Tom thought. His face was very happy. 'Do you know, Uncle Stephen, I often used to get into rows for saying things like that—I mean about Fu Kong's sleeves.'

'While your mother was alive—wasn't it all right then?'

'Yes, but she was like you. My step-mother thinks I tell lies.'

The spell of the game was suddenly relaxed, and Uncle Stephen looked across the table at his small antagonist. '*Did* you see Fu Kong's sleeves, Tom?'

'I don't know. That's the queerest part of it. I must in a sort of way have seen them or I couldn't have described them, could I? I mean *something* must have put them into my head; or where did they come from?'

‘What put them into your head was knowing that the chessmen were Chinese.’

‘Yes, but—— Somehow I can’t ever think of things without beginning to see them.’

‘Are you frightened of the dark?’

‘No. Not often.’

‘Were you nervous last night—when everything was strange to you?’

‘No. Well perhaps a little bit. But it hadn’t anything to do with being in the dark. It was more as if—— Sometimes I pretend things, and then all at once they become real. I mean, I begin to believe them.’

‘And you went to sleep last night at once?’

‘Yes. At least——’

‘At least what?’

‘I went to sleep as soon as I got into bed. But I came out on to the landing first and listened.’

‘Listened?’

Tom nodded.

‘But why? What were you listening to?’

Tom coloured. He did not answer.

‘Had you heard anything?’

‘Nothing except the clock. I can’t explain, Uncle Stephen. Really, I’m not trying to hide anything. I just—— I don’t know. It’s just that I try to make things happen. No, it’s not quite that. I *would* tell you if I could, but ——’

‘Don’t worry. I expect I understand. Everything depends on the things you want to make happen. They must be good things.’

‘Yes.’

‘You can make them good things.’

‘Yes.’

‘And if you make them good things *always*, the time will come when there won’t be any others.’

‘I think this *house* is good, Uncle Stephen. Don’t you think houses can be good or—not good?’

‘Yes.’

‘But it’s not an ordinary house.’

‘Don’t you like it?’

‘Yes, but it’s not ordinary, and neither is the other—the lodge.’ Tom hesitated. ‘And you’re not an ordinary uncle,’ he added.

‘What is an ordinary uncle?’

Tom had no difficulty whatever with this. ‘Uncle Horace,’ he replied.

Uncle Stephen laughed. Tom was pleased that he had made him laugh, though it had been quite unintentionally. Again the game proceeded, and presently Tom moved his queen and said ‘Check!’ But he said it half-heartedly, for a suspicion had been dawning in his mind. ‘Uncle Stephen, you’re not to let me win on purpose.’

‘Don’t you want to win?’

‘Yes, I do, but not in that way.’

‘All right.’

‘You mean you can win if you like?’

‘As the pieces are now, I think in five moves.’

And so it was. Tom immediately rose and put away the table.

‘Does that mean it is bedtime?’ Uncle Stephen asked, glancing at his watch.

‘Bedtime! Why it’s quite early! It only means that we can play chess again to-morrow.’

‘And what shall we do now?’

‘I don’t want to bother you. I’ll read for a bit. . . . Shall I tell you what I’d *like* to do?’

‘I don’t see how I’m to know otherwise.’

‘I’d like you to show me some pictures.’

‘Pictures. What kind of pictures?’

Tom had his eyes fixed on a row of tall portfolios. ‘Any kind. One of these,’ he said, going to the shelf.

‘But my dear boy, I’m sure those aren’t pictures—or at least what you probably mean by pictures.’

‘Which shall I bring, Uncle Stephen?’

‘It doesn’t matter. I’ve forgotten what’s in them.’

Tom carried a portfolio to the table and Uncle Stephen unfastened the tapes that kept it closed. ‘These are all Greek vases,’ he said. ‘We’d better try another lot.’

‘But I like these,’ said Tom, pulling his chair round beside Uncle Stephen’s. ‘At least I like this first one. Only I want you to tell me about it. Who are those figures?’

‘The two goddesses are Demeter and Persephone: the boy is Triptolemos. They are sending him out on his mission.’

Tom bent over the plate. ‘Tell me how you know who they are, Uncle Stephen, and about Triptolemos.’

‘Are you sure this isn’t just an excuse for sitting up when you ought to be in bed?’ Uncle Stephen asked doubtfully.

‘Really it isn’t. Of course I know who Demeter and Persephone were, but I don’t know about Triptolemos. What was his mission?’

‘His mission was to give corn-seed to the country-people, and to teach them how to plough the land and to sow the corn and reap it and thresh it. He later became a half-god, but as you see him there he is just a farm-boy, though a prince of Eleusis. The chariot is Demeter’s own car, drawn by winged serpents.’

‘Was there ever any such person as Triptolemos?’

‘Nobody knows. He hasn’t always even the same father. But he is always the favourite of Demeter. He is her messenger and it is through him she gives her blessings. Altars and temples were built to Triptolemos himself, because he really was Demeter’s adopted son, besides being a very pleasant person.’

‘What else did he do?’

‘He gave the people three commandments—like Moses, except that Moses gave ten. The commandments of Triptolemos were: Honour your

father and mother. Offer fruits to the gods. Be kind and just to animals.'

'Those are good commandments,' said Tom. 'I'm going to keep them myself. I think it's far better to keep a few commandments absolutely than to bother about a lot that don't really suit you.'

'But, Tom dear, that's a very immoral doctrine.'

'Is it? I'll always keep your commandments, Uncle Stephen. Is there anything else about Triptolemos?'

'Sophocles wrote a play about him, but there are only a few lines of it left: and Apollodoros, who wrote a book called *The Library*, full of old tales and legends, says that he was an elder brother of Demophon—the little boy Demeter tried to make immortal by putting him every night into the fire, until his mother interfered. According to another tradition that little boy was Triptolemos himself. Ovid, in his *Fasti*, gives a different version, making the father, Keleos, not a king, but just an old peasant who worked on his own farm, and who met the goddess when he and his small daughter were coming home one evening with a load of acorns and blackberries. The girl was driving a couple of goats, and it was she who spoke first to Demeter, seeing her sitting by a well and mistaking her for an old countrywoman—the kind of solitary old woman Wordsworth would have made a poem about. All the Greek stories, you see, were treated in different ways by different writers. They were everybody's property, and the writer when he made a poem or a play out of them drew the characters to suit his own temper. And somehow this makes them all the more real—when you come across them over and over again, different but still the same. They accumulate a kind richness of humanity. Triptolemos may once have been as real a boy as you. The heroes had strange fates. Some began as mortals and slowly grew divine; some, beginning as gods, lost their divinity and became human. . . .'

'You know, we can't possibly go through all these to-night,' Uncle Stephen said, an hour later.

Tom sighed, smiled, stretched himself, and got up from his chair. 'Is that milk for me, Uncle Stephen?' he asked, looking at a tray which had been set on a side-table.

'Yes, Mrs. Deverell left it for you.'

Tom drank his glass of milk and put some biscuits in his pocket. 'Good-night, Uncle Stephen,' he said, holding out his hand, 'and thanks awfully for showing me the pictures.'

‘Good-night, Tom. Sleep well. I suppose you can find your own way?’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘Don’t drop candle-grease on the stairs.’

‘No.’

Tom lit his candle and walked as far as the door. There he stood holding the door-knob, and once or twice he turned it, but he did not open the door nor look back into the room. Then he put the candle down.

He returned to the table. ‘Let me put this away,’ he said, lifting the portfolio and carrying it to its shelf.

Uncle Stephen watched him in silence. Tom lingered for another minute or two by the bookshelves, but at last went once more to the door. This time he heard his name spoken.

‘Tom.’

Instantly he blew out the candle, came back, and stood beside Uncle Stephen’s chair.

‘What is it, Tom?’

‘It’s nothing,’ Tom whispered, putting his arms round Uncle Stephen’s neck. He slid into the armchair and with his cheek against Uncle Stephen’s added, ‘I wanted to say good-night.’

CHAPTER XI

Nothing had come from his step-mother—not even a letter—so after dinner Tom went down to the station to make inquiries. But he did not find his luggage. If it came, the station-master told him, it would be sent out to the house; it might come by the next train; there was one due at 4.30. Tom thanked him and turned homeward.

But he was annoyed, and he was particularly annoyed because it seemed to him so stupid! What good could keeping his clothes do? It wouldn't bring him back. At least they might have sent on a few things, such as shirts and socks and collars—things they *knew* he would require. He hadn't even a pair of slippers, and his step-mother must know that too. In fact, he was sure she had long ago gone through all his possessions to find out exactly what he *had* brought, and Jane would have told her. She simply wanted to make him uncomfortable, and wanted to be disagreeable to Uncle Stephen. He half thought of going into the post-office and telephoning to Uncle Horace. But it would do no good. Let them keep his things if they wished to: they could have them as a memento—the only one they were likely to get.

Both on his way to the station and on his return through Kilbarron he had kept a sharp look-out for the boy he had seen at the other house. Not that he expected to meet him: he thought it far more likely that he lived ten or twelve miles away and had ridden over on a bicycle. He might easily have done that, and hidden his bicycle somewhere while he explored the Manor grounds. It was just the sort of thing Tom himself would have liked to do—though when it came to the point he might have funked it. . . .

That was it:—if you had courage you could do anything. . . . He remembered seeing Eric diving off the balcony at the shallow end of the swimming bath into three feet of water where a slip would have meant a bad accident. It was an idiotic thing to try (he still thought that) and at the time he had begged him not to. All the same he had admired him tremendously—too much even to resent being called a 'sloppy little fool' by Leonard, who was waiting to perform the same feat. It was strange how if you were like Leonard or Eric you had to *invent* such exploits; you never *naturally* got into disagreeable positions where courage was necessary and must be pumped up whether you felt it or not. Leonard, for instance, who rejoiced in fights, was never singled out by other rejoicers; he had had far fewer scraps than Tom himself, who was all for peace, and whose nose bled at the slightest touch.

Was he a coward? It was disgusting to think he was: but can you be a coward in some ways without being a coward in all?—and in lots of ways he was sure he was one. His courage seemed to *vary* so much. He could never count on it; it never seemed to work spontaneously, but had to be manufactured, and there must always be somebody to be courageous *for*. Therefore it wasn't natural—didn't come from his guts, as it should have come, but from his mind—a sort of angry pride. . . .

Tom's self-examination was not yielding much comfort. He had forgotten what had started it. Perhaps this other boy. Beauty, strength, courage—those really were the qualities he admired. And he hadn't *any* of them. The image of Deverell rose before him. Deverell, he supposed, at this moment would be waiting for him down by the river. He frowned. *Purposely* he had made no promise, but still he hesitated. He felt rather mean, and most likely in the end he would have gone to the river had not the idea flashed upon him to leave a note for the trespasser. He could pin it to the door where he would be sure to see it if he came back. The temptation was irresistible, and Tom hurried on.

He entered the grounds and turned aside from the main avenue, keeping by the wall, and skirting the shrubbery, beyond which he caught a glimpse of George, and George's assistant Robert, a stocky youth of eighteen or thereabouts, whose acquaintance he had not yet made. Robert was shy, and had deliberately kept at a distance. At present he and George were clipping the laurels, though for the moment they had stopped working and their voices were raised in the clamour of religious argument. At least George's voice was raised, which Tom took for a sign that he had been getting the worst of it. He paused to catch the gist of the discussion, but it had already reached its climax.

'Cut them bushes an' houl' yer tongue!' George ordered angrily. 'The like of you puttin' it on you to give *me* salvation, that got you your job and learned you everythin' you know except foolishness. If your sins is washed clean it's more than your face is.'

'It's into the heart, not at the face, that the Lord looks, Mr. McCrudden,' said Robert earnestly.

'Ay—well, it's yer face *I* have to put up with.'

Tom moved discreetly away.

Still keeping by the dark stone wall, in whose ancient cracks and crannies a multitude of ferns and climbers, and even an occasional sapling,

had found a roothold, he approached his destination through a copse of larch and hazel. Deverell had certainly been right about the rabbits; in every clearing their burrows were manifest, and the white flashing of their little scuts as they dived into shelter at his approach. He reached the inner wall which surrounded his abandoned house, and passed through one of the gaps.

But hardly into the land of yesterday's sorcery. Not even when he emerged on to the lawn and saw before him again the low creepered house, the grass terraces, the ruined fountain with its solitary guardian. It was all lovely and quiet and neglected, but it was somehow less thrilling, less strange. It was as if a vivid light, thrown upon it by enchantment, had been withdrawn. Was it he himself who had broken a spell, or had he really seen it first in a peculiar lighting—though the hour must have been nearly the same? He only knew that its beauty was more familiar, less wonderful, that the suggestion of life had vanished from the house, and that it was empty.

Treading noiselessly on the thick matted grass, Tom went round to the back. He entered a square, roughly-paved yard. He peeped through a dark cobwebbed kitchen window, then turned the handle of the door and gently pushed. The door opened and he heard a scuttle among the litter of old newspapers on the floor. Tom stood there, still grasping the door-handle, gazing out of sunshine into twilight. But he did not enter. There was a wooden chair, a table; the grate was stuffed with rubbish; in one corner a heap of plaster had fallen from the ceiling. Not a sound now even of a mouse: then the noisy buzzing of a bluebottle which had flown in over his head. Fat fussy creature! A feast for somebody! Tom thought; noting the thick webs, and wondering what spiders shut in here could possibly find to eat. Or mice either. But the mice doubtless were not really shut in—had their secret passages connected with the outer world.

The friendly chirping of sparrows in the ivy, and the bright sunshine, held him on the threshold. Inside, it was dirty and gloomy, and a cold musty smell rose from the paved floor. Besides, he knew there was nobody there. Tom, who had come to explore the house, closed the door without entering. He re-crossed the cobbled yard; he would leave his message and go. But when he reached the corner of the house he put paper and pencil back in his pocket, for the trespasser was there.

Tom stood still. Yes, he was there, kneeling by the fountain, exactly as Tom had knelt yesterday, his hands plunged in the water, his back turned. And Tom knew him. Presently he lifted his cupped hands from the pool. He did not look round; his head was bent over some captive; and the water dripped down between his fingers on to the grass. But he must have heard a

footstep, for he said over his shoulder, 'I've got the biggest water-beetle you ever saw.'

'Have you?' Tom replied.

The words dropped rather lamely. In fact, though there was no reason why he should do so, he felt a little let down, like one who has prepared an elaborate surprise only to find it has all from the beginning been regarded as a matter of course. But this check was momentary. 'Let's see it,' he said, running to the fountain.

The trespasser held out his hands, and Tom surveyed the black, glossy, rather formidable creature, who was making indignant efforts to regain his liberty. All at once his back split open, two wings were unfolded, and he whirred triumphantly away.

Tom watched his short clumsy flight as he grazed the top of a fuchsia bush and dropped down among a clump of irises. Then he turned and encountered the dark blue eyes of the kneeling boy. They were candid yet watchful, with an unusual breadth between them, and the corners of the eyebrows were slightly protuberant. The line of the nose was firm and bold, the mouth just a little pouting, the chin rounded. He would have looked exactly like a young buccaneer, Tom thought, only there was something else there, something that removed him indefinitely from that type and from the purely athletic type of Eric and Leonard—a kind of subtle intellectuality.

'Where do you come from? You were here yesterday.'

Tom, lost in contemplation, was taken aback. Questions as to *his* identity were not what he had expected, particularly when asked in a tone that struck him as singularly high-handed. 'I live here,' he answered stiffly. 'This place belongs to my uncle.'

The kneeling boy accepted the statement, but it did not abash him. 'Tell me your name,' he said in the same dictatorial tone.

Tom coloured. 'Why don't you tell me yours?'

At this the trespasser showed surprise. But he was not annoyed, and after just the briefest hesitation answered 'Philip.' A rather longer pause ensued before he added, 'Coombe.'

'Well, my name's Tom Barber,' said Tom.

The announcement brought them to a deadlock. The whole encounter, somehow, had been unfortunate, and very different from the one he had anticipated. But that was always the way. He began to suspect that this boy

was after all of the type of his step-brothers: the arrogance was not so pronounced, but it was there, and he recognized it with a pang of disillusionment. He had looked so pleasant! He did still for that matter: there could not, Tom felt, in the whole world be anything that looked much pleasanter. Meanwhile the strange boy had risen to his feet and they confronted each other. Tom stared as long as he could: then his eyes dropped and he merely stood there waiting unhappily.

He was astonished to hear a quite friendly voice addressing him. ‘What are you annoyed about?’

Tom looked up. ‘Nothing.’ His smile was hesitating.

‘Well, you haven’t spoken for nearly five minutes.’

‘Neither have you,’ Tom said.

‘I was thinking—coming to a decision.’

‘So was I.’

‘About me?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘You *said* this place belonged to your uncle.’

‘Oh that!’ Tom was relieved to find his real thoughts so widely missed.

‘Did you tell him you had seen me?’

‘Yes, I told him last night. He doesn’t mind. He says you can go into the house when you like. . . . I only told him,’ Tom added, ‘because at that time I thought you lived there, and that he might know who you were.’

‘Well, *you* know now.’

‘I don’t know very much,’ said Tom.

‘You know my name.’

‘Yes.’

‘And in a way I do live there.’

Tom looked at him uncertainly. ‘How do you mean?’ he asked.

‘I mean I’m living there for the present—temporarily. I found the door unlocked. Nobody can have been near the place for ages and I didn’t see what harm I could do. I don’t do as much harm as the birds: the chimneys are full of nests.’

‘No, I’m sure you don’t,’ said Tom. ‘But why do you want to live there? It can’t be very comfortable.’

‘I ran away. As a matter of fact I ran away twice—first from school and then from home. I want to go abroad, but I thought I’d better hide for a while, till they had stopped looking for me.’

‘Everybody I know seems to have run away,’ murmured Tom. ‘At least everybody about here. Uncle Stephen did, long ago: and Deverell did: and I ran away myself to come to Uncle Stephen.’

‘Well, you can’t stay at home for ever,’ said Philip.

‘No,’ Tom agreed, more doubtfully. ‘Though if you come to think of it a good many people do—at least till they’re grown-up.’

‘I wanted to go to sea a year ago, but my father wouldn’t let me. And I’m not going back to school. Anyhow I don’t think they’d take me, because I nearly killed one of the boys with a cricket stump before I left. I thought at first I *had* killed him. I tried to.’

‘*Truly?*’

‘Well, perhaps not quite: but I wanted to hurt him badly, and I did.’

There was a pause.

‘I like this place and nobody will ever find me here.’

‘I found you,’ said Tom.

‘Only because I allowed you to. I stood at the window on purpose.’

‘I would have found you sooner or later without that: I intended to explore the house.’

‘I shouldn’t have been in the house—unless you had come in the middle of the night.’

Tom tried another subject. ‘How do you manage about your grub: I mean where do you get it?’

‘I haven’t had to get any so far. I only came yesterday and I have what will do me till to-morrow:—bread and cheese, and there’s a well in the yard.’

‘But it must be frightfully uncomfortable. Isn’t the place swarming with mice?’

‘Only downstairs: they come in out of the garden. Besides, in the hold of a ship there would be rats and cockroaches.’

Tom regarded this bold adventurer with serious and wondering eyes. ‘Were you going as a stowaway? I thought that only happened in stories. How would you get on board to begin with? And as soon as they found you they’d send a message. Nearly every ship has a wireless.’

‘A wireless!’ Philip looked puzzled, but continued his explanation. ‘I’ll not go as a stowaway if I can get a proper job. But I’m going *some* way, and I can’t risk being caught.’

‘I’ll bring you your grub,’ said Tom.

‘Will you?’

‘Unless you’d like to come and stay at the Manor. I know it would be all right, because my uncle said this morning he wished there was another boy for me to knock about with.’

‘No,’ replied Philip decisively.

‘But why? You needn’t be afraid of Uncle Stephen.’

‘I’m not afraid of him.’

‘Why won’t you come then? It would be a good deal better than where you are and just as safe. That place must be filthy.’

‘It’s not so bad upstairs. You haven’t seen it.’

Tom looked at him in uncertainty. ‘You mean you don’t want to come?’

‘I can’t come. I must be free to do what I like and I couldn’t be free if I went to stay with your uncle. Besides, he’d expect me to tell him all about myself.’

‘I don’t think he would,’ said Tom quietly, ‘but it doesn’t matter.’

He looked down into the fountain. He could think of nothing else to say and yet he wished to say something. Philip did not help him, and Tom turned away. ‘I must be going,’ he murmured.

‘Will you come back again?’

It was less an invitation than a question, but Tom answered, ‘Yes, if you want me to. Besides, I’ve to bring you your grub.’

Philip kept step beside him. He was at least a head taller than Tom—as tall as Leonard, and of the same clean powerful build. ‘Are you going to tell

your uncle what I've told you?' he asked.

'I'd rather tell him, and I'll have to tell him some of it; but if there's anything you don't want me to tell——'

'I don't mind. You can tell him whatever you please—so long as you make him promise to keep it a secret and not to interfere with me.'

'You needn't be afraid,' said Tom, 'he isn't that kind.'

They walked slowly over the thick matted turf, and entered the green avenue. A hare, twenty yards away, squatted down to watch them.

At the gate Philip stopped. 'I don't think I'll come any further.'

Tom too paused, in indecision. 'I wish you would,' he said. 'I want you to help me to build a raft, and then we could go on the river. Have you been to the river yet?'

'No.'

'Will you come with me to-morrow and bathe?'

'Would anybody be likely to see me? Should we have to pass any houses?'

'No. . . . It's over there.' He pointed through the trees. 'There are no houses near.'

'Well——'

'I'll come early,' Tom promised eagerly. 'Then we'll have the whole afternoon. And I'll bring your food at the same time. I'll come whether it's wet or fine.'

'Alone?'

'Yes, of course.'

'There won't be any other boys there?'

'No, there won't be anybody except ourselves.'

Philip thought it over for a minute or two. 'All right,' he said at last. 'Good-bye for the present.'

He was turning away, but Tom stood still. 'What is it?' Philip asked.

Tom hesitated. 'It's just that it seems rotten leaving you here alone,' he murmured shyly.

Philip looked at him with a faint surprise. ‘You needn’t worry about *me*,’ he answered rather coldly; and the statement was so obviously true that Tom wished he had left his own words unspoken.

CHAPTER XII

When he was still about a stone's throw from the Manor, Tom stiffened into immobility, like a cat, who, in the act of crossing the road, suddenly changes his mind. But it was not at the house he was looking; it was at a car drawn up on the gravel sweep before it, the engine silent. He knew that car. Yes—and he knew that voice too, though the speaker, being within the porch, was invisible. Also he knew the back of Shanks, the chauffeur: the problem was whether to advance or retreat.

Quiet as the stone boy at the other house, he stood to debate it. But what on earth was Uncle Horace kicking up such a row about? Surely they hadn't refused to let him in! *Had* they, though? It *sounded* like it. This was extraordinary!—and whatever happened he mustn't miss it.

But he approached with circumspection, since it was quite possible he might be pounced on unawares and carried off by main force. It *could* be done. After all, the car was there, Shanks was there to lend a hand, and—George and Robert having left off work at five o'clock—Tom had nobody to call to his assistance. At the same moment Shanks turned and saw him. His wooden face expressed a total lack of interest, but that might be only part of a 'plant', for Tom was not yet within pouncing distance. 'Here's Mr. Tom now, sir,' Shanks called out officially; and then, having carefully turned his back to the porch, he winked.

It was a deliberate wink; there could be no doubt about it; nevertheless, coming from the saturnine and inscrutable Shanks, its significance was ambiguous. It might mean anything or nothing. Tom winked in response, but approached no nearer.

'Hello, Uncle Horace!' he said, as Uncle Horace came fussing to the edge of the porch. 'What's happened?'

'Nothing has happened except that your mother sent me down to bring you home. But it appears Mr. Collet can't see me. I may say that I intend to wait here until he can.'

Uncle Horace, Tom perceived, was not in the best of tempers; his complexion was a shade more florid than usual, and his always high-pitched voice had an unmistakable edge. He did not even ask Tom how he was, but then Tom himself, instead of coming forward to shake hands, continued to hover at a cautious distance.

‘Where is Uncle Stephen?’ he asked of Mrs. Deverell, who stood, frail but determined, in the background, holding the fort as it were.

‘He’s in his room, Master Tom, and he left instructions that he was on no account to be disturbed.’

‘And in the meantime his hospitality extends as far as the doorstep,’ Uncle Horace said, with an angry flash of his white teeth.

Tom was puzzled. It *did* look rather odd.

‘You must pardon me, sir,’ Mrs. Deverell interposed quietly, ‘but the master never receives visitors except by appointment; and this afternoon he mentioned particularly that he would be engaged and was not to be disturbed.’

‘Disturbed!’ Uncle Horace echoed impatiently. ‘My good woman, all I asked you to do was to take him a message. And considering the distance I’ve come——’

‘I’m sorry, sir, but the master’s orders were definite; I wouldn’t dare to go against them.’

Uncle Horace turned from her abruptly. ‘Then you’d better get into the car, Tom. We’ve a long drive before us. You can write to your uncle when you reach home. Would you fetch Master Tom’s hat and coat, please?’ he said to Mrs. Deverell.

As if at a signal Shanks swung open the door of the car and stood in readiness, but Tom retreated another yard or two. There he again halted, very much on the alert, ready to spring away at the slightest attempt to lay a hand on him.

‘Is Uncle Stephen in his study, Mrs. Deverell?’ he called out.

‘I don’t think so, Master Tom.’

Uncle Horace descended the steps. ‘Come, Tom,’ he said, but Tom did not budge. The impassive Shanks, still holding open the door, remained sardonically at attention.

‘You know very well, Uncle Horace, I can’t possibly go away like this,’ Tom expostulated. ‘And at any rate I’m not going at all. I’m going to live with Uncle Stephen. He’s adopted me. The whole thing’s settled.’

Uncle Horace said nothing. He might have been calculating whether Shanks had even a sporting chance if ordered to pursue his nephew, but if that were his thought he decided against it.

‘I think, all the same, Uncle Horace ought to be invited in,’ Tom went on, addressing Mrs. Deverell.

‘Whatever you say, Master Tom. I’m sure there’s no discourtesy meant, but your uncle’s always most particular that his orders should be obeyed. Of course, with you here it makes a difference. Mr. Collet wouldn’t wish you not to be polite to your visitors. I could get the gentleman some refreshment, if you would bring him into the dining-room.’

‘Thank you, I don’t want any refreshment,’ the visitor snapped. ‘As for you, Tom, you appear to imagine you are going to be assaulted. I didn’t bring either ropes or handcuffs with me. I supposed your natural feeling would be sufficient to make you respect your mother’s wishes.’

‘She isn’t my mother,’ said Tom.

‘She is in the place of your mother.’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘And your father committed you to her charge.’

‘Did he?’ Tom answered softly. ‘I don’t doubt your word, Uncle Horace, but I should have to have some proof of that.’

Shanks suddenly coughed, and Uncle Horace darted a furious glance at him.

‘My mother committed me to Uncle Stephen’s charge,’ Tom added.

Uncle Horace smiled—the coldest and thinnest of smiles. ‘I don’t think we need continue the discussion,’ he said. ‘It is hardly a suitable place.’

‘Will you swear you won’t touch me?’ asked Tom.

‘Really!’ Uncle Horace broke out. But he checked himself, and an exasperated shrug of his shoulders completed the sentence.

Tom, however, was obstinate. ‘I won’t come any nearer unless you promise.’

It was the last straw. ‘I don’t *want* to touch you,’ cried Uncle Horace in tones belying his words. ‘Your stay with your uncle has been short, but it seems to have had a disastrous effect upon your manners.’

This outburst Tom accepted as a promise. ‘I’m sorry, Uncle Horace. I don’t want to be rude to you.’ And he stepped forward at once. ‘It’s just the way things have happened that is unfortunate. Come in, won’t you? I’m sure

Uncle Stephen must be somewhere about. You see, it's tea-time; in fact it must be considerably after tea-time.'

Uncle Horace glowered as he preceded Tom up the steps and into the hall. Mrs. Deverell hastened to open the dining-room door, but Tom was now anxious to show the visitor every courtesy. 'I'll take Mr. Pringle to the study,' he said. 'Though I don't think Uncle Stephen can possibly be there,' he added to Uncle Horace, 'or he would have heard us. If he didn't—I mean if he's so absorbed as all *that*, I shouldn't think he'd see us either, even if we do go in.' But Uncle Horace received his little joke without response.

And when they entered the room it was to find it unoccupied. All Uncle Stephen's belongings were there, and some traces of Tom also, but not Uncle Stephen himself.

Tom was about to invite the visitor to sit down, when the visitor abruptly waved *him* to a chair. 'Sit down,' he said, and Tom obeyed him. 'Now, tell me what is the meaning of this pretty performance?'

Tom looked docility itself, and it was in the mildest possible voice that he asked, 'What pretty performance, Uncle Horace?'

'You know what I refer to: kindly answer my question.'

But, as he stared into the boy's face, he remembered perhaps something which induced him to alter his tactics, for it was in a less aggressive tone that he went on. 'Why did you run away from home?'

Tom did not reply: indeed Uncle Horace hardly left him time to do so before adding, 'Why did you *want* to run away? Why couldn't you have said something? Don't you think it was treating your mother—your step-mother—rather badly? I suppose *that* didn't occur to you!'

Tom looked at him gravely, but without any hint of a troubled conscience. 'It did occur to me,' he said. 'Only there was no other way. And at any rate I didn't think she'd care.'

'She did care.'

'Yes. . . perhaps. . . I don't know. . . You see—I don't think I want to talk about that part of it: it won't do any good.'

Uncle Horace's thin lips drew closer together. 'Why won't it do good?'

Tom sighed. He looked at Uncle Horace in a kind of unspoken deprecation. 'Because——' he began, and then stopped. He knew so well what Uncle Horace was leading up to, and he wished he wouldn't. 'I think it

will be better if you don't tell me she's fond of me,' he said at last, slowly and inoffensively. 'You see, I know she isn't: I've always known. I should think it's the kind of thing people always do know.'

Uncle Horace checked him with a quick movement; but he looked for all that rather taken aback. 'You're making a big mistake,' he replied pompously, but without much conviction, and Tom did not answer.

'Don't you understand too,' Uncle Horace went on, abandoning the point of sentiment, 'that it puts her in a most unpleasant position—that when people get to know you have run away they will talk—imagine, and very likely say, there must have been some cause to make you behave like that.'

There was truth in this, and Tom acknowledged it. 'Only there's no reason why they ever *should* get to know,' he persisted.

Uncle Horace took him up quickly. 'That's all nonsense: you can't keep a thing like this quiet. I shouldn't be surprised if Eric and Leonard and Jane had already been chattering about it.'

'Well, I don't see that I'm to blame for *that*,' Tom replied. 'There was no need to say more than that I'd gone to live with Uncle Stephen, or even gone on a visit to him.'

'The effect remains, no matter who is to blame. Tell me the real truth now, Tom. There wasn't any particular *reason*, was there, why you did what you did? You weren't unhappy—nobody had done anything you didn't like? Eric or Leonard hadn't been teasing you? I may tell you I've inquired into *that* side of the matter very carefully—it was the first thing I did—without finding much, though of course I may not have been told the truth. The boys did admit that now and then they had teased you. There was a book of yours it seems—a particular favourite—*Rudolph the Mysterious*—and they hung it up in the W.C. as—eh—toilet-paper.'

Tom laughed. The relaxation was so complete that he could almost have embraced Uncle Horace. 'Oh, that was ages ago. Of course I was angry at the time, but I'd forgotten about it. It was a rotten book anyway, though I liked it frightfully then, and read it I don't know how often. That's why they hung it up. But it was only a paper-backed thing, in the *Boy's Companion Library*.' He looked half incredulously at Uncle Horace. 'Surely you don't think I'm such a fool as that!'

'As what?' asked Uncle Horace, who saw nothing amusing in the incident, and at any rate found these changes of mood singularly unsatisfactory.

‘As to worry about a joke. In fact, I think it was quite a good joke.’

‘But——’ Uncle Horace paused. ‘Then there is some other reason?’

‘I wanted to come to Uncle Stephen.’

Uncle Horace repressed his irritation. ‘Look here, Tom: you had never set eyes on your Uncle Stephen in your life: you had barely even heard of him, and what you had heard wasn’t favourable.’

‘Oh yes, I’d heard of him,’ said Tom simply.

‘What had you heard?’

‘To begin with, I knew what all of you thought.’

‘That’s just what I say. You knew nothing except that.’

‘I didn’t believe it was true, you see—what you thought. . . . Besides, really that had nothing to do with it.’

‘Then what had to do with it?’ asked Uncle Horace.

‘I forget.’

It was a far from satisfactory answer, and he knew from Uncle Horace’s stiffening countenance that he believed it to be a lie. Of course it *was* a lie, too, but what else could he say? Uncle Horace kept on badgering and badgering till you didn’t very much mind what lies you told. And if it came to that, what was all his own talk but a lot of bluff? The chief reason why they wanted him back he hadn’t mentioned: he had taken jolly good care not to mention it. How mad they would be if they knew Jane had told him!

He awoke out of these considerations to the consciousness that Uncle Horace’s cold, greyish eyes were boring into him like gimlets. It was the kind of gaze with which a cross-examiner attempts to extract the truth from a prevaricating witness, and Tom resented it. Not because of any reflection it cast upon his candour (for he *wasn’t* being candid), but because he could not see what right Uncle Horace had to question him at all. It was none of his business: he was just a cross old thing, who loved interfering—even his own relations admitted it.

‘Tell me,’ said the cross old thing, ‘had you received a letter from Mr. Collet?’

‘No,’ answered Tom in surprise. But the question threw a new light on Uncle Horace’s attitude, and again he felt his answer was not believed.

‘No message of any kind?’

‘No.’

‘Had you written to him yourself?’

‘No.’

Uncle Horace, momentarily baffled, sat back in his chair before beginning a fresh attack, and Tom, in the interval, ventured a question on his own account. ‘When are they going to send on my clothes?’

‘Your clothes aren’t going to be sent on: you are coming home with me.’

‘I’m not.’ It was the first definitely defiant speech he had made, and it transformed him instantly, as by magic, back into a sullen little boy, brimming over with obstinacy. He sat there frowning, but Uncle Horace was not perturbed. Indeed, from his face, one would have gathered that he welcomed the change. Sullen boys he had met before and knew how to cope with.

His satisfaction permitted a brief flash of the well-known smile. ‘You’re coming to-night,’ he declared.

Uncle Horace was sitting with his back to the door: Tom was facing it and now got up. ‘I think I’d better go and look for Uncle Stephen,’ he muttered darkly.

‘You’ll oblige me by remaining where you are. Mr. Collet, if he is in the house at all, must know perfectly well I am here. Probably he has known from the beginning. All this childish business of wasting my time is either a pose or a calculated rudeness: in fact he is acting quite as I should have anticipated from what I’ve heard of him.’

‘You know nothing about him,’ cried Tom passionately. ‘And what right have you to interfere with me? *You’re* not my guardian, anyway!’

Uncle Horace had completely recovered himself: he was now master of the situation. ‘You won’t make matters better by losing your temper,’ he said. ‘You’re behaving at present like a spoiled, self-willed child.’

While he was speaking, Tom had turned half round. He stood scowling in mute anger, and then suddenly his whole countenance altered as an expression of relief, affection, happiness and trust, swept over it. At that moment, in spite of its plainness, his face became oddly attractive. Not that Uncle Horace was attracted. On the contrary, turning once more, Tom encountered a gaze of fixed and profound suspicion.

‘What’s come to you now?’ asked Uncle Horace coldly.

Tom's smile broadened. 'It's Uncle Stephen,' he breathed, as if conveying a secret. 'He's there.'

At this Uncle Horace also whipped round, and rising abruptly, knocked over a small table beside him.

'What——'

'I must apologize,' Uncle Stephen said. 'I didn't know anybody was here.'

The tall figure still stood in shadow, motionless; and to Tom the black panelling behind it, throwing into relief the silvery whiteness of the hair, made it look exactly like an old portrait in a dusky frame. Uncle Stephen came down the full length of the room; he laid a hand on his nephew's shoulder, and Tom leaned close up against him in a way that annoyed Uncle Horace indescribably. 'You'd better introduce me to your visitor, Tom.'

'This is Mr. Horace Pringle,' Tom replied, with an unconscious trick of mimicry catching the very tone of the clear low voice which had just spoken.

Uncle Horace jerked his head in acknowledgment, but he remained where he stood, one hand behind his back, the other resting on the top of his chair. 'This is Mr. Horace Pringle!'—— and there had been a glint in his eyes when he had said it. A precious pair! That boy, looking like a tiger's cub in the ecstasy of being stroked and caressed! A precious pair indeed. Uncle Horace's unspoken opinion was cried aloud from every visible inch of him—even from his clothes and buttons and tie and collar, the white frill of his waistcoat, his spats and his slender, highly-polished boots.

Uncle Stephen had bowed ceremoniously. 'Do sit down,' he suggested. 'Tom, I'm afraid you haven't been very hospitable. You might at least have got your uncle something to drink after his drive, even if you couldn't offer him a cigar or a cigarette.'

'Thanks, I never drink between meals,' Uncle Horace interrupted frigidly. 'I shan't beat about the bush: I've come for Tom himself.'

'For Tom?' Uncle Stephen's eyebrows were slightly lifted as he repeated the last words, throwing into them a note of interrogation and just a shade of surprise.

'Mrs. Barber——my sister——wishes him to return home.'

'At once? But surely that is a very short visit! My letter, perhaps——'

‘Oh, she got your letter,’ Uncle Horace interrupted. ‘She ought to have acknowledged it at once, no doubt, but you will receive her reply to-morrow. And in the meantime she thought it would save trouble if I drove down and fetched Tom back with me. She asked me to apologize for the inconvenience his unexpected arrival must have caused you.’

‘It wasn’t unexpect——’ Tom began, but a slight pressure on his shoulder made him leave his speech unfinished. Uncle Horace had pricked up his ears, however, and Tom knew he would now be more suspicious than ever.

‘His arrival wasn’t at all an inconvenience,’ Uncle Stephen said softly. ‘It gave me great pleasure.’

‘I should have thought—with your habits of solitude—it couldn’t be anything but the greatest possible nuisance.’

Uncle Stephen waited a moment. ‘Habits of solitude, don’t you think, usually mean no more than a distaste for uncongenial society?’

‘Perhaps: but the society of a young boy can hardly be congenial.’

‘That, of course, you have no means of judging. I don’t wish to be rude, but you must see yourself that it is so.’

‘I dare say I can’t judge in the present case,’ Uncle Horace answered dryly, ‘though I should have said that the first essential to congeniality is the possession of something in common—interests, tastes, experience, age. What can you possibly have in common with a boy of Tom’s age?’

‘A boy of Tom’s age is not necessarily devoid of interests and tastes. Also your list ought surely to include character, a certain temperamental outlook or sensitiveness.’

Uncle Horace received these additions with something very like a snort. ‘Tom’s,’ he said, ‘is the kind of temperament that makes it desirable that he should not be removed from the ordinary healthy influences of home and companions of his own age.’

‘You mean the particular home and companions he left behind him when he came to me?’

‘Since my sister is his guardian, naturally that *is* his home. . . . I don’t know what tales he may have brought you,’ he went on, with a glance at the possible tale-bearer; ‘the fact remains that he was well looked after in every way, perfectly happy, perfectly content till——’

‘Till what?’ Uncle Stephen asked.

‘How do I know,’ Uncle Horace answered sourly. ‘He’s always been secretive. Now there seems to be some particular secret that he refuses to talk about. But I’m convinced it wasn’t there a few days ago.’

‘*Rudolph!*’ Tom whispered. ‘I never knew I was so like him.’ He was regarding Uncle Horace with inquiring eyes in which brimmed a suppressed laughter. He was unaware of it, but nothing could have been more provocative.

‘Your idea, then, is that this secret of Tom’s has been implanted by me?’ Uncle Stephen went on quietly.

‘I didn’t say so.’

‘But it is the obvious meaning of all you *have* said.’

‘You can take it in whatever way you like.’

Uncle Stephen’s eyes narrowed for a moment, though whether in distaste for the accusation, or for the manner of its expression Tom could not tell. To him it seemed that Uncle Horace was merely being tiresome. *His* uncle was not like that; and he rubbed his cheek softly against Uncle Stephen’s hand.

Uncle Horace withdrew his eyes from the revolting spectacle. ‘Are you or are you not going to send Tom back with me?’

‘You also forget that he really *is* related to me, of my own stock, whereas _____,’

‘Family affection has meant a lot to you in the past, hasn’t it?’ Uncle Horace interrupted. ‘I repeat my question: Are you or are you not going to send Tom back with me?’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Uncle Stephen quietly, and Tom experienced a strange thrill of pleasure.

‘How long do you propose to keep him?’

‘For ever and ever,’ Tom breathed, but again he felt a warning pressure.

‘As long as he cares to stay: I certainly shan’t keep him against his will. But I explained all this clearly in my letter.’

‘Your letter was serious then?’

‘Yes. Didn’t it strike you as serious?’

‘It did not, but my sister was more credulous. Therefore the first thing she did, after showing it to me, was to consult her solicitors. I suppose you understand that you can be compelled to give the boy up.’

‘We shall see.’

‘You mean, you are going to fight the case?’

‘I don’t think there will *be* any case.’

Uncle Horace gave his high nervous laugh. ‘You are optimistic. I can assure you matters won’t be allowed to remain as they are now.’

‘That also we shall see.’

Uncle Horace took out his watch, glanced at it, and replaced it in his pocket. Deliberately he seemed to pause before making his next point. ‘Another thing you perhaps haven’t considered. All this must entail publicity.’

‘Yes?’

‘It may become necessary to rake up ancient and buried scandals:—if we have to prove, for instance, that you are not a proper person to be in charge of the boy.’

‘If you can do so it will certainly strengthen your position.’

‘I may add, speaking for myself,’ Uncle Horace pursued, ‘that my visit to-day has convinced me you are *not* a suitable person.’

At this Uncle Stephen smiled, but gravely, not in derision. ‘That *at least* is a little unreasonable,’ he protested. ‘I should have been here to receive you if I had known you were coming, and I have apologized for not being here. The only other cause for offence you can have found is my refusal to send Tom back.’

‘I am not alluding either to your refusal, or to your reluctance to admit anybody to your house—or even to the slightly theatrical manner of your own entrance.’

‘Oh! the concealed door! I assure you my use of it was entirely accidental.’

‘Most people are content with ordinary doors.’

‘You think others definitely not respectable? I’m sorry. I can only plead the age of the house and the fact that *behind* the door there is nothing more

alarming than a staircase leading to my bedroom. If you are not referring to any of these things, however, what *are* you referring to?’

‘To the alteration in Tom himself.’

Uncle Stephen now at all events showed a genuine astonishment. He looked at Uncle Horace half incredulously. ‘An alteration?—an alteration for the worse?’

‘Most decidedly.’ And with this Uncle Horace stepped lightly across the room to its more orthodox entrance.

The impulse was irresistible, and Tom made a face behind his back. Unfortunately Uncle Horace, turning his head unexpectedly, had time to catch it. He regarded his nephew grimly though he said nothing, and Uncle Stephen, who luckily had missed this by-play, rang the bell, then changed his mind and went himself to see their visitor off.

Tom, left all alone, stood in the middle of the floor, waiting for Uncle Stephen to come back, and thinking. Of course, he had heard something—a faint click—it was that which had attracted his attention—but he had unusually sharp ears, and Uncle Horace could have heard nothing. And even for *him* it had been a thrilling moment when he had turned and looked and—Uncle Stephen simply had been there. Yes, and the thought *had* risen in his mind of how wonderful it would be if he really were a magician. He had had a vision of himself going through the streets of Kilbarron, of the women peering furtively out over their half-doors, and the boys railing after him ‘Wizard’s brat!’ . . .

Suddenly Tom hated himself for these thoughts. They were stupid—all wrong.

He was wakened out of his reverie. ‘I suppose it is going to be war to the knife—eh?’ Uncle Stephen had returned.

CHAPTER XIII

Through the open window, flung wide to the evening air, Tom watched the departure of Sally and Mrs. Deverell—figures in a garden picture, but walking straight out of it. Why should this nightly departure continue to affect him so oddly, like a queer kind of ritual? For no sooner were they lost to sight than he had again that sense of an indescribable change in everything around him. The clock ticked on, the birds sang, the branches waved—nevertheless, nothing was the same. The quiet seemed to deepen; the light he could have sworn deepened too; something that he knew was withdrawn, something he did not know drew nearer; it was like dreaming; it was like the approach of sleep.

If Uncle Horace were to return now would he be able to find the gate—or would Uncle Stephen have hidden it by enchantment?

Tom leaned his hands on the window-sill, and the stone was warm. The last sunlight mingled with the shadows on the grass; a wood-pigeon cooed from the ash-tree; Tom felt at peace with all the world.

He turned his head and looked round at Uncle Stephen, who was reading. One book he held in his hands, and three or four others were open on the table beside him. Tom thought he would read also, but as soon as he tried to think of a book the impulse died. He did not really want to read. He glanced at the chessmen and immediately knew he did not want to play chess. He got a stool and placed it beside Uncle Stephen's chair; then, in silence, sat down upon it. In this way he was not interrupting Uncle Stephen, while at the same time he was letting him know he was there, for Uncle Stephen had all day to read and might like to talk for a change.

Uncle Stephen turned a page. The fingers of one hand twisted Tom's coarse, dry, brown hair into little locks, but absent-mindedly, and presently he withdrew them to turn another page. This was not in the least what Tom wanted, so he took from his pocket a feather he had picked up in the wood, and began to tickle Uncle Stephen's hand. The feather produced no effect, and Tom gave the hand a tiny bite. At this the book closed, but with a finger still keeping the place. 'Uncle Stephen, I must either disturb you or go out of the room.'

Uncle Stephen laid down his book. 'What is it to be, then;—chess?'

‘No, I want to talk. I have something to tell you. I saw that boy again this afternoon and I spoke to him. His name is Philip Coombe. He ran away from home and he’s living in the other house now—hiding there. But he’s going abroad, going to see the world. He’ll do it too; he’s just that sort.’

‘Where does he come from?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t know the least thing about him. He won’t answer questions. But I like him.’

‘How can you like a person you know nothing about?’

‘Well—you can, too. *I* can anyway.’

‘You mean you like what you’ve made up about him?’

‘Yes—but I think it’s true. . . . I asked him to come and stay here.’

‘To stay in *this* house?’

‘Yes. Was that wrong? Do you mind, Uncle Stephen? He isn’t coming, anyway.’

‘I’d certainly prefer you to tell me your plans beforehand.’

‘Yes. So I will. I promised to take him food every day while he is there, but that was right, wasn’t it? I *ought* to do that, don’t you think?’

‘I suppose so.’

Tom sat pondering for a while: then he began again. ‘Uncle Stephen?’

‘Yes.’

‘You don’t seem very interested in him.’

‘Interested—in what way? So far you haven’t told me anything interesting.’

‘But you’re not trying to be interested.’

Uncle Stephen regarded him mildly. ‘What should you call trying? If you give me a hint I’ll do my best.’

‘Well, you haven’t asked me how old he is, or what he looks like, or anything.’

‘How old is he?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Tom! Tom!’ Uncle Stephen stretched out his hand towards his book.

‘No, you’re not to,’ cried Tom quickly, catching his wrist and pulling it back. ‘I only mean I don’t know *exactly*. He’s a good deal bigger than I am, but I don’t expect he’s much older—about sixteen.’

There was a pause, broken at last by Uncle Stephen. ‘Well, what’s the next point? Am I to ask another question?’

‘I’m just thinking,’ said Tom. ‘There’s *something* about him I can’t quite make out—something *different*. Perhaps it’s only his way of speaking—but there’s *something*.’

‘His accent?’

‘No.’ Tom’s forehead wrinkled. ‘It’s awfully hard to describe. What would you call it if a person didn’t always use the words other boys use? . . . But I’m not sure that it *is* that,’ he added quickly.

‘I’ve no idea. Do you mean he’s very prim and pedantic?’

‘No, I don’t,’ said Tom. ‘Just the opposite. I’m far primmer myself: I bet he’d do anything.’

‘Anything! A reckless, lawless kind of person?’

‘Well, not anything rotten, of course. . . . All the same,’ he went on half under his breath, ‘I bet he *is* pretty reckless and lawless.’

‘Apart from the question of his speech?’

Tom waited a moment before saying reproachfully, ‘It’s very easy to make fun of people.’

‘I’m not making fun of people. I’m only trying to find out what has impressed *this* person. You see, for me that is the most important point.’

‘What?’

‘What I’m trying to discover.’

‘But I mean what is the important point?’

‘The important point is the source of *your* interest.’

‘I don’t think I understand.’

‘Well, we’ll put it in a different way. What quality is it that *must* be there, or at least that you most want to be there, in anybody you regard as a friend? Is that plain?’

‘It ought to be—but I’d have to think it over.’

‘Think then.’

Tom sat still for several minutes. He shut his eyes tight; he compressed his lips; he might have been grappling with the riddle of Sphynx.

‘Well, have you found it?’ Uncle Stephen asked. ‘Or was this just an opportunity for taking a snooze?’

Tom opened his eyes. ‘I believe,’ he said, ‘I would *have* to like anybody who was faithful—even if the person was bad—really bad—in every other way.’

‘Faithful to *you*, do you mean?’

Tom thought once more, but this time appeared less satisfied with his answer. ‘I suppose that *is* what I mean,’ he admitted. ‘At least, it’s the way I imagined it.’

‘And the “faithfulness” implied a deep affection. You imagined that too, didn’t you?’

‘Y-es,’ answered Tom. ‘How did you know?’

‘I knew you were creating a romantic impossibility.’

‘Why is it impossible?’

‘Because nobody *could* be faithful, and bad in every other way. To begin with there must be your capacity for affection. Besides, you can’t have faithfulness without unselfishness and courage. When courage evaporates faithfulness goes with it. I don’t deny you have hit on a good quality, but it isn’t one you can recognize at a glance. Therefore I shouldn’t be too ready to attribute it to every attractive new acquaintance.’

Tom puckered his brows, not in dissent, but not wholly in acquiescence either. ‘Don’t you think there are *some* people you can be sure of at once?’ he asked.

‘There may be.’

‘But you must know. You *must* know. Why, the first minute I came into this room—or at any rate a few minutes afterwards——’

‘You feel sure, then, about this boy?’

Tom shook his head. ‘No, I don’t. I’m not a bit sure. And I’m not a bit sure that he likes me. Will you come with me to the other house?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘But if *he* won’t come here, then you’ll never get to know each other!’

‘Does that matter?’

‘Did it?’ Tom asked himself. ‘Did he want Uncle Stephen to go to the other house?’ Deeper and deeper he sank into his thoughts. He supposed it was true that it took a long time really to get to know people, and that he was always in too great a hurry. Certainly he was in too great a hurry to tell them he liked them, and it hadn’t answered well in the past. They didn’t want to be told. They didn’t want—those he *had* told—even to be liked; and Philip, he half suspected, was of that kind. . . . Nor were words ever satisfactory. What you said always sounded either too much or too little. You could hear it yourself—either horribly gushing, or else so feeble and dry that it expressed nothing. The only true communication seemed to be not words at all:—when Uncle Stephen stroked his hair, for instance. Yes, it was that. He wanted to keep Uncle Stephen for himself: he didn’t want to share him with Philip. It might be selfish—but there it was. He wanted Uncle Stephen for his very own. He wanted Philip too, but not in the same way— He wanted nobody else in the same way.

Tom became more and more doubtful. The room grew darker without his noticing it: he only saw that it *was* dark when Uncle Stephen got up to light the lamp. And how much darker it must be in the other house, with its cobwebbed windows half overgrown by ivy. Was Philip standing at his window looking out? The fountain would be hardly visible. And suddenly Tom felt that if he had to go to that house now he would be afraid. He wouldn’t be afraid if he had Philip with him; but he would be afraid of not finding him, of finding the house empty. He saw it with the moonlight glinting on its cold black windows. And inside it was empty—empty and dark. . . .

The vision altered his mood, and into his mind, like rooks returning to a rookery, flocked strange and restless thoughts.

‘Uncle Stephen,’ he asked, ‘is there really such a thing as magic?’

Uncle Stephen looked at him, and his look, though it was kind, *because* in fact it was kind, made Tom feel unhappy.

‘There have been people who have thought so, and who have tried to practise it. That is to say, there are the rites and ceremonies invented to accompany magic, and there are books—obscure, pretentious, and fantastical.’

‘Is it wicked to practise magic?’

‘Not the kind of magic you mean: not the magic of fairy stories.’

‘But I don’t mean that.’

Uncle Stephen was silent a moment, and Tom felt that a faint shadow had passed between them.

‘The other is usually associated with wickedness: certainly I can’t imagine any good coming of it.’

‘But the Greeks believed in it.’

‘Yes, some of them.’ Tom had an impression that the shadow had lifted, and he was sure of it when Uncle Stephen went on. ‘I dare say Homer believed in the magic of Kirké, but I don’t think Euripides believed in the magic of Medea. Doubtless there were real women, who, like the woman in the poem of Theokritos, turned a magic wheel to charm back a lost lover. But all that is utterly different from medieval magic, with its conscious evil and depraved association with Christianity. Apollonios of Tyana was called a magician, but he and his master Pythagoras were really holy men, and if supernatural powers were attributed to them it was because they were in communion with the Gods, not with evil spirits.’

Tom with his forefinger began to trace an invisible design on the carpet.

‘Are you drawing a pentagram, Tom?’ Uncle Stephen asked, and in his voice was that half-bantering affection which Tom particularly liked.

Nevertheless, a strange mood of perversity seemed to prompt him with questions, which he hated all the more, because he knew Uncle Stephen thought they were innocent.

‘Have you ever known a magician, Uncle Stephen?’

‘I have known people—unpleasant people—who tried experiments in magic.’

‘In real magic?’

‘Yes.’

‘Here?’

‘No; not here. Not even in this country. It was many years ago, and their experiments were not successful—in any way.’

‘Did you help them—in the experiments?’

‘Yes.’

‘And were they unpleasant too?’

‘Not at the beginning—only foolish: but in the end—yes.’

There was a hardly describable change in Uncle Stephen’s voice, yet it was perceptible, and still more so when he spoke again. ‘Now, tell me why you asked these questions, and what is in your mind, and who put it there?’

‘It—it was just something I heard,’ said Tom, speaking very low.

Uncle Stephen sat silent. Tom did not dare to look up, but as the silence lengthened he began to feel it like a coldness spreading through the room—a cold mist in which he had lost sight of his companion and friend, which shut him away from him almost as some palpable barrier might have done. Gradually it became unbearable. ‘Uncle Stephen, I’m sorry,’ he broke out, clutching the hand that had not been withdrawn from his shoulder. ‘I shouldn’t have said anything. And I haven’t even told you the truth. It was really what happened to-day that made me think of it. You know—when Uncle Horace was here—the things he said. And my step-mother had a servant—a girl who came from these parts—and she told some story, though I never heard it. But I’m sorry, Uncle Stephen, forgive me. I know I’ve hurt your feelings. And I didn’t believe it anyway: and anyway I wouldn’t care if it *was* true. I’d like it.’

‘Stop,’ said Uncle Stephen sharply. ‘You mustn’t lose your self-control like this. What is there to get in such a state about? One would think something dreadful had happened. Your whole body is shaking.’

Tom gulped: then he said in a queer, choked voice, ‘It was because I thought I’d offended you.’

‘Even if you *had* offended me it would be no reason for such an outburst. You mustn’t give way to your emotions in this way. Remember you are a man, or at least a boy.’

‘Yes,’ said Tom, but with a little sigh of relief. ‘Then you’re not offended?’

But Uncle Stephen’s voice was still rather stern. ‘I can’t very well be offended till I know what you mean.’

‘I didn’t mean anything,’ said Tom, ‘or at any rate I don’t now.’ Then he added, as if to make a last confession, ‘I tried to find the secret door when you were out of the room.’

Uncle Stephen rose. Clothed as he was, all in black, and with the black skull-cap crowning his silver hair, he would, Tom felt even in this moment

of contrition, have made a lovely magician. Yes—and he would have helped him. He watched him now light one of the wax candles which stood in slender bronze sconces on the carved chimney-piece. ‘Come,’ said Uncle Stephen, and, a little awe-struck, though filled with excitement, Tom followed him across the room.

Uncle Stephen held the candle aloft, and Tom noticed how firmly and levelly he held it, so that not a drop of wax fell. The flame shone on the dark panelling, and at the corner of each panel was carved a flattened conventional rose. On the centre of one of these roses Uncle Stephen pressed, and it sank inward, releasing a spring. Four of the panels swung back in a single piece, and Uncle Stephen motioned to him to pass through the aperture: then he himself followed.

And after all they were only in a narrow passage, from which a flight of stone stairs ascended to another door, that opened precisely as the one below had opened. Tom stood on the threshold of a room he had never seen before—Uncle Stephen’s bedroom. Uncle Stephen entered, and lit a lamp, which in a minute or two burned brightly. He beckoned, and Tom stepped forward and stood beside him.

The room was not large—not so large as Tom’s own bedroom—and it was far more simply and sparsely furnished. A low narrow bed in the centre of the floor, a wardrobe, a chest of drawers, a dressing-table and a single cane-bottomed chair—there was no other furniture than this. There was not even a carpet, only a rug beside the bed; and the grey walls were bare—the whole room had a monastic bareness and austerity, except that, in the open space beyond the bed, there was something wonderful.

It was wonderful because—time-stained, ancient, battered—without arms, and with the legs broken off below the knees—it yet had all the beauty and radiance of a God. Motionless he stood there dreaming, with a lovely mildness in his open countenance. He was a spirit, and Tom felt himself to be in the presence of a spirit—of a beneficent guardian, who had made sweet and sacred this place in which he stood.

Uncle Stephen was watching him. ‘Who is he?’ Tom breathed. And suddenly he felt that this room was different from all other rooms: it was as if merely by his acceptance of it, and by his presence there, that broken lovely figure had made it into a temple for himself and filled it with life. Tom was ready to drop down on his knees.

‘Who is he?’ he asked again.

‘You like him?’ Uncle Stephen said. ‘Well, that is right, because he is, or was, especially a boy’s God—Hermes Παιδοχόρος, “he who cares for boys,” and his statue was put up beside that of Eros in the palaistra, as a kind of symbol of the relations that ought to rule there. You have read of him in the *Iliad*—a “boy before the down has begun to grow on his cheeks, who is then most lovely.” But he is also Hermes Ψυχοπομπός, the escorter, the guardian of souls. He is the prototype of the Christian Good Shepherd and you can be his young ram.’

‘But—— Does he allow you to sleep here?’

‘He is the God of sleep and dreams. The last libation of the day was made to him—a kind of “now I lay me down to sleep” ceremony. The Greeks would have found Doctor Watts’s poem quite appropriate:

With cheerful heart I close mine eyes,
Since Thou wilt not remove;
And in the morning let me rise
Rejoicing in Thy love.

It was the custom to put his image in the sleeping-room, and the beds were so arranged that it was the last thing the sleeper looked at before he fell asleep, and the first thing he saw when he awoke in the morning.’

‘That is how *your* bed is arranged,’ said Tom.

‘The Gods protected those who slept under their shadow. The idea is pleasant—don’t you think? It is very like your own idea of faithfulness. Even the animals who haunted a shrine were protected. They were safe, their rights of sanctuary were respected, and Aelian says the Athenians put to death a man who had killed a sparrow in the temple of Asklepios. If you had been an Athenian boy, and were sick, you would have been taken to sleep in that temple. Being a boy, you would have prayed to Asklepios Παῖς—Asklepios in his boyhood—and the boy-god would have come to you in a dream, or perhaps while you were still awake, and cured you.’

‘Uncle Stephen, *please*, would you let me sleep here—just once?’

‘We shall see.’

Tom was still gazing at the statue. ‘Where did he come from?’ he asked.

‘From Greece first. But at one time he must have been brought to Italy, for it was in Italy he was discovered, buried in the ground, by a man who had found lots of other things, but nothing so precious as this.’

‘And he gave him to you?’

‘Yes—before he died.’

‘The same man who gave you your chessmen?’

‘Yes.’

‘He must have been very fond of you, Uncle Stephen.’

‘I lived with him much as you are living with me.’

Tom took Uncle Stephen’s hand and drew him a step nearer to the statue. ‘Was he—once—worshipped?’ he asked reverently.

‘Yes—or the spirit within him.’

‘Sleep—the spirit of sleep,’ Tom whispered. ‘Haven’t even the words a lovely sound?’

‘It is more than mere sleep as you know it. It is a road through time—a gateway into a world where time is like space, and you may go backward or forward.’

‘I have been there,’ said Tom. ‘I have gone back till I was quite small, and mother was there. . . . Uncle Stephen, he *is* alive: I can see his arms and his hands; his legs and his feet: I can see all of him now—quite perfect and whole.’

‘Yes, I know you can.’

‘Does he make me see him like that?’

‘Perhaps. I don’t know.’

‘If we brought him downstairs, wouldn’t he make that room into his temple—just as he has made this?’

‘I should not care to move him. He has always been here. I would rather give you this room for your own. You would like it, wouldn’t you? You see, all the space between these four walls is now holy ground. Downstairs it could not be the same—with strangers coming and going.’

Tom gave a little laugh. ‘Uncle Stephen dear, not a *great* many strangers come and go.’

‘Perhaps not. But think of that wretched scene this afternoon. It would have been odious. All that you now feel in the air around you would have been broken by it. *Don’t* you feel it? Like a kind of soundless music. Perhaps to you it is even not quite soundless, for I think you are much closer to these things than I am. And it is stronger now than it used to be. Sometimes——

Well, all *that*, I think, would have gone. It comes from the spirit within the image, and, if that spirit were withdrawn, it would vanish too, like the scent of a flower when the flower dies. But here there are no intruders, no contrary influences, nothing antagonistic. You looked at him and found him lovely, and in doing so your spirit was mixed into his spirit. Your mind reached him, like the sunlight or like a prayer: his power was strengthened, his life was strengthened; you became the unconscious priest and your affection drew the beloved nearer. . . . But most people *would* be intruders.'

'Uncle Stephen, was it really true, what you said about people who were sick sleeping in the temple of Asklepios, and about the God coming to them in the night?'

'It's certainly true about the people. As for the God, I told you the tradition. Asklepios was an earth-god, or an earth-daimon, and the sleeper slept with his ear to the ground, so as to receive a healing dream from below. Sometimes the God appeared in his own form, sometimes in that of a snake, sometimes in the dream he performed a cure and the patient awoke healthy and sound.'

'Has Hermes ever come to you?' Tom asked wonderingly.

'Not in the way you are with me now; not so that I could touch him or hear him; not even as a ghost. But as an influence—yes: as a power—yes.'

'Do you think on the night I sleep here he will come to me?'

'I don't know. . . . I'm not sure that I should have brought you here at all. Not now—not yet.'

For Tom was standing there with a strange expression on his face. He might have been listening to some very faint, very distant sound; and in his eyes there was a peculiar veiled and inward look. Slowly they were raised till they met Uncle Stephen's eyes, and more slowly still his words came. 'Uncle Stephen—there is something I don't understand. Tell me—tell me.' His voice suddenly broke, and next moment he was in Uncle Stephen's arms.

'What is it, Tom? What is the matter?' Uncle Stephen was patting him and consoling him: he bent down and kissed his cheek.

'Nothing—nothing,' Tom faltered. 'I'm sorry. I couldn't help it. It was just for a minute. I—I don't know what happened. But somehow it all seemed to come over me.'

'What seemed to come over you?'

‘I mean—you, and him, and Philip, and—even the boy at the fountain:—it was as if you all were one person. . . .’ His face had grown white and strained, his parted lips trembled. ‘Uncle Stephen, *don’t* you love me—really—really?’

‘Yes, yes. Don’t look like that. I shouldn’t have brought you to this room. I ought to have known. But I wanted you to see for yourself that there was no magic; that it was no magician’s den with circles and triangles chalked on the floor; that there were no rods and tripods and chalices—nothing, nothing at all, but the broken statue of a God.’

‘But I never thought there was any such den,’ Tom protested, half laughing through his tears.

‘Perhaps not. But a seed had been sown in your mind, and I did not want it to grow. Now you have seen the whole house, and if that foolish door worries you, you can nail it up yourself.’

‘I’m not such a baby,’ cried Tom.

‘You are very young in some ways—extraordinarily young. It is just as if a little corner of you had never changed at all—and I keep stupidly thinking of what I was at your age and treating you as if you were the same, whereas you are not—not at all.’

‘I think it must have been because I was tired,’ Tom went on, trying to explain. ‘So much seems to have happened to-day. I think I’d like to go to bed now.’

But he still clung close to Uncle Stephen, who looked down at him and stroked his bowed head.

‘Don’t you want your supper?’ he asked.

‘No: I’m not hungry: I couldn’t eat anything.’ Tom lifted his head, his eyes still a little troubled. ‘But I’d like you to come up with me.’

‘To sit with you?’

‘Yes: you won’t have to wait long: I’ll go to sleep awfully soon if I know you’re there. . . . And—Uncle Stephen—you won’t think any the less of me because of this, will you?’

‘No, I won’t think any the less.’

‘I hope you won’t,’ Tom said ruefully. ‘Though I don’t see how you can very well help it. I’m not like Philip, am I? *He* doesn’t mind being all by

himself at night in that other house, and it must be frightfully lonely and queer.'

'I don't want you to be like Philip.'

'All the same, I'd hate him to know about this. He wouldn't be as kind as you are.'

'Perhaps not. But don't get it into your head that because he's not afraid to sleep by himself in an empty house he's a wonderful person. I've a very good idea of what he is, and I prefer you.'

They went out of the room and along the passage, Uncle Stephen holding the candle. In his own room Tom undressed quickly, and his spirits rose more quickly still, so that by the time he was safely in bed he was his normal, by no means melancholy self.

'Now, you're not to talk,' said Uncle Stephen, for Tom had already begun to chatter.

'But you won't go away till you're sure I'm asleep?'

'No; not if you keep quiet and try to go to sleep.'

There was a silence. The door was ajar, and presently from down below came the soft deep chiming of the hall clock.

'Dickory,' said Tom.

'I thought you weren't to talk.'

Tom said no more, until he murmured, 'Uncle Stephen, I'm getting sleepy now: will you say good-night.'

CHAPTER XIV

‘MY DEAREST TOM,

‘What on earth did you say or do to poor Uncle Horace? None of us can quite make out, though he has *talked* of precious little else ever since he got back. He came round that very night foaming at the mouth with rage, and there was a most awful scene—entirely apart from you—because he barked his shins against Leonard’s bicycle in the hall. You see it was late and darkish and he was in such a hurry to get in. At first we thought the ceiling had come down; but it was Uncle Horace and the bicycle. However, that doesn’t concern you, and I’d better tell you what does.

‘To begin with, Uncle Horace says U.S. pretended to be too busy to receive him and that he wouldn’t have got into the house at all if you hadn’t turned up just as he was going away. Then, after he did manage to get in, there was still no sign of U.S., though really he was hiding all the time and listening, so that, when Uncle Horace had at last persuaded you to come home, he was able to upset everything by appearing suddenly through a trap-door. This is the part where Uncle Horace gets so feverish that we simply daren’t ask questions, and Tom dear, though awfully thrilling of course, don’t you think it *was* a little eccentric too? But perhaps you don’t, for Uncle Horace says you’ve become the *âme damnée* of U.S. (I’ve been dying to bring that in—it’s a lovely expression—and it really *is* what Uncle Horace means.) What he *says* is that you’re being hopelessly spoiled and that mother isn’t to send on your clothes or your books or anything. They sit talking about it together by the hour. At first we were sent out of the room, but now they’re got reckless and discuss everything openly. Uncle Horace is angrier with U.S. than with you, though he’s pretty angry all round and says you both insulted him and that your manner, once you had U.S. there, became insolent to the last degree. He also says it’s mother’s duty to get you out of U.S.’s clutches, though when she asked him if any wickedness was actually going on in the house he told her not to be a fool. That’s the sort of temper he’s in: poor mother has her head bitten off about fifty times an evening. And the worst of it is, it brings him round here *every* evening—simply the pleasure of

abusing U.S. He hasn't missed one since he got back, and he finds fault with all of us nearly as much as with you. Everything in the house annoys him, but particularly the drawing-room clock, which at nine and ten has taken to striking thirteen and fourteen, and mother always forgets to have it fixed. They've both been to see lawyers, but I didn't hear what happened, and I don't think you need worry, because Uncle Horace knows he'd have to pay all the expenses if they went to law.

'I got your two postcards, but would much rather have had one letter. By the way, you'd better disguise your handwriting when you reply to this, as I've been forbidden to hold any communication with you. I hope you're having a good time—it sounds as if you were—and send you my love. To U.S., *at present*, only kind regards.

'Ever your affectionate friend,

'JANE GAVNEY.

'P.S.—*Is* U.S. a magician, and can you bring rabbits out of a hat yet?

'P.P.S.—It would be better if you addressed your letter c/o Miss Margaret Stanhope, The Limes, Dunmore Park.'

Tom refolded this epistle and put it back in his pocket. They had heard neither from Uncle Horace nor his step-mother, but he had ceased to care whether his clothes came on or not. His measurements had been sent to Uncle Stephen's own tradesmen, and a complete outfit had arrived several days ago, to the delight of Mrs. Deverell and Sally, who had made out a list of his requirements, had gone over everything carefully, had marked his linen and superintended the tryings-on of his suits, while Tom strutted in front of them, endeavouring to appear indifferent to criticism and admiration. Sally had made jokes. She had pretended he must be going to get married, and all questions of taste were referred to a mysterious 'She'. Mrs. Deverell was not given to joking, but it was clear to Tom that they both enjoyed having him at the Manor and enjoyed even the extra work it gave them. It was Master Tom this, and Master Tom that, while George McCrudden and Robert docilely had fallen in with the feminine view. The only drawback was that the women were too inclined to forget he wasn't a small boy. He liked being made much of, but——

He glanced at Philip lying on his back under a beech-tree, and the contrast struck him. It was impossible to imagine anybody treating Philip as

he was treated by Sally and Mrs. Deverell. Yet Philip was only a year older. It was the self-reliance of his nature, more really than any physical qualities he possessed, that made the difference—though the physical qualities were there too, and Tom was sure the roughest kind of life would not alarm him. He would be able to hold his own either on board a ship or anywhere else; nothing short of positive ill-treatment could injure him; and he was strong enough to stand even a good deal of that. . . .

Just now he was asleep, or seemed so. Both boys had taken off their jackets, and Philip had rolled his up to make a pillow of it. Tom sat beside him, leaning against the broad trunk of the tree, and still holding in his hand a branch of syringa he had broken off to drive away flies while they were walking through the bracken. Their beech was on the slope of a hill overlooking the river valley. Between banks of reed-grass, sedges, and wild parsnip, the sluggish water wound in and out, sometimes hidden by overhanging bushes and pollard willows, but its course always visible as far as Tom's sight could reach. The air was heavy, and there was a dark threatening line of clouds on the horizon. . . .

He closed his eyes. For a minute or two perhaps he actually lost consciousness, but the sudden nodding of his head was sufficient to awaken him. The fire they had lit had not quite gone out; he could still see the red glow of the sticks beneath a covering of grey ashes. He felt a tickling sensation below his knee. He pulled up the leg of his trousers and discovered a furry caterpillar—a Hairy Willie was his name for it. . . . Philip *really* was asleep, he thought. . . .

Tom picked up the caterpillar with the intention of placing it on the sleeper's nose, but instantly it curled into a tight ring in his hot hand, pretending to be dead. He laid it on the moss and looked down at his friend.

His first thought was that if he himself had been dressed as Philip was dressed he would have looked like a boy out of one of Dr. Barnardo's Homes. Yet Philip didn't: his clothes didn't matter. There was a triangular rent in his crumpled trousers; he had no waistcoat, no collar, and his shirt, open on his sun-browned chest, required both washing and mending:—and none of these things mattered. Tom bent down till he could see on the sleeping boy's cheeks and upper lip a faint down composed of minute silken hairs, invisible at a distance, but which now showed like a velvet film on the smoothness of his skin. With the tip of his finger he tested his own skin, brushing it lightly to and fro.

He held the syringa over Philip's mouth, but, though he touched him with the utmost carefulness, the blossom left a golden stain of pollen. Tom moistened his finger and tried to remove it without waking him.

A lazy voice grumbled, 'What are you doing?' Philip had only half opened his eyes, and in the narrow ellipse the dark blue iris acquired a strange depth into which Tom gazed. As he did so his lips parted and a thrill passed through him. Two words he whispered involuntarily, though it was only after he had spoken them that they reached his consciousness, producing a slight shock.

'You were asleep,' he said hurriedly.

'I wasn't, but *you* must have been: you called me Uncle Stephen.'

'I didn't. . . . At least, I did,' stammered Tom. 'I mean, I didn't mean to.'

'I hope not. Are we going in for a swim?'

Tom hesitated. He put up his hand and began to loosen the knot of his tie: then stopped. 'There's no hurry,' he said.

This reluctance was unusual. Every afternoon during the past fortnight they had bathed: the mornings Tom spent with Uncle Stephen. He was not to begin work with Mr. Knox till September, and it was hardly work he did with Uncle Stephen. They read together, and talked of what they had read, but it was more than anything else an introduction into the beauty of a creed, outmoded perhaps, but not outworn, rejuvenescent as the earth's vegetation. . . . And when he read in Homer of boys building their sand castles on the shores of the Aegean, it seemed to Tom as if all time had been one long, summer day. . . .

He looked up to find Philip watching him. 'Will you promise to answer me truthfully if I ask you a question?'

'How can I promise before I know what the question is?' Tom said. But he added immediately, 'Yes.'

'Why did you call me Uncle Stephen—because you did, you know?'

'I told you why: it just slipped out. Besides, I wasn't really calling you Uncle Stephen: it was only that for a moment something made me think of him.' To avoid further discussion he began to strip off his clothes as quickly as possible. Then he ran down the hill, and was splashing in the shallows at the edge before Philip had unlaced his boots.

He waited until Philip joined him. Neither boy was a good swimmer, though both, with some puffing and blowing, could manage fifty yards or so, and at its widest the channel actually out of their depth was not more than ten yards across. ‘This is great!’ spluttered Tom. ‘I wonder how far the river goes?’

‘Oh, for miles and miles: they always do. Right up into the hills somewhere.’

‘Sally says you ought to be careful when you bathe in fresh water, or you may swallow something that will go on living inside you. She says you shouldn’t lie on the grass, because an earwig may creep into your ear, and if it once gets in, it will eat your brains. She says a cat should never be left alone with a baby, or it will suck its breath and kill it. She says a drowned woman always floats face downward and a drowned man on his back. . . . I say, suppose we got a canoe and *discovered* the source of the river! The raft would be no good for that. I expect Uncle Stephen would get me one if I asked him.’

‘We could go by land.’

‘When?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Why don’t you know? I hate putting off things, if I’m going to do them at all.’

‘It’s you who will have to get permission, not me.’

‘Yes, but there’s no use in my asking till we’ve settled when we want to do it.’

These last remarks were made on the bank and while Philip squeezed the juice of a dock leaf on to his ankle, where he had been stung by a nettle. Tom was pulling his shirt over his head when another thought occurred to him. It had occurred to him several times before, though he had said nothing about it, nor was it without a struggle that he brought himself to mention it now. ‘You did Greek at school, didn’t you?’ he began.

‘Naturally. . . . It’s only the juice that really does any good, and there’s so little of it.’

But Tom was not thinking of the virtue of dock leaves. ‘Why do you say “naturally”? Plenty of people don’t learn Greek.’

‘At my school it was compulsory.’

‘That’s queer. Wasn’t there a modern side?’

‘I never heard of any.’

Tom pondered. He wished Philip wasn’t so uncommunicative. It made it difficult to ask him even the simplest questions. He had never been told the name of this school, for instance, though he had once asked. He had an idea that it was a good deal more distinguished than his own, but that was all.

‘Did you like it?’ he said.

‘Like what? Greek? No.’

This was discouraging, but once he had begun Tom was determined to go on. ‘Of course, with Uncle Stephen it isn’t like school. There’s no “prep”, and he doesn’t mind if your construe is pretty wobbly. I don’t mean to say that he doesn’t put you right, but what he really wants you to do is not to translate but to get the meaning without—to read as if you were reading your own language: and I’m beginning to be able to—a little. And then he tells you things, and he has all sorts of pictures—photographs, you know, and plans and maps. It makes it all true, somehow—talking about it. . . . I mean, that river, for instance—*our* river—it seems different—you begin to think of it differently—to think of it as alive. *Everything* comes alive, becomes in a way the *same* as us, so that you wouldn’t be awfully surprised if the river became friends with you, and appeared in a human form, or at any rate spoke. You see he *is* our river—and we ought to dedicate our hair to him as a bond of friendship.’

Philip did not answer, and Tom, glancing at him, saw a faint smile on his face. He coloured. What he had said, of course, had been vague and confused—he couldn’t put things the way Uncle Stephen did—but still——For a minute or two he sat without speaking, offended. Then he asked, ‘*Will* you come in the mornings?’

‘To do Greek and talk about rivers? No.’

Again there was a pause, but it was broken abruptly by Philip. ‘Who’s this?’

Tom looked up. He followed the direction of Philip’s gaze and his face changed. ‘He’s a chap called Deverell,’ he said uneasily, at the same time half rising to his feet. ‘I say, let’s move on. He mayn’t have seen us: I don’t think he has.’

Deverell was still at a considerable distance. He was approaching along the bank of the river, but he was moving at a sauntering pace, sometimes

coming to a standstill, while his dog, with flapping ears, hunted in and out among the sedges.

‘Let’s go before he sees us,’ Tom repeated more urgently.

‘He has seen us already,’ Philip replied.

‘Well, let’s go anyway: we might as well.’

Still Philip did not budge. ‘Are you frightened of him?’ he asked. ‘You seem to be.’

‘Of course I’m not frightened,’ Tom muttered in annoyance. Nor was he, for, though he wanted to avoid this encounter, what really troubled him was the feeling that he had behaved shabbily to Deverell—letting day after day pass without ever going near him. Once they had met by accident—or so Tom supposed—and even on that occasion, after five minutes or so, he had invented an excuse to get away. Moreover, he had not given the true reason, for he had said not a word about having to keep an appointment with Philip. He had said not a word about Philip to Deverell and not a word about Deverell to Philip. Now he was reaping the consequence.

Deverell meanwhile had begun to climb the hill, striking a diagonal course which would bring him straight to where they sat. He had given no sign of recognition; he was not even looking in their direction; but that, Tom knew, was characteristic. Philip *might* have come away when he had asked him to! And that was characteristic also. He glanced at him. Philip was sitting bolt upright, watching the approaching figure with an expression of extraordinary coldness. Tom stretched himself on his side, pillowed his head on his arm, and pretended to go to sleep.

He was perfectly aware how these ostrich tactics would strike the boy beside him, and also of their futility, but the minutes passed—perhaps they weren’t really so many as they seemed, or perhaps Deverell had turned back. Suddenly he felt against his cheek, first the touch of a blunt cold nose, and then the rapid caress of a warm tongue. Even in his embarrassment he could not suppress a stifled laugh. At the same moment a deep voice growled, ‘Here, Dingo, come out a’ that.’ The voice assumed its ordinary pitch. ‘Doin’ a sleep, Mr. Tom?’

‘Yes,’ said Tom, opening his eyes.

‘Bathin’ makes you sleepy like, don’t it?’

‘Yes,’ said Tom once more.

He sat up, and saw that Deverell's gaze was directed not at him but at Philip, in a hard fixed stare. 'Mr. Tom, he likes to play at peep-bo,' Deverell dropped grimly. 'Isn't that so, Mr. Tom?'

'No it isn't,' said Tom. He smiled up at the poacher and his bright eyes were lit with friendliness. He felt that Deverell recognized the friendliness, that even for a moment he responded to it, and that then, deliberately, he rejected it. And Tom understood this too: it was strange how much better he knew Deverell than he knew Philip: it was as if one similarity of temperament were stronger than all that was unlike. 'All the same,' he went on, 'I think it must *look* extremely like that.' He smiled again, and there was in his voice a curious blend of provocativeness, appeal, apology, and mischief. The young poacher's dark eyes rested on him sombrely, but not angrily. Simultaneously Tom became aware that Philip also was looking at him, with a faint and slightly disdainful surprise. But he didn't care. It wasn't Philip's business to choose his friends for him: he would be friends with whoever he wanted.

'Mr. Tom nearly promised to go fishin' with me,' Deverell said slowly, 'but in the latter end he drew out of it.'

'Oh, I never!' cried Tom. 'You asked me and that was all. You mustn't say that, really: I mean, you mustn't think it, because whatever else I don't do I keep my promises.'

'Well, I won't say you were very keen on the sport of it,' Deverell admitted. 'Maybe this other young gentleman is more of the sportin' kind than what you are. He wouldn't be any friend of yours, would he?'

'Do you mean a relation? He isn't a relation, but of course he's a friend. It was at this point that he might have performed an introduction if it hadn't been for the frozen expression on Philip's face. Tom gave it up in despair.

'I seen you about with him these last two weeks,' Deverell went on, 'but my mother says there's no one stayin' at the Manor barrin' yourself.'

'Neither there is,' Tom answered.

'And I didn't hear any word of him down in the town. Perhaps he'd be coming over from a distance each day?'

'Don't you think you'd better be moving on?' Philip abruptly asked, his eyes as blue as ice and as cold.

Deverell looked at him, thrust his hands into his breeches pockets, then turned and spat before facing him once more. 'So that's the kind of talk, is

it?’ he said softly.

‘Yes, that’s the kind of talk. Just show me how quickly you can get down that hill again.’

‘At your bidding, perhaps? Look see, my young cock, if you weren’t a friend of Mr. Tom’s here, I’d give you a clip on the ear might learn you manners.’

Philip rose to his feet. ‘Clear out,’ he said. ‘And don’t let me see you molesting Mr. Tom again.’

‘Molestin’—molestin’—and when was I molestin’ him? Isn’t it for Mr. Tom himself to choose who he’ll——’

‘No, it isn’t for Mr. Tom. And if I catch you hanging round here——’

‘Well, what will you do?’ asked Deverell, dropping his voice almost to a whisper. At the same time he advanced a step, and the effect was so suddenly threatening that Tom sprang in between them.

‘Oh, I say, stop it,’ he cried. ‘What’s the sense in all this!’ He turned half angrily to Philip. ‘He has as much right to be here as we have, and I don’t see why he shouldn’t speak to me. I’m going to speak to him anyway, and I’m going fishing with him too.’

Philip remained for a moment quite still. Then he wheeled round, ‘Good-bye,’ he dropped over his shoulder, and walked off without another glance.

‘I’m sorry,’ Tom muttered to Deverell, who was standing with his eyes bent gloomily on the ground. But the young poacher did not answer.

‘I *am* sorry,’ Tom repeated half petulantly. ‘I wish you wouldn’t be angry with me. I know I’ve behaved rottenly, but I’ll really go out with you one of these days—if you’ll let me—if you want me. I’ll send a message by your mother. . . . I don’t know why he spoke to you like that, though it was partly my fault, and a little bit yours, too, perhaps. I mean he didn’t like your asking questions about him. . . . And—I think I’d better go after him now. . . . You see, he *is* my pal (you remember what you once asked me?) though I don’t think I’m *his* very much. I mean, he likes me well enough, but—not in the way you do. That’s how it is, really, and I can’t help it.’

Still Deverell said nothing, and Tom, after a further hesitation, began slowly to follow on Philip’s track. Presently he broke into a trot, and Philip must have heard him, though he did not stop nor look round. Even when Tom came up with him he continued to march straight on without a word.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Tom pacifically. ‘What are you in such a rage about? What have I done?’

Philip stared in front of him and walked on.

‘Oh well, if you won’t speak—— All I tried to do was to prevent a row. What chance would you have had if it had come to that?’

‘Not very much, I dare say, unless you had backed me up: but I expect that’s hardly in your line.’

Tom flushed. ‘If you think I’m a coward you’re welcome to do so: I don’t care.’

‘I don’t suppose you do, and I’ll know another time what to expect.’

‘What *have* I done?’ Tom repeated. ‘Is it because I told you he had a right to speak to me?’

‘Yes, you said that when he was there—after telling me first he’d been annoying you.’

‘That’s a lie: I told you no such thing.’

Philip immediately confronted him, blocking the way. ‘Are you calling me a liar?’ he asked, raising his hand.

Tom flinched ever so little, but he stood his ground. ‘Yes,’ he muttered, biting on his lower lip to prevent it from betraying him. He waited for Philip to strike him, as he had waited in more than one such crisis at school, but no blow came. Instead, Philip thrust his hands into his pockets.

‘I don’t think you’re a coward,’ he said, with a kind of angry honesty, ‘and you mayn’t actually have said he had annoyed you; but you implied it; you even wanted to run away from him.’

‘It wasn’t for that reason.’

‘So I see now. Why didn’t you stay with him, then? I gave you the opportunity.’

Tom answered nothing, and after a moment Philip once more began to walk on towards the Manor woods, whereupon Tom also walked on beside him.

In this fashion they proceeded, without uttering a word, but Tom was not good at keeping up a quarrel, and very soon his sole desire was to find an excuse for ending this one. ‘It wasn’t Deverell’s fault,’ he began. ‘It was

really mine. It must have looked to him exactly as if I wanted to avoid speaking to him, and I had been quite friendly before.'

'A good deal too friendly, I should imagine.'

'What do you mean? Why shouldn't I be friendly?'

'He's the surliest-looking brute I ever saw. You seem ready to trust anybody.'

It was on the tip of Tom's tongue to reply 'I trusted *you*,' but he refrained. All he said was, 'You might have done what I asked you to: then none of this would have happened.'

'What did you ask me to do?'

'To clear out when we saw him coming.'

'That's not the way to get rid of him,' returned Philip impatiently. 'You've got to take strong measures with a person like that: you've got to send him about his business. He admitted himself he'd been spying after us and asking questions. Do you think I'm going to have a chap like that prying round, or to hide every time I see him?'

'Well, *I'm* not going to send him about his business. I've got nothing against him. It was only because you were there that I wanted to avoid him.'

'Yes, I know that—now. You needn't go on repeating it. Have you arranged to meet him to-morrow?'

'No, but I've promised to meet him one of these days, and I'm going to.' After which he was silent until he added, 'You see, you won't even try to understand. The reason why I wanted you to come away at the beginning was partly because I had broken my word to him, but chiefly because I knew you wouldn't get on together.'

'You were right about that at any rate: though you told him you hadn't broken your word.'

'Not literally, but I never went near him.'

'Why?'

'Because of you, I suppose.'

Philip's face did not clear, though he answered less angrily. 'Well, if you take my advice you *won't* go near him.'

‘Wouldn’t it be rather mean if I took your advice?’ Tom asked quietly. ‘After all, I must form my own judgments of people.’

‘Then you think I’m mean?’

‘I think you’re unfair and prejudiced. You’ve taken a dislike to him without any cause—simply because he asked me who you were.’

‘It wasn’t only that. It wasn’t even principally that.’

‘What was it then?’

‘It was because I know he won’t do you any good; and I *do* know it.’

‘I don’t see how he can do me any *harm*. Surely I can look after myself!’

‘Yes, if you wanted to: but you seem to like him.’

‘So I do,’ Tom answered.

The statement, nevertheless, did not bring him much comfort, and later, walking home alone, he became unhappier still. The quarrel had ended, but it had not ended like his quarrels with Jane; it had left a feeling of estrangement behind it; there had been no ‘making up’.

CHAPTER XV

As Tom sat up, a single chime—deep, distant, mellow—reached his still drowsy ears. He knew it came from the grandfather's clock in the hall, and it was strange, he thought, that he never seemed to hear it in the daytime. But at night, though he was far away and his door shut, if he happened to lie awake he could always hear it, and if he opened his door, even the slow tick, tock—tick, tock—rose up quite distinctly through the well of the staircase.

He had drawn up his blinds—always so carefully drawn down by Mrs. Deverell—before getting into bed; the windows were open, and the moon was shining into the room. Perhaps it was the moon which had awakened him. There had been a thunderstorm and a heavy fall of rain a few hours earlier, but now the night must have cleared, and Tom, slipping out of bed, went to the window to breathe its freshness. He leaned over the sill, and the garden lay below him filled with light and darkness, black and white like an etching. Motionless trees threw their shadows across the grass. There were shadows everywhere. In spite of the flood of moonlight, Tom thought it would be easy for an enemy to approach the house unseen. . . .

He leaned farther out, trying to view the garden from a different angle, and in doing so his elbow knocked against a book on the dressing-table, which fell with a thud to the floor.

‘Damn!’ Tom muttered under his breath.

The book was the first volume of *Arabia Deserta*, and he had put it there so as to be sure to remember it next day. It was for Philip. Not that he had asked for it—nor indeed for any book—the idea was Tom's own. He had thought a travel book might interest him since he was going to be a traveller, and Uncle Stephen had said this was a good one.

He thought of Philip and he thought of Deverell. It was because of what had taken place that afternoon. He did not believe Deverell would readily forgive or forget an injury—he would be far more likely to exaggerate one. His temperament was passionate and brooding; and, quite apart from the insult he had received, Tom knew he must be jealous. Suppose he had followed them. They had taken no precautions; they had not once looked round. Nothing indeed seemed more probable than that he *had* followed them; and once he knew Philip's hiding-place, what was to prevent him from going back at night when he would be sure to find him alone?

Tom's thoughts might not have taken this turn in broad daylight, nor even had he lain on snugly in bed, but now, looking out into that mysterious garden, it became increasingly difficult to dismiss them.

Swiftly and silently in the moonlight he re-dressed himself. He opened his door noiselessly, and tip-toed along the passage and down the stairs. With equal caution he stole along a second and darker passage, branching off on the right from the hall, and leading to the kitchen. The kitchen door was locked, but the key was in the lock and Tom turned it. Then very gingerly he pushed open the door.

Not that he felt any ghostly terrors: what he actually dreaded (the result of one memorable descent to the kitchen in Gloucester Terrace) was cockroaches. But cockroaches or no cockroaches he must get his shoes. He lit his candle, cast a rapid glance round the tiled floor, and breathed a sigh of relief.

Having found his shoes and put them on, he returned to the hall. His every movement was made with the utmost carefulness, for, though the darkness told him Uncle Stephen had gone to bed, he might not yet be asleep. Tom opened the hall-door—always left on the latch for Mrs. Deverell in the morning—and instantly was face to face with a white, crystalline world—glittering, treacherous—like a landscape in the moon.

Beyond the shining pallor of the lawn was a black wall of trees. Keeping on the grass, so that his footsteps should be noiseless, he passed the row of dark windows at the front of the house, then broke into a run, and in a minute or two had reached the outer fringe of the wood. He by this time knew his way to the other house so well that he believed the darkness would not matter, but almost immediately he blundered into the bushes and fell headlong. He was not hurt, but it showed him how useless it was to hurry. He lit the candle he had brought with him. Here, in the close shelter of the trees, the flame burned almost steadily, yet the light it cast was equivocal, seeming to illuminate Tom himself much more than his surroundings. It was better than nothing, however; it helped him to avoid overhanging branches, and he moved slowly on. His daily journeys had beaten down a well-marked track, but it was narrow, and even with the light he carried not easy to follow. Now and then he heard a rustle in the brushwood, and once he heard a distant scream that might have been the scream of an owl or of a cat, but he saw no living thing except snails, and the pale-winged moths his candle attracted—creatures fragile and insubstantial as the ghosts of white hawthorn.

When at last he reached the broken gate he blew out his candle. He no longer needed it, for the path was now smooth under his feet, and wide enough between its leafy walls to admit the moonlight. Tom's heart was beating with a strange excitement. He had half forgotten the errand that had brought him here, or perhaps it would be truer to say that he no longer believed in that errand. The avenue curved, widened, ended: he stood still. He gazed at the house, but approached no nearer. Never before had he looked on anything like this. It was as if house and garden and terrace, as if the stone boy and his urn and his owl and his otter, were all sunken to the bottom of a silver sea. An indescribable beauty flooded Tom's mind, and his eyes dimmed, though no grief was in his heart. And on that spot where he stood he dropped down on the cold grass.

When he raised his head in the shadowy air his face was wet. He got slowly to his feet. His face, his hands, his shirt, his jacket, his trousers—all were wet and cold with dew, yet he did not feel cold. He approached the house over the damp sward. He stood below a window and called 'Philip,' but there was no answer and he did not repeat his call.

He stood there dreaming, his head bowed. Night brooded over him with dusky wings. A faint wind sighed and passed, stirring the lock of coarse brown hair that tumbled over his forehead, and rustling in the ivy. Tom awakened. Perhaps he had forgotten that he had called Philip's name once only, and not very loudly, for he moved round to the back of the house and entered the yard. He pressed down the latch and pushed the door open.

Once more he lit his candle. The moon was shining on the front of the house, but here all was in darkness. He knew the room, however, in which Philip slept; his only fear was lest he might startle him. Perhaps it would be better to go back and throw gravel at the window. But if he went up very quietly and sat down beside the bed and spoke Philip's name or touched him, then he would see who it was before he was really awake enough to be alarmed. So Tom ascended the stairs, being careful to tread on the side of each step to prevent it from creaking. Softly he opened the door; then raised the candle above his head. These precautions were unnecessary, however, for a single glance told him the room was empty.

He crossed to the bed: there was nothing on it but a mattress and a couple of moth-eaten patchwork quilts. Tom sat down. The sudden disappointment, following on his mood of emotional excitement, for a while shut out every other feeling. Then his earlier anxiety reawakened. The thought of Deverell again occurred to him, but he did not see how even if there had been a second quarrel it would explain Philip's absence. There was

only one thing to do, and, though he felt it to be useless, he made a search of the house and of the garden.

He found nobody. Philip must be abroad on some nocturnal adventure of his own; and indeed, when he looked at it more calmly, Tom ceased to find this surprising. For anything he knew to the contrary, Philip might be in the habit of roaming the country-side every night, especially since he had the whole morning in which to sleep. He folded his jacket and sat down on it beside the fountain to wait.

But his mood had grown less confident. The confidence perhaps had never been very stable. At all events, he did not now believe Philip would want to find him here when he came back. Supposing he was in the habit of taking such rambles, he had breathed no word of them to Tom, and that in itself showed he did not want his company. The hours they spent together in the afternoon were sufficient: they had been sufficient hitherto for Tom himself: what was this sudden fever of restlessness crying like an ancient cry within him? A melancholy crept over him, and the strange unearthly beauty of his surroundings grew sad too. It was as if the whole scene had retreated from him, as if he were no longer in it as a part of it, but only as a stranger from another world. So a ghost might feel whose hauntings were unperceived and unsuspected. The lovely stone boy, though so near, was not conscious of him; his head was bent sidelong as if to listen to the water dropping from his urn, though there was no water. Perhaps he was content to stand there smiling at his thoughts; perhaps, like Tom, he felt lonely. And suddenly springing to his feet, Tom stepped across the basin of the fountain on to his small island and clasped him in his arms. He kissed him passionately;—kissed his cold mouth and cheeks and forehead and hair. He would wait no longer. What was the use of waiting—only in the end to be asked why he had come? How could he say why? He shivered, for he had grown cold sitting without his jacket, and the heavy dew was everywhere. In stepping back on to the grass his foot slipped from the mossy stones, and he splashed knee-deep in the water.

He hurried home. He had forgotten his candle and he no longer troubled about the path, but forced a way recklessly through bushes and undergrowth. Branches whipped his face, brambles tore his hands and clothes. Sometimes he tripped and stumbled, but nothing checked his course, and he even found a relief in the resistance he encountered. When at last he emerged from the jungle, he was plastered with dirt, there was more than one rent in his jacket and trousers, and his face and hands were smeared with blood.

Thus it was that he confronted Uncle Stephen, whom he found standing at the edge of the wood, a lighted lantern in his hand. Uncle Stephen raised the lantern, and its light fell on the forlorn bedraggled figure, who for a moment stopped, and then approached him with hanging head. But Uncle Stephen asked no questions: all he said was, ‘I came out to look for you.’

The nervous force that until that instant had supported Tom was suddenly extinguished; he felt now only tired. And what he wanted more than anything was for Uncle Stephen to put his arms round him. Then, he felt, he would never go away again. For a minute, until he had regained his self-control, he clung to Uncle Stephen. ‘I’m sorry for disturbing you,’ he said, ‘I didn’t think you would have heard me.’

Uncle Stephen spoke quietly. ‘What has happened to you? Are you hurt?’

‘No,’ answered Tom. ‘I may have scratched myself—it was so dark in the wood: but it’s nothing; I hardly feel it. . . . I’m afraid I’ve torn my clothes.’

‘You’re quite sure you’re not hurt?’

‘Yes.’

They walked on together to the house, Uncle Stephen with his hand on the truant’s shoulder. ‘I had gone upstairs only a few minutes before you went out,’ he explained. ‘That is how I came to hear you. I had left my door open because the night was so close. I heard you going downstairs.’

‘And you knew I was going out?’

‘Not till you opened the hall-door.’

‘But you could have called me,’ said Tom half reproachfully.

‘Yes. Are you sure that at that time you wanted me to call you? . . . I thought you had gone down to the study to get something and would be coming back. It was only because you stayed out so long that I began to feel uneasy. You have been away a long time, Tom—nearly three hours.’

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t think it was so long.’

‘And you’re shockingly dirty and wet. If the water’s hot enough you must take a bath, and if not you’re to go straight to bed.’

‘Yes. . . . Uncle Stephen, I want to tell you about it.’

‘I wish you sometimes wanted to tell me about things beforehand,’ Uncle Stephen replied.

‘I thought you would be asleep: I didn’t want to disturb you.’

They had entered the hall, and Tom sat down on the stairs to remove his shoes. Uncle Stephen waited till he had done so; then he said, ‘You must take off those wet clothes at once. And don’t bother about a bath: I’ll get you something to drink instead. But I shan’t be more than a minute or two, and I expect to find you in bed when I come up.’

‘All right,’ Tom sighed, ready enough himself for bed.

The lamp had been lit in his room, and he undressed in a last burst of energy, flinging his clothes on the floor and scrambling between the cool sheets, where he lay blinking at the light, his cheeks burning, and all the surface of his body tingling with stings and scratches. Presently Uncle Stephen appeared, carrying a steaming tumbler.

‘You’re to drink this—all of it,’ he said. ‘Sit up or you will spill it.’

Tom sat up and took a sip—a very small one. ‘What is it?’ he asked, wrinkling his nose. ‘It’s pretty awful!’

‘It won’t be awful after you’ve finished it. You may be slightly drunk, but you’ll be warm and comfortable and sleepy, and it will prevent you from catching cold. . . . Come, it’s not so bad as all that.’ For Tom had taken another sip and made another grimace. ‘Hold your nose if you like, but drink it while it’s hot.’

Tom gulped down the contents of the glass—coughed, choked, and cuddled back under his bedclothes. Uncle Stephen was right. There was just a moment of nausea, and then a warm drowsy wave of physical comfort spread through his body. He yawned and began to talk.

‘Won’t it do to tell me in the morning?’ Uncle Stephen interrupted. ‘You know you’re tired out.’

‘I’d rather tell you now, before I go to sleep,’ Tom muttered.

‘But I can guess: I can guess what happened. And I’m not cross with you, if that’s the trouble.’

‘You’re never cross with me,’ said Tom.

‘Well, I don’t want you to think that either; because I could be very angry indeed if the occasion arose.’

‘I don’t think I’ll ever do anything to make you angry, Uncle Stephen. I know I won’t purposely, and I don’t think I will even unintentionally.’

‘Then you know what *would* make me angry,’ said Uncle Stephen.

‘If I wasn’t sure I’d ask you.’

‘And yet it would have pleased me very much to-night if you had come to my room and told me you were going out.’

‘Yes. I *would* have come, too, if I’d known you were awake. You don’t think I’d ever be *afraid* to tell you things! But I hadn’t planned this. I’d gone to bed; I’d been asleep; then something must have wakened me, and I went to the window—and then I thought of it.’

‘Very well.’

‘But, Uncle Stephen, there was nobody there. I went all over the house and there was nobody. What do you think can have happened?’

‘Nothing. If your friend had come to look for *you*, there would have been nobody here either. Don’t worry about it.’

‘You mean, you think he had just gone out the way I did. I think so too now. Have you ever been to the other house at night, Uncle Stephen?’

‘No.’

‘It was lovely. . . . I mean at first—with the moonlight and the fountain boy and everything so different. . . . It was like that poem about the boy “plucking fruits by moonlight in a wilderness”. Do you know the poem?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Oh, you must know it: it’s by Coleridge.’

‘Well, I may have read it, but I’ve forgotten.’

‘Then you can’t have read it, because nobody could forget it.’

‘And were you the boy?’

‘No, no. . . . Only he *might* have been there. But there was nobody there except that boy with the urn. I kissed him, and the stone was covered with dew and very cold. . . . Uncle Stephen, why are you looking so grave?’

‘Don’t I usually look grave?’ Uncle Stephen smiled, but it did not alter his expression.

‘No, you don’t; not like that.’

‘Perhaps I was thinking.’

‘Was it about me?’

‘Partly about you. About a good many things.’

‘But why did it make you look like that—when you’re not angry with me?’

‘I’m not angry.’

‘You’re sad then—and that’s worse.’

‘I’m not sad—nor glad. I was simply trying, I suppose, to look into the future—your future—and wondering how much sadness or gladness it might contain, for there is always a mixture of both.’

But Tom was dissatisfied. ‘Uncle Stephen, will you bend down quite close and look at me?’

‘No, I won’t: you’re to be a good boy and go to sleep. Don’t you know it will soon be daylight? I heard a bird just now—and there’s another one. You’re not to come down to breakfast, but to sleep as long as you can. And don’t be puzzling your head about the other house. I’m beginning to be sorry you ever found it. . . . Good-night.’

Uncle Stephen extinguished the lamp. But Tom lay looking at the window in the glimmering twilight of dawn.

CHAPTER XVI

Nobody having called him, it was after ten when Tom came down to breakfast. Mrs. Deverell poured out his tea, but she made no comment on his lateness. Indeed, there was something unusual about Mrs. Deverell this morning. She looked as if she had not slept—either that or else she had been crying. And she attended to Tom practically in silence. She called him ‘Sir’, too, instead of ‘Master Tom’, which he found disconcertingly formal. He wondered if anything had happened and whether he ought to ask her about it. He had just decided in the negative when he heard a sniff. This was dreadful!—and Tom, who happened to be taking a drink, stared round-eyed over his breakfast-cup in alarm. Mrs. Deverell was standing near the sideboard, her back turned to him. He saw her take out a pocket-handkerchief and give a surreptitious dab at her eyes. Then another. Tom put down his cup. He had never before seen a grown-up person cry, and perhaps he ought to take no notice. But how could he go on callously with his breakfast while she wept with her back turned? Mrs. Deverell sniffed again.

Tom pushed back his chair. He wished she would speak. He himself made a timid remark, but Mrs. Deverell answered in so subdued a voice that he did not hear what she said. ‘Mrs. Deverell, what’s the matter?’ he asked, and this time there was no reply at all. He gazed at her. Why wouldn’t she speak to him? He left his chair and adopted the mode of consolation that came most natural to him, though in a modified form, for Mrs. Deverell wasn’t the kind of person you could put your arms round. She wouldn’t like it. Her manner was mild, but she was a firm stickler for proprieties, and her sense of class distinction was adamant. Tom was the young master and must behave as such. Nevertheless he took her hand and stroked it two or three times. Even that, perhaps, was overstepping the mark, for Mrs. Deverell withdrew her hand. ‘If you’ve finished your breakfast, Master Tom, run along now like a good boy.’

Well, at any rate she had regained her composure, and Tom, though he hadn’t finished his breakfast, did what she told him. Out in the porch he spied Sally polishing the brasses. The sleeves of Sally’s blue and white print were tucked up above her elbows and the morning wind had fluffed her hair. Also, she was singing! She sang in an undertone—a song without words—and so far as Tom could make out without tune—but presumably expressive of a contented mind. He approached her hopefully therefore, and put his question. ‘What’s wrong with Mrs. Deverell?’

Sally's song ceased. Her polishing went on, however, and the glance she gave him was frigid. 'You needn't ask me, Master Tom. If there's anything wrong I suppose it's the usual thing.'

'What usual thing? Do you mean Jim?'

'Oh, it's Jim, is it? I didn't know you'd reached that length in your acquaintance!'

Tom was annoyed and made a grimace at her. 'Well, it's his name, isn't it? He's not Charles or Joseph.'

Sally disdained to reply, and he went on, 'What's he been doing anyway? I saw him yesterday afternoon and there was nothing the matter then.'

'Yesterday afternoon's a long time ago. A good many things might have happened since yesterday afternoon—especially where *some* people's concerned.'

These pregnant words were followed by a pause, but Tom did not take up the challenge.

'It took me nigh and next an hour trying to clean your clothes, and those trousers may as well be turned into floor-cloths for all you'll ever be able to wear them again!'

So that was it! Tom laughed. 'They were my old bags,' he said carelessly.

'And what about the tear in your jacket, to say nothing of a lock of green stains that'll never come out in this world?'

'We'll take them out in heaven, Sally. You shouldn't have bothered.'

'I suppose not: and have you running about the country-side the way you'd be a disgrace to your uncle and the whole house!'

Tom wrinkled his nose. 'It seems to me everybody's very grumpy this morning. I hope Uncle Stephen is all right. Is he in the study?'

'He is, and there's a gentleman with him, so you needn't go worrying him.'

Immediately a transformed Tom faced her. 'Who?' he cried excitedly. 'Not Uncle Horace!'

Sally threw an instant damper on these hopes. 'It's Mr. Flood that's with him,' she returned loftily, 'the solicitor from the town.'

Tom's enthusiasm subsided. 'Oh,' he murmured, and then added, 'Do you think he'll be long?'

'Now how can I tell how long he'll be! What's more, I've my work to do, instead of answering questions.'

'Well, it's a very queer time to call. You should have told him Uncle Stephen and I are always busy in the mornings.'

'Maybe the first one that asks for you I *will* tell them that. This morning your name wasn't mentioned.'

Tom assumed a crushed and humble air. 'Don't you like me any more, Sally?' he asked. 'You're not going to let a few green stains come between us!'

He took a short run, and slid along the dark and shining floor, while Sally screamed after him, 'Stop that, now! And me just after polishing it!' But Tom had already turned down the passage, and next moment was tapping at the study door.

'Come in.' It was Uncle Stephen's voice, and Tom entered. Uncle Stephen was seated at the big square table, while at the opposite side of it, with a litter of papers between them, sat a small grey man with bushy eyebrows and gold-rimmed spectacles, who was writing on a stiff parchment with a pen that produced scratching, squeaking sounds. At the noise of the opening door the writer looked up, but Tom, who had not expected to find them occupied like this, stood still, uncertain whether to advance or retreat.

Uncle Stephen decided for him. 'Come and shake hands with Mr. Flood. . . . We shan't be able to do any reading this morning. Mr. Flood is going to keep me busy—or rather, I'm keeping *him* busy.' And to Mr. Flood he added, 'This is Tom, the cause of all our trouble.'

The solicitor had risen. He shook hands gravely, but there was both curiosity and a twinkle of amusement behind his spectacles. 'I've heard about him,' he said. His eyes, in spite of their half quizzical expression, were subjecting Tom to a close scrutiny, and his next words were addressed directly to him. 'My wife declares you came to her assistance in a dog fight.'

'Yes,' said Tom. 'At least I came to somebody's assistance, but I don't know how she knew my name.'

'That was feminine intuition. In the first account I heard, you were merely a boy with freckles; but before bedtime you had become Mr. Stephen Collet's nephew.'

‘Well, it *was* me,’ said Tom, ‘though it happened the day after I arrived, and the only person who knew about me was Mr. Knox.’

‘The day after you arrived everybody in Kilbarron knew about you,’ Mr. Flood answered, in his dry, matter-of-fact voice. He pushed his spectacles up on to his forehead, and had another look at Tom. ‘Do you know, Mr. Collet, though it may sound fanciful, I believe I myself could have guessed that boy was your nephew.’

Tom tried hard not to look self-conscious, while the lawyer went on: ‘Taken feature by feature, of course there’s not the ghost of a likeness. Or rather, it must be a ghost—just something in his expression. *Is* he more like his mother’s family than his father’s?’

‘That, I’m afraid, I can’t tell you. I never saw either his father *or* his mother. In his appearance Tom doesn’t remind me of anybody: in other ways, I should think probably he belongs to our side.’

Mr. Flood prolonged an examination which was becoming embarrassing. ‘I have an idea he likes belonging to your side,’ he said shrewdly.

Tom blushed. It was time for him to clear out, he thought. He shook hands again, said good-bye, and left the room feeling slightly puzzled.

But it didn’t matter—even if they were, as he suspected, engaged in some business concerning himself. What he had to do now was to fill in the time before dinner. Lunch, Mrs. Deverell would call it—like his step-mother—the implication being that they dined at some fashionable hour such as half-past eight. . . . Uncle Horace dined at half-past seven, and dressed for dinner even when he was alone, but he was the only person of Tom’s acquaintance who lived up to these high standards. . . . Poor Mrs. Deverell! He hoped Sally’s explanation of her troubles was not the true one. . . . And there was also the matter of Philip to be settled. Not the matter of his absence last night, for Tom had ceased to regard this as a mystery, and in fact could not now understand his own mood of last night, nor why he had got into such a state about so little. But he wanted to make it up properly with Philip. He would go to him that afternoon and do everything he could to please him. Or everything but one thing, for he was not going to drop Deverell. . . .

He passed out through the front gate and sauntered down the road till he reached a field path, which branched off on the left. He had never been along this path, but he knew it was the one leading to Deverell’s cottage. He

leaned against the stile for a minute or two, thinking: then he made up his mind and climbed over.

A walk of some three hundred yards brought him almost to the cottage door, but here again he paused, and was still standing there irresolutely when Deverell himself looked out of the window. The young poacher beckoned, and a moment later partially opened the door, though he did not speak till Tom was quite close. Then he said in a low voice, ‘You want to see me, Mr. Tom? Come in.’

A slight pull enforced the invitation, and Tom entered the narrow hall. Deverell immediately shut the door behind them. He pushed Tom firmly, but not roughly, on into the kitchen, where he drew out a worn armchair for his visitor, while he himself sat down on the white deal table, his legs swinging, and his back to the window. Between them a silence seemed to deepen, and yet it was not exactly a silence of constraint. The young poacher did not look at Tom; his head was lowered, he was gazing at the tiled floor. Presently he spoke, but still without raising his eyes.

‘I’m glad you came, Mr. Tom: I wanted to see you. I wanted to send a message to you, only my mother wouldn’t take it.’

‘What’s the matter? Has something gone wrong?’

At this Deverell at last looked up, and his face was dark and determined. ‘I’ve got into trouble, Mr. Tom. I must have money to get away.’

‘What kind of trouble?’

‘Nothing’s happened yet, but if I don’t get away at once it might be bad.’

Tom did not ask for further particulars; nor did he reply at all for a minute or two, and then it was only to say, ‘How do you expect me to have money?’

He saw Deverell get down from the table, take three strides to the door, lock the door, and put the key in his pocket.

Again there was a silence. Tom made no movement, and Deverell watched him with an expression that gradually became troubled.

‘You needn’t be frightened, Mr. Tom; I’m not going to hurt you; but I don’t want you to go till we’ve settled something. It’s not the way I’d like it to be, but it’s not my choosing. I could have got money easy enough by playing a trick on you. That gentleman that come down in his car to fetch you—he wanted me to help him get hold of you, but I wouldn’t.’

‘Uncle Horace.’

‘Aye.’

Tom’s face had whitened a little; nevertheless, at this, a tremulous smile for a second appeared on it. ‘What a frightful lie!’ he said.

‘I could telephone to him now,’ Deverell went on. ‘I know his number. I could tell him I have you safe locked up here and all he’s got to do is to drive down and he’ll find the goods ready for him.’

‘The goods being me?’

Deverell made no answer.

‘His surname, by the way, is Pringle,’ Tom said quietly. ‘That will help you with the telephone-book, if there *is* any truth in your story. You will only find the number of his private telephone, and he won’t be at home just now, but he lives over the bank and if you ring up the bank you’ll get him.’

The trouble on Deverell’s face deepened. Again he went to the door, but this time he put back the key and unlocked it. ‘You can go, Mr. Tom,’ he said. ‘You’re the only one I’ve ever cared for. I would have been a good pal to you, but it can’t be now. I’d have gone straight with you, and this would never have happened, but now it’s too late.’ He sat down on a kitchen chair, his elbows on his knees, his bent head supported between his hands, so that Tom could only see the thick black hair which covered it.

But Tom did not take advantage of his liberty. ‘I don’t want to go,’ he said. ‘I came here on purpose. It was your mother—something about her—that made me guess something was wrong.’

‘Aye, there’s always something wrong according to her,’ said Deverell bitterly. ‘Always has been. Many a time I’ve gone out just to avoid the way she’d be looking at me as if I was the cause of all the sorrow in the world. If you’d had somebody grieving over you, Mr. Tom, and mourning and praying over you ever since you was ten, you’d know what it was like.’

Tom did know, or at any rate could easily imagine, what it would be like. Mrs. Deverell could be very tenacious: had he not seen her facing Uncle Horace without yielding an inch? But he could also imagine what it must have been like from *her* point of view—with a son perpetually out of work—silent, morose, at loggerheads with all the neighbours—a son who had brought disgrace on her name and who apparently was about to do so again.

‘This trouble,’ he began; and then stopped. There was no use in going back over that. It was done—whatever it was. ‘Why don’t you ask Uncle

Stephen to help you?’ he said.

‘What good would that do?’ answered Deverell sullenly.

‘I don’t know. What good does asking me do?’

‘You’re the only one I could ask. Even if you refuse me it won’t be the way the others would.’

‘But Uncle Stephen could do so much *more*! What *can* I do?’

‘It’s no use, Mr. Tom. It wasn’t poaching this time. And I’d no luck. I was seen.’

‘Seen?’

‘Seen coming away. I got into a house last night, but I didn’t take anything. I thought I heard someone moving and I funk’d it.’

‘If you didn’t take anything it won’t be very bad, will it?’

‘It will be bad enough. You see, I been in jail before and that makes a difference. They count that against you. Only—I think if I could get right away they maybe wouldn’t bother doin’ anything. Not on my account, but on account of mother.’

The last words were a little chilling, but Tom accepted them. He had refused to listen to any warnings against Deverell in the past, and he wasn’t going to begin to listen now.

‘I wish you hadn’t done it,’ he said. ‘If you had only told me that you needed money—— I mean, it would have been far easier to help you *before* than it will be now.’ Then, realizing the futility of such talk, he stopped. Lifting his eyes, he encountered the young poacher’s brooding gaze fixed on him.

‘It wasn’t the money, Mr. Tom.’

Tom opened his mouth to speak, but turned away without having spoken. He already had an idea of what was coming—was not, for that matter, even particularly surprised. It had been stupid—horribly stupid—but he could understand. After all, it was only a variation on the thoughts he himself had had last night. ‘You needn’t have been so angry with me,’ he said.

‘No—nor I wasn’t either. I was angry for a bit with that young fellow that was with you, for he’d no call to treat me like he did. What had I done on him? But it wasn’t that. It was just that I felt the way I didn’t care a curse

what I did. And then I remembered the one that had give me away first and started most of the trouble.'

Tom sighed. All this seemed to him hopeless—and yet very natural. It was muddle-headed, savage, blind—but it was very natural. 'Do you want to leave to-day?' he asked. 'Are you sure you were seen? Don't you think, if you had been seen, somebody would have been round here before now?'

'There's a reason for that. But I bin' keeping a watch, ready to slip out the back way. You give me a start for a minute till I seen who it was. It was James Dunwoody that seen me; him that's doin' night-watchman where they're mending the road up by the station. He maybe wouldn't think much of it at the time, and he'd be going home to sleep before the news would be out. But he'll hear soon enough and he's not one would keep his mouth shut. You see, they don't like me, Mr. Tom.'

Deverell had taken a packet of cigarettes from his pocket. He held it out to Tom who took one mechanically, forgetting that he had given up smoking. He lit it from the match Deverell struck, and then Deverell lit his own. They sat there, facing each other, smoking in silence—a rather odd picture for anyone either at Gloucester Terrace or the Manor House to have peeped in upon.

'Of course, when it is found that nothing was taken, it may end there,' said Tom.

'How? What way would it end there?'

'Whoever it was mayn't go to the police at all.'

'Mr. Tom, what's the use of talking like that?'

'Not very much,' Tom admitted. 'Don't be angry with me. I'm not really talking; I'm only trying to think.'

'Wouldn't you go to the police yourself?'

'Not if I knew the burglar. Was it a shop?'

'It was; and the man that owns it is the same that was always spreading talk about me when I was only a boy like you, and that give me away the first time I got into trouble.'

Tom transferred his gaze from a gaudy picture calendar to Deverell. 'Did you break open anything—drawers and that kind of thing?'

'I did.'

‘It was lucky you heard him.’

‘Why? You mean he’d have seen me. I don’t see as it makes very much difference, Mr. Tom.’

‘It might have made a difference if he had crept down without your hearing him,’ said Tom. ‘I expect you hate him.’

Deverell rubbed one hand backward and forward against his thigh. ‘You mean——?’ But he did not develop his idea of what Tom might have meant.

‘I’m going to help you if I can,’ said Tom, ‘and if I can’t it won’t be because I haven’t tried.’

‘I know that, Mr. Tom.’

‘But it will take some time. I’ll have to go home first, and then to the town. If my plan doesn’t work I’ll come back and tell you.’

‘When?’

‘As soon as I can. Quite soon if it’s no good: in less than two hours if it is. But I’d better go at once.’

He moved to the door and Deverell at the same time sprang to his feet. For a moment he laid a detaining hand on Tom’s arm.

‘You’re mighty good to me, Mr. Tom.’

‘No, I’m not,’ said Tom, ‘I’m just ordinary. But everybody else seems to have been pretty rotten. I think you’d better try to get some sleep while I’m away. I’ll knock on the kitchen window.’

Deverell shook his head. ‘I must keep a look-out. I’m not going to let them get me.’

‘Well, good-bye for the present.’

Tom glanced at his watch and saw that it was after one. Without further speech he hurried off. He was trotting quietly along the road when a small car met him and from the driver’s seat Mr. Flood waved his hand. Tom waved back. ‘That’s a stroke of luck anyhow,’ he thought, for he had been vainly racking his brains as to how he might get Uncle Stephen by himself for a few minutes. It would be no betrayal of Deverell to consult Uncle Stephen. If it came to that, he *had* to consult him, had to tell him everything or he would not be able to help Deverell at all. He would just have time before dinner.

On reaching the house he went straight to the study. Uncle Stephen was locking up some papers and had his back turned, but Tom began at once, and in fact, with the particular question he had to ask, it was easier to address his back.

‘Uncle Stephen, supposing I wanted fifty pounds immediately, how could I get it?’

Uncle Stephen turned round, but he did not look surprised, only mildly speculative, as he gazed on the flushed, slightly breathless questioner.

‘I don’t think you *could* get it,’ he replied. ‘Certainly not without a great many explanations as to what you wanted it for, each one of which would be met with the firmest opposition.’

‘This is serious: I want you to take it seriously. As a matter of fact I’m not sure that fifty pounds will be enough.’

Still Tom could see from the way he looked at him that Uncle Stephen was not taking the matter in earnest. ‘What have you been up to?’ he demanded. ‘It sounds to me very much as if you wanted to square somebody.’

Tom did not smile. ‘I have some money of my own, haven’t I?’

‘Yes, but not at your disposal. If you wanted fifty pounds of it I’m afraid you would first have to approach your Uncle Horace. *He* might take it seriously, but I doubt if he would give you fifty pounds.’

‘That’s no good,’ Tom answered quickly. ‘I must have the money to-day. Uncle Stephen, will you lend me fifty pounds?’

Uncle Stephen sat down in his armchair. ‘Come here,’ he said, ‘and tell me all about it.’

Tom came over, but with less alacrity than usual: he both looked and felt worried. Seated on an arm of Uncle Stephen’s chair he told his story.

And even then Uncle Stephen did not seem very much impressed. Instead of answering directly with yes or no, he began to talk of other things. ‘It’s odd, Tom, how since your arrival this house has become the centre of problems, adventures and mysteries, whereas previously we never found anything more exciting to discuss than whether it was too warm for a fire in the study, or some question of food already decided by Mrs. Deverell in her own mind. . . . Tell me, before we go any further, what is your own attitude in this?’

Tom did not reply. He did not quite understand the question he was to reply to, and there was no use telling Uncle Stephen the first thing that came into his head.

Uncle Stephen altered his question.

‘What is your reason for wanting to give Deverell fifty pounds? Are you doing it merely because he asked you to? Do you take the slightest interest in him apart from this scrape he has got into?’

Tom still was puzzled. ‘Do you mean, do I like him?’

‘No. We all like for the time being the person we are helping. I want something better than that.’

‘Then I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Do you think there is any good in him; that he’ll ever do any good—ever even become self-supporting?’

‘I’m sure there’s good in him,’ said Tom.

‘What makes you sure? His mother isn’t, you know.’

Tom hesitated. ‘It’s just—things. . . . He’s been rather decent to me over all this.’

Uncle Stephen did not answer. Indeed, the first sound he made was more than anything else in the nature of a slight gasp: but the clear, solemn gaze turned on him caused him to repress it. ‘Well, Tom,’ he said at last, ‘it’s for you to judge. Mind you, I don’t say you’re wrong, though I think you’re wrong. But you shall have your fifty pounds. I believe you’re going to waste it, and I wish you had discovered a more promising protégé. Still—— Ring the bell, like a good boy; I want to speak to Mrs. Deverell.’

Tom obeyed him. He did not know what was going to happen now.

CHAPTER XVII

Mrs. Deverell, pausing on the threshold, at the very first glance appeared to take in that she had been summoned for a special purpose. She was nervous, though Uncle Stephen both looked and spoke very kindly to her when he said, 'Sit down Mrs. Deverell.'

Tom watched her take a chair close to the wall and sit there stiffly. He saw that her thin, veined hands trembled before she folded them in her lap; she looked so frail and frightened indeed that he would have escaped from the sight of her distress had not Uncle Stephen motioned to him to remain where he was.

'Master Tom has been to see your son this morning, Mrs. Deverell,' he began.

Mrs. Deverell tried to reply, but what she said was inaudible.

'I don't suppose you know all the particulars of this unfortunate affair, but your son told Master Tom about it, and also that he would like to get out of the country before further developments take place. I've no doubt myself that if this can be done it will be the best thing—for you at any rate. For a long time, I'm afraid, you've had more anxiety than comfort from keeping him at home.'

'Oh no, sir, it's not that: I——'

'Master Tom proposes to help him by giving him fifty pounds,' Uncle Stephen continued.

'I'm sure, sir, he'll pay it back when——'

Uncle Stephen made a slight gesture with his hand, and Mrs. Deverell did not complete her speech.

'Master Tom does not expect to be paid back and does not want to be paid back. He has asked me to advance him the money and I intend to do so, but that is my whole share in the matter: the idea is Master Tom's and the money is his. That, I think, is all.'

Mrs. Deverell burst into tears.

Tom turned his back. He had known what would happen, and why couldn't Uncle Stephen have let him clear out before it did happen? He

caught sight of the open window and scrambled across the sill before anybody could prevent him.

He did not go far, however, but waited where he had a view of the room, and no sooner had Mrs. Deverell left it than he returned. Uncle Stephen was unlocking his desk, from which he took a cheque-book.

‘You’d better tell them to give you a pound in silver and the rest in Treasury Notes,’ he said quietly, as he wrote out the cheque and dried it on the blotting pad. He handed it to Tom who put it away in the inside pocket of his jacket.

‘Thank you, Uncle Stephen.’

‘You know what you’re doing, Tom? If it comes out that we’ve been assisting a criminal to escape it won’t help *our* case. . . . Well, don’t look so guilty about it: you’ve nothing to be ashamed of. I suppose all your time now will be spent in avoiding Mrs. Deverell. It won’t be the slightest use, and you’d have done much better to have let her thank you and get it over. Are you going to the bank at once or are you going to wait till after dinner? It must be dinner-time now.’

‘I think I’d like to go at once, Uncle Stephen, and I’d rather you didn’t wait for me.’

‘Very well. I suppose you won’t be happy till the matter is settled.’

Tom departed on his errand, but on reaching the bend of the avenue he glanced back at the house and caught sight of Mrs. Deverell watching him from an upper window. ‘I hope she’s not going home,’ he thought. ‘And I bet she is. He won’t like it—especially when she wouldn’t take the message he asked her to. And he’ll hate taking the money before her. Really you’d think she might have sense enough to wait till after I’d been.’

So Tom scolded poor Mrs. Deverell for an act she merely looked like committing, but once out on the open road he ceased to think of her and began to run. He could not run all the way, but he ran at least half of it, and arrived at the bank in a moist, breathless, and excited state. He fumbled for his cheque and pushed it across the counter, forgetful of the rule of precedence, so that a lady, waiting to have her own cheque cashed, told him he was an ill-mannered boy, and the cashier stared at him coldly and asked him if he didn’t know that he had to take his turn. Abashed, apologetic, blushing, but at the same time hating both the cashier and the lady, Tom took up his proper position.

The lady received five single notes and counted them correctly three times. Then, apparently having forgiven Tom, she bestowed a smile on him and withdrew.

‘A pound of silver, please, and the rest in Treasury Notes.’

The cashier again looked at him coldly, but after examining both sides of Uncle Stephen’s cheque, as if he hoped to find a flaw in it, handed Tom the money.

‘Count it and see that it’s right,’ he said sharply, as Tom was stuffing the notes into his pocket.

So he had to take them out again and count them—count them twice, because two of the notes got stuck together the first time.

‘Wet your fingers,’ said the cashier, obviously a person of the baser sort.

Tom took no notice.

‘Don’t be losing it now,’ the cashier went on, in tones indicating that this was what he expected to happen. ‘I suppose you’re going straight back to Mr. Collet?’

‘Then you suppose wrong,’ replied Tom, who felt there had been enough ordering about.

Out on the road again, he proceeded at a more rational pace. The first act was successfully accomplished; the rest was up to Deverell.

There was nobody in sight when he reached the field path and climbed the stile, but Deverell was waiting for him, and appeared from behind the cottage the moment Tom drew level with it.

‘This way, Mr. Tom; the back door’s open.’

‘Was your mother here?’ Tom asked, when he was once more in the now familiar kitchen.

‘Yes; she’s gone about five minutes.’

‘I’ve got what you want: at least I hope it’s enough,’ said Tom, emptying his pockets. ‘There’s forty-nine pounds in notes, and a pound in silver.’

Deverell stared at the money on the table. A deep, painful flush had risen in his swarthy face and his head hung awkwardly. A change seemed to have come over him: he looked ashamed, he looked shy, and this altered attitude immediately produced its reaction on the impressionable Tom.

‘Mr. Tom,’ Deverell stammered, ‘you won’t think too hardly of me?’

‘No, of course not,’ said Tom hurriedly. ‘Why should I think hardly of you?’

He felt now very shy himself, and was thankful that Deverell said nothing more, but began to busy himself with the kettle and a tea-pot.

‘You’ll take a cup of tea with me, Mr. Tom?’

There was something in this rather wistful question, a kind of rough gentleness, that made Tom more uncomfortable than ever. He began to feel miserable and knew from past experience that it would take very little more to bring him to the point of blubbing.

‘Yes,’ he said.

They sat down at the table, Deverell eating steadily and methodically, Tom nibbling at a slice of bread and butter.

Deverell’s chair suddenly grated on the floor as he pushed it back. His hands, brown and rough and powerful, the nails uncleaned, the fingers stained with nicotine, rested on his knees. ‘Mr. Tom, I wished I’d known you five years ago.’

Tom smiled faintly. ‘You wouldn’t have wanted to know me five years ago. I was only a kid.’

‘Yes,’ said Deverell slowly, ‘I suppose so. It’s queer, isn’t it, how things is always like that?’

As he looked at the dark unhappy eyes that were turned on him, Tom too had a feeling that human affairs were hopelessly ill-arranged.

Deverell rose and began to clear away the tea-things. Tom helped him. When at last everything was tidied up the young poacher turned to the boy. He laid his hands heavily on Tom’s shoulders. From this position they moved round till they clasped the back of his head. And Tom remained absolutely still, his face curiously grave.

‘Wish me luck, Mr. Tom,’ Deverell said at last.

‘Yes, I wish you good luck.’

Deverell’s hand passed awkwardly over his hair.

‘You can kiss me if you like,’ said Tom simply.

Deverell bent down.

‘You’d better go now, Mr. Tom. I must go soon myself.’

Tom without another word went out into the sunshine, nor as he walked away from the cottage did he once look back.

CHAPTER XVIII

When a whole week had gone by without bringing news of Deverell, it was taken for granted even by his mother that there was no longer cause for anxiety. He had got away, and nobody had seen him go or knew his destination. Moreover, Mrs. Deverell had found out definitely—though Tom did not quite know how—that the police did not intend to do anything so long as the culprit remained in exile. But Tom had his own troubles—troubles which he kept to himself. He had not thought it right to bother Uncle Stephen, because Uncle Stephen was not well. This indeed was one of the causes of Tom's inquietude, though the doctor had assured him there was no need to worry. All morning and all evening he sat with Uncle Stephen; every afternoon he hurried off to the other house. When he was in company he tried to be cheerful; when he was by himself he moped.

One afternoon, half an hour before tea-time, he had gone for a short walk along the Kilbarron road. But he had not proceeded far when he heard somebody calling his name, and looking round saw Mr. Knox. The curate waved his hand, hastened his footsteps: there was nothing for it but to wait.

'It's a long time since I've seen you,' beamed Mr. Knox as he came up. 'Where have you been hiding yourself?'

'I've been busy,' Tom answered.

Mr. Knox glanced at him, then glanced again, more closely, and there followed a brief pause.

'I called at the Manor this afternoon,' the curate said. 'I'm glad to hear Mr. Collet is so much better.'

'Yes, he felt better this morning, thank you.'

'And how are you yourself?'

'Very well, thank you.'

With an effort Tom continued the conversation. 'Did you see Uncle Stephen?'

'No. I'm afraid I didn't ask to see him. It didn't occur to me that he would want to see anybody while he was still in bed.'

And they walked on for another fifty yards.

‘It was Mrs. Deverell who told me he was better and hoped to get up for an hour or two to-morrow. As a matter of fact it was partly to see Mrs. Deverell that I called.’

‘Yes,’ said Tom.

‘Poor woman, she’s had a good deal to worry her, but I hope things will be all right now. It must be a temporary relief, at any rate, to have got rid of that blackguard, and I fancy from what I’ve heard he’s hardly likely to risk coming back.’

‘What blackguard?’ asked Tom.

Mr. Knox looked at him in surprise. ‘Surely you knew that her son had decamped?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well——’

‘Did you know him?’

‘I can’t say I *knew* him, exactly,’ Mr. Knox replied. ‘I *knew of* him. I don’t suppose I’ve spoken more than half a dozen words to him in my life: any time I called at his mother’s cottage he slunk out by the back door.’

‘Yes—he would do that.’

‘You don’t think he was a blackguard?’ Mr. Knox said. ‘Perhaps I shouldn’t have used the word.’

‘No, no; it’s not that: you may be right. I don’t know what a blackguard is. It’s somebody you don’t like, isn’t it? But then I liked Deverell, so it’s different for me.’

‘You *liked* him?’

‘Oh yes. I used to think I didn’t—or to pretend I didn’t—but I did, and do still.’

Mr. Knox looked at him again. ‘What is the matter, Tom?’

‘Nothing. Why?’

Mr. Knox walked on for some time in silence.

‘I asked for you also at the house, but Mrs. Deverell told me you had gone out with a friend. I’m very glad you’ve found somebody of your own age to be friends with. Mrs. Deverell did not seem to know his name, but she said you went out together every afternoon.’

Mr. Knox paused, as if expecting a little further enlightenment, but none was forthcoming.

‘Well, Tom, I’ll not inflict my company on you any longer,’ he said. ‘Because I don’t think you want it.’

Tom’s eyes met the curate’s for the first time. ‘That’s because I’ve been rude to you.’

‘No, not rude—I can’t imagine your being rude to anybody—but not very friendly.’

‘Rather a beast. I know. If I told you I’d been trying not to be, I suppose you’d hardly believe me.’

‘Yes,’ said Mr. Knox, ‘I should. But I can see you’re worried about something and would rather be alone.’

‘No——’ Tom began.

‘Now, Tom, don’t tell me an untruth: it’s better to be rude than to do that. So good-bye.’

‘Good-bye,’ said Tom.

CHAPTER XIX

For all his determination not to show it, it was a very chastened-looking boy who approached Uncle Stephen's bedside that evening. 'Would you like me to read to you, Uncle Stephen?' he asked.

'Presently, perhaps.'

Tom sat down on a low chair beside the bed.

'First, I want you to talk to me, to tell me why I've had such a woebegone nephew for the last week.'

'You've been ill,' said Tom. 'Naturally I tried to be quiet.'

'Not ill enough to account for *that* forlorn appearance. I've been waiting for you to tell me of your own accord.'

'I didn't tell you,' said Tom, 'because I thought you oughtn't to be worried.'

'Then you've been a very good boy; but you need have no further scruples.'

Tom looked up at the watching Hermes. 'It is only that I don't know what has happened to Philip,' he said. 'I mean I don't know what has become of him. He has gone.'

'He must have gone that night,' he continued after a moment or two. 'The night I went to look for him and didn't find him.'

'And he left you no message?'

'No message; nothing. . . . I suppose it's that that I mind most. . . . I knew he was angry with me. He was angry because he thought I took Deverell's part when they quarrelled.'

'Do you mean Deverell actually saw him?'

'Yes. . . . It was on that last afternoon. Philip was with me. We were down by the river. Then Deverell came along and they quarrelled. . . . All the same, I didn't think he'd go away like that—without even saying good-bye. I can't understand anybody doing that. But I've been over at the other house every day. I've waited there all afternoon every day—and he has never come back.'

From his present position Tom could not see Uncle Stephen's face without turning his head, and he did not turn. But he leaned his cheek against the coverlet of the bed so that Uncle Stephen might stroke his hair and twist it into little knots. 'Perhaps I'd *better* read to you, Uncle Stephen,' he said, after a long pause. 'Wouldn't you like me to?'

There was no answer and Tom did not repeat his question. The light was fast ebbing from the room. Soon, in the twilight, he could only see the Hermes dimly. It was as if the marble, which even in broad daylight created a mysterious illusion of warmth and softness, had now actually dissolved, leaving in its place the glimmering spirit of the God. . . .

What influence was there belonging to this room that always affected him so strangely, though not always in the same way? *That* depended a little on his own mood, and to-night he had a feeling of something dream-like and precarious, as if he might suddenly awaken and find he *had* been dreaming—as if everything might change, the walls disappear, the ceiling melt into the open sky, and he, Tom, find himself living in a different time, a different place. . . .

And that God there—the guide, the messenger, the friend—was the God of dreams. He could lead Tom's spirit to the ends of the earth and guide it home again. . . . It must have been in this room that Uncle Stephen had dreamed first—and, awakening in his bedroom in Gloucester Terrace, Tom had known he was there. . . .

Why didn't Uncle Stephen speak? He could not even feel the touch of his hand now. . . . Yet Tom, too, remained motionless and silent: his eyes closed; he might have been asleep. . . .

It was into this room of darkness and silence that Mrs. Deverell presently entered. She stood near the door, her slight form visible in the dim light from the passage behind her. 'Hadn't I better light the lamp, sir?' she asked, with a note of surprise in her voice; and when nobody answered she struck a match. She stood by the lamp till the flame burned clearly and evenly. Then she carried a small table over to the bed. She went out into the passage and returned with a tray which she set upon the table. 'I brought up Master Tom's supper too,' she said.

Tom watched her as a native of some remote island might watch the rites and ceremonies of his first missionary. It was Uncle Stephen's voice that brought him back to actuality.

‘I’m afraid, Mrs. Deverell, you’ve been kept far too late these last few nights. There’s no need for it any longer: Master Tom can look after me.’

‘Oh, it’s all right, sir; there’s plenty I can find to do downstairs. But I’ll be going now if you’re sure you won’t require anything more.’

Yet she still lingered, her pale eyes fixed as if in uncertainty on her master, and on the boy seated in the chair beside him. At last, with a low ‘Good-night, sir,’ she left them.

And as usual Tom listened for the sound of the hall-door being pulled to, for the sound of retreating footsteps on the gravel.

It was Uncle Stephen who spoke first. ‘Put away that stuff, Tom,’ he said abruptly. ‘I don’t want it.’

Tom rose obediently and removed the tray, with its steaming bowl of gruel and his own biscuits, cheese and milk. Then he returned to his seat.

But he did not again propose to read aloud. He had a premonition that something was coming, that Uncle Stephen was going to tell him something—though he had no idea what. He waited. It was something which would make a difference:—he knew that, but he knew no more than that. And he tried to stifle the feeling of suspense which with each moment grew till it became a kind of reasonless dread of the unknown.

Yet what Uncle Stephen said, after all, was quite ordinary. ‘Would it make you very happy if your friend came back to you?’

Tom felt an immediate relief. He shook his despondency from him and breathed more freely. It was this room, it was sitting here in the dark without a word, which had worked upon his mind. He was all right now, and he turned quickly to the bed. ‘You aren’t angry with me, Uncle Stephen, are you?’

‘Angry! Why should I be angry?’ Uncle Stephen asked in surprise.

Tom smiled. ‘I didn’t really think you were,’ he said. ‘Yes, of course I’d like him to come back. I’d like to see him *once* more at any rate. I don’t expect him to stay. I mean, he always told me and I always knew he wouldn’t stay. But I’d like to see him once.’

‘Even though he left you like this?’

‘I think there must have been a reason for it. I’m sure there was. Besides, he was angry with me.’

‘What reason could there be?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Nobody can have been making inquiries about him, for the first thing they would do would be to call here. Don’t you think the most probable reason is simply that this sort of thing is natural to him—that he doesn’t think much about other people’s feelings? It seems to me to fit in with what you originally told me about him.’

‘I don’t remember what I told you.’

‘Don’t you even remember that I warned you.’

‘Not about this.’

‘Not directly perhaps, but indirectly. After all, he behaved in much the same way to his father and mother. It seems to me that restlessness and a desire for adventure are the main ingredients in his character, and that, once the wander-fit seizes on him, he isn’t very likely to pay attention to such trifles as saying good-bye to his friends. If you had been there he would have said good-bye to you, but you weren’t there, and he didn’t think it worth while to wait.’

‘But how do you *know* he is like that, Uncle Stephen?’

‘Because you told me about him.’

‘I didn’t tell you all that: for one thing, I don’t believe it’s true.’

‘Then you’re still fond of him?’

‘Yes.’

Uncle Stephen paused, and it was as if he were carefully weighing his next words, so slowly they came. ‘He *is* what I say, Tom. There may be, there must be, the germs of something more, but they’re not developed: the whole circumstances of his life tended to keep them from developing.’

Tom started. There was something in Uncle Stephen’s manner which revived all his misgivings. ‘How do you know? Why do you talk as if you knew? You did once before, too. Uncle Stephen, *do* you know anything about him; and if you do why won’t you tell me?’

‘What I now know,’ said Uncle Stephen a little sadly, ‘is that I should never have allowed this to happen.’

‘What?’ Tom breathed. He had turned completely round and his eyes were fixed very intently and brightly upon Uncle Stephen’s face.

But Uncle Stephen did not answer. He was sitting up in the bed, the skull-cap he wore, vividly black against the pillows behind him, his eyes not looking at Tom, but towards the door by which Mrs. Deverell had come and gone: and for the first time Tom saw him frown.

He leaned closer, he was half-kneeling now on his chair, but still Uncle Stephen did not look at him.

‘Tell me—tell me,’ Tom repeated.

‘Yes, I am going to tell you; but it’s not easy. I don’t know how you will take it. I wish I did. I wish it had never happened. Tom, dear, there isn’t any Philip.’

‘Isn’t——’ Tom began, but he stopped short. A flush rose and died in his cheeks. Unconsciously he laid his hand on Uncle Stephen’s and gripped it tightly.

‘Listen,’ said Uncle Stephen. ‘This boy——’

Tom was listening with his whole being, but for the moment he was to hear nothing further. Uncle Stephen only added, ‘No—I can never explain it in that way.’

And suddenly he seemed to withdraw into himself, and his eyes shut.

‘Go to that cupboard in the wall, and bring me the box that is there.’

Tom sprang to his feet. The cupboard, as he pulled back the door, revealed itself as but a couple of shelves, and on the upper one of these was a flat wooden box, its corners brass-plated, its lid overlaid with a criss-cross pattern in brass filigree. It could not contain much. It was about twelve inches long and a third of that in depth. But it was the only box there, and Tom lifted it from the shelf and brought it to the bed.

‘Now give me my keys,’ said Uncle Stephen, ‘they’re on the dressing-table.’ And the smallest of these he inserted in the lock, turning it twice before he raised the lid.

As he looked over Uncle Stephen’s shoulder Tom’s eyes were still and absorbed. The ferment in his mind, too, was momentarily stilled—forgotten in an intense expectancy.

Yet he saw very little. The box was lined with olive-green silk, and appeared to contain merely a few old letters, among which Uncle Stephen fumbled before he drew out from beneath them a flat leather case which he opened by pressing a spring. Tom bent nearer. Only his breathing was

audible. Within the case was a thin slab of ivory on which was painted the portrait of a boy.

‘Do you know him?’

Tom did not answer. He was gazing not at the picture but at Uncle Stephen himself. The pupils of his eyes were slightly dilated and his face had grown very white.

‘There is a name,’ Uncle Stephen said, ‘and a date—there inside the lid. The date is that when the likeness was painted; the name is the name of the sitter, of the boy. Read it aloud.’

Tom read in an oddly muffled voice. ‘Stephen Collet. 1880.’

‘It was painted three months before he ran away from home.’

‘It is your name,’ whispered Tom.

‘Yes, my name. And it is the only portrait that was ever made of this boy. At the time it was supposed to be a good likeness, but if you were to see him a year later he would not be quite like that.’

Tom waited a moment: then he asked, hardly audibly, ‘What happened to him?’

‘He carried out his plan. If I could show him to you as he was a year later, you would see him among strangers, in a foreign country, living anywhere, anyhow—ragged, more or less homeless, but not starving, not even particularly conscious of discomfort, because the climate suited him and he was strong and healthy. Besides, any squeamishness he may have felt at first had by then disappeared. Not even if things had been much worse would he have dreamed of returning to the country rectory he had left, to the old people, his parents—whom in fact he never saw again. There was nothing romantic about all this, Tom; nothing fine; and the future held no prospect of anything but disaster. It was by the merest accident that disaster was averted—a chance encounter in the street. There are people, perhaps, who possess a gift of instant recognition, or who think they do. At all events, it was this boy’s fate, after a brief exchange of perhaps a dozen questions and answers, to be singled out by a stranger—a man of another race—as possessing the particular qualities and faculties he happened to be in search of. The whole thing was sudden; improbable; for all the boy knew to the contrary, dangerous; and therefore precisely of a nature to appeal to him. He followed his master without a moment’s hesitation. But though you may think it resembles it, this was no prelude to an Arabian tale, but to long years of arduous training during which, if again I could show him to you, you

would see the pupil becoming a disciple, the disciple a collaborator. . . . And when he was once more alone his youth was over. . . . That is all, Tom—all I need tell you now. As for what you want me to tell you—that is nearly as inexplicable to me as it can be to you.’

‘But that *is* you, Uncle Stephen—that boy?’

‘It was—once.’

‘And it is Philip.’

‘There never was a Philip, though I took that name when I ran away.’

‘But,’ Tom stammered painfully ‘—— then it must really be true after all.’

‘What must be true, Tom?’

‘That you are a magician.’

Uncle Stephen shook his head. He looked away. Then he looked back at Tom, and still waited. ‘It had nothing to do with magic,’ he said at last. ‘The first time it happened I myself thought it was an ordinary dream—or if extraordinary, only because of its unusual vividness. And then you came to me with your story.’

Tom, leaning over Uncle Stephen’s shoulder, was thinking. Strangely enough, his nervousness and apprehension were gone, he was only puzzled. ‘Was it here that you dreamed, Uncle Stephen?’

‘Yes.’

‘Was it on purpose—I mean, did you try to?’

‘No. I will tell you about that too.’

‘Tell me first, Uncle Stephen, had you ever heard of me before I came to you?’

‘I had heard of you—yes—from a friend of your mother’s. But it was very little—a phrase or two in a letter. I don’t know what there was in it that impressed me, gave me a definite impression which persisted and deepened. For many years I had lived alone, and possibly that may have had much to do with it. I cannot say. I can give no rational account of what happened, but you became very real and very dear to me in imagination. Imagination, I suppose, is a faculty which can be trained; but what had been trained in me for years was more the power of concentration. That is everything, Tom. Before I dreamed that afternoon, I had been thinking of you, thinking too of

my own boyhood. Then the scene arose in my mind in which these two boys met. It arose spontaneously: I did not seem to be making it up. At a certain point it must have passed into a dream, for I definitely woke up, and I knew by looking at my watch that the afternoon was nearly over. But I really thought very little about the matter until you came with your story. That seemed incredible, and yet I had to accept it. I knew there was no boy at the other house—besides, what you told me *was* my dream. I ought to have left it at that. Unfortunately I knew exactly the conditions under which this accident—if it was an accident—had taken place. I determined to repeat everything. And you came to me again with your story and this time it had advanced a step. I knew it must be dangerous. Even if some strange connection *had* been established between present and past, I knew it could not be safe. Therefore I should not have gone on, because it involved not only myself, but you. Besides, I had to deceive you.’

‘I *think*, you know,’ said Tom slowly, ‘that deep deep down I must have had a sort of suspicion. I don’t even now feel frightfully surprised.’

Uncle Stephen turned to him doubtfully, but Tom pursued his idea. ‘You see, I couldn’t have liked Philip so much if he hadn’t been you.’

But Uncle Stephen did not look convinced. ‘You have a considerable capacity for liking people,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ Tom admitted. ‘I even, in a sort of way, loved that fountain boy—and Deverell—a little. . . . But this is different. Anyway, you know, Uncle Stephen, I once almost asked you if you were Philip. It was that night, you remember, after Uncle Horace had been here: the first time I was ever in this room. I couldn’t understand then, and I was very silly about it—but it was because I felt there was something I *didn’t* understand. And one day I called Philip by your name. It was because his eyes were exactly the same as yours. . . . You know, I’d like you to come to the other house just once more. It would be quite different this time, because I’d know who you really were. Everything would be different.’ He suddenly paused. His eyes were fixed on the broken lovely figure, mild and benign, dreaming half in shadow, half in lamplight. ‘Do you think,’ he whispered, ‘it happens through the God? . . . I don’t want you to answer,’ he went on quickly. ‘Don’t let us talk at all for a little. I want to be quiet.’

CHAPTER XX

The track through the wood had become a path and was now used by other creatures than Tom. Pheasants, hares, squirrels, a weasel, and a big black fierce-looking cat who had lost an ear—all these he had met at one time or another. The track was used by butterflies, moths, wasps, and bees—in fact the entire animal world had immediately discovered and begun to make use of Tom's path. He kept it clear, not only by tramping it daily, but also by vigorously swinging a stick; and gradually it was widening. On either edge pressed closely and silently the green rooted world of vegetation.

This evening he advanced over the sodden ground, sweeping his stick like a sword, and at every blow scattering a shower of raindrops from the drenched leaves. In his left hand he carried a picnic basket, for Mrs. Deverell had continued to pack one for him daily, though now most of its contents went to feed the mice and birds. The hour of his visit was much later than usual; it was past seven o'clock; and it had been with the utmost difficulty that he had persuaded Uncle Stephen to allow him to come at all. He felt ashamed of his importunity. More than ashamed, now that he had got his own way. It was as if he had taken an unfair advantage. To be sure, he had promised that it would be for this once only—and indeed he wanted no more than that himself:—still, Uncle Stephen had been strangely reluctant—and at the back of Tom's mind there was an uneasiness, a feeling that he had done wrong.

He reached the broken gateway and walked quickly up the avenue. He entered the house and climbed the stairs to Philip's room. It was dark and cheerless, and he wondered if he could do anything to make it less so. He tried to drag away some of the obstructing ivy which looked so picturesque from outside; but it was very tough and he had nothing to cut it with. He knelt down and leaned out over the dark lichened sill. He listened to the knocking of a woodpecker. No other sound reached him. At that moment the sun struggled out from behind the clouds and the whole prospect changed.

It was like a signal, a propitious omen, for it had been cloudy all day, even when not actually raining. The house faced west and the sun streamed straight into the room. Tom did not mind now how long he had to wait: in fact he enjoyed it. Only, sitting on the bare floor was uncomfortable, so he fetched one of the ancient patchwork quilts from the bed, and also the volume of *Arabia Deserta* which he had brought for Philip and never taken

home. The quilt was stuffed with flock, but it made a tolerable cushion. Tom sat on it by the low window-sill and turned the pages of his book. But either the style was too crabbed, or his mind just then was incapable of concentration, for after reading for ten minutes he discovered that he had not taken in the meaning of a single sentence. He put the book down and began frankly to dream.

He heard the far-away cawing of rooks, and the sound reminded him of the passing of time. Something unexpected must have happened. He got up and walked up and down the room; he ate two of Mrs. Deverell's sandwiches; he went out into the garden and came back again.

He was determined to wait, no matter how long Philip should keep him. He wondered what would happen when he *did* come! Somehow he could not get it out of his head that this meeting would not in the least resemble their other meetings. If nothing else, Philip would have to admit that his name was Stephen Collet, and, once he knew Tom knew that, he would no longer have any reason for not talking freely.

There were all kinds of questions Tom wanted to ask. Philip would be far better able to answer them than Uncle Stephen himself, because Uncle Stephen must have forgotten heaps. What would he say, for instance, when Tom began to talk to him of Uncle Stephen and of all that had occurred? Would he remember? Tom somehow had taken it for granted that he would, but now he felt more doubtful. It was really very queer and confusing. Uncle Stephen for Philip was the future, *Philip's* future, and of course you can't remember the future. Besides, he had often talked of Uncle Stephen before and Philip hadn't remembered, hadn't known anything about him except what Tom himself had told him. Therefore it would be the same this time. Either that, or he wouldn't *be* Philip. Tom felt a chill of discouragement: he wished now that he had not made this plan, but it was too late to draw back.

Uncle Stephen must have altered a great deal—altered in every respect. Tom was not thinking of physical alterations, but of other things. And the more closely he recalled Philip the more he realized that Uncle Stephen was dearer to him than all the Philips in the world, and the more he wished that he had not insisted on a final experiment.

He wondered if he himself would ever change as much as that. So far, he thought, he had changed very little, if at all; but of course other people might not agree with him. Probably everybody changed—whether it was to become nastier or nicer. He began to think of various grown-up people he knew and to turn them back again into boys. In some cases it was easy. It

was easy to picture Mr. Knox as a boy, easier still to picture Deverell: but what on earth had Uncle Horace been like? Uncle Horace must have changed more even than Uncle Stephen. Far more, because there were definite glimpses of a boy in Uncle Stephen, but no boy in the world could ever have been like what Uncle Horace was at present. Where had that boy gone to, then—or was he still somewhere inside Uncle Horace—hidden, shut up as if in a cupboard, frightened to squeak? Tom remembered strange little creatures—caddis worms they were—which he had often fished out of ponds and streams with a net full of water weeds—creatures so thickly encrusted with bits of stick, stone, sand, and shell that you never would have dreamed anything but the protective case existed till the case suddenly began to move. The *boy* Uncle Horace must be like that. Perhaps not a bad little chap either. In a minute or two Tom began to feel an affection for this small and hitherto unsuspected Uncle Horace. Out of a mysterious limbo he had sprung fully equipped and articulate, and was capering about the room, chattering, as lively as a cricket. He slipped behind Tom and clapped his hands over his eyes. Who is it? And Tom knew who it was. It was perfectly idiotic, but he was sure that never again would his relations with the grown-up Uncle Horace be exactly what they had been in the past.

Dusk was falling now, and once or twice Tom's eyelids closed. A white shape drifted noiselessly past the open window. He knew it was an owl, and wished it had perched on the sill and stared in at him, for he was fond of owls. They were beautiful and fierce and solemn, and he had once read, or somebody had told him, that when they mated it was for life. This had impressed him deeply. It was the old quality of faithfulness cropping up once more. He thought of it now and it led to other thoughts. His mind was a stilled pool over which he brooded: then gradually the pool dimmed, wavered, vanished.

CHAPTER XXI

Tom opened his eyes, but for a moment or two did not realize where he was. Then he remembered and sat up. Outside it was broad daylight; he must have slept the whole night through. He scratched his head, stretched out his arms, turned round from the window and saw—Philip.

He was lying on the bed fast asleep. Tom crossed the room quickly and stood looking down at him. When had he come? Could he have been here all night? He stooped lower and at last knelt beside the bed. His face was within a foot of Philip's face; he was gazing so intently that he held his breath. And in that sleeping countenance he could certainly trace a definite resemblance to Uncle Stephen, though even now, even with his knowledge and his desire to prompt him, he saw far more difference than resemblance. He *knew* it was Uncle Stephen, but should he have known had he possessed only this shadowy likeness to guide him? Would other people—Mrs. Deverell, Sally, Mr. Flood or Mr. Knox—know? And suddenly he found himself looking into two wide open eyes—blue, dark, questioning.

Tom drew back with a kind of spiritual shock. Though their colour and shape were the same (and it was a most uncommon colour), the expression in those eyes was not Uncle Stephen's. Recognition there was in them, and friendliness; but the recognition and the friendliness were not Uncle Stephen's.

'Philip!' he faltered.

The boy on the bed yawned, swung his legs round and assumed a sitting position. 'Hello! Are you saying your prayers?'

Tom got up in some confusion. 'I never heard you coming in last night.'

'Is that why you were kneeling there staring at me?'

'I wasn't.'

'You *weren't!*'

'I mean——' But, having begun his explanation, Tom could not end it, and Philip watched his embarrassment ironically.

'I hope you were praying that you might become a nice truthful boy.'

'Why shouldn't I look at you?' asked Tom, defending himself. 'I thought you were asleep and I was wondering how you managed to get in last night'

without waking me. It *was* last night, wasn't it?"

'Yes, of course it was last night.'

'What time?'

'I don't know: it was dark: and *you* were pretty sound asleep. . . . I say, aren't you hungry? What about breakfast?'

Tom hurried to unpack the basket—the more readily in that it gave him time to think and helped him to conceal a growing anxiety.

'I brought two thermos flasks,' he mumbled, trying to speak in his ordinary voice. 'But the tea in them must be quite cold by now.' Having said this, it was as if he were afraid to risk further conversation, for in silence he spread out the contents of the basket, using the napkin Mrs. Deverell had wrapped round the sandwiches as a tablecloth, and drawing the table itself over beside the bed. He knew he was not behaving naturally, probably not looking natural, but he could not help it, he had grown all at once horribly nervous.

He fetched the chair and sat down. 'You haven't told me yet what brought you here last night,' said Philip.

'No,' answered Tom.

But he could not go on like this, and suddenly he blurted out, 'There are other things I have to tell you. You said your name was Philip Coombe.'

'Yes.'

'Well, it isn't.'

Philip glanced at him, surprised, but unperturbed. 'How do you know?'

'I do know.'

'Is that what's worrying you? Coombe is the name of the place I came from:—Coombe Bridge. Philip is the name of a dog, a retriever:—our dog at home. They were the first names that came into my head. There's nothing more in it than that.'

'Why did you invent a name at all?' asked Tom.

'Well, I thought it safer I suppose, and once I had done it, it didn't seem worth while changing back. Your uncle's name was another reason.'

'Uncle Stephen?'

‘Stephen Collet. It gave me a considerable scare, you know, when you mentioned it; and I knew I’d got to be jolly careful. It isn’t a common name, and I was pretty certain he must be a relation though I’d never heard of him. . . . How *did* you find out, by the way? I mean, how did you find out that I wasn’t Philip Coombe?’ He looked at Tom in sudden suspicion.

‘I—— I guessed,’ said Tom.

‘You must be a remarkably good guesser,’ Philip answered drily.

He said no more, but Tom felt that a gulf straightway had opened between them. Nor was he astonished. He was making a mess of everything. He looked timidly at Philip, but Philip did not return his look, he went on quietly with his breakfast. Tom grew more and more unhappy. And to think he had insisted on this meeting! All the questions he had looked forward to asking were forgotten. He did not want Philip now; he had never wanted anybody less; he wanted only Uncle Stephen.

His trouble doubtless was visible in his face, for Philip asked him, ‘What’s the matter?’

Tom was gazing down at his paper of sandwiches, but without even pretending to eat. ‘I’m not very hungry, I think.’

Philip did not question him further. He appeared to be perfectly content that Tom should withhold his confidence, and it was Tom himself who was forced to break the silence, for the unruffled countenance of the boy opposite him had begun to be almost terrifying. ‘Philip,’ he said, ‘don’t you remember *anything*?’

Philip shrugged his shoulders. ‘Why do you go on calling me that, if you know it isn’t my name?’

‘I can’t call you Uncle Stephen,’ said Tom miserably.

‘No; I dare say one Uncle Stephen is enough.’

‘Stephen, then: what does it matter!’

‘Nothing except that it *is* my name and you seemed rather particular about it a few minutes ago.’

Tom made a movement, half of impatience, half of hopelessness. ‘Listen,’ he began. ‘You must listen——’

‘I can listen a great deal better if you don’t get excited,’ said Philip. ‘You seem always either in one extreme or the other. If anybody has found out about me I suppose it’s your friend the gamekeeper—or whatever it is he

calls himself. But if he thinks I'm going to pay him to hold his tongue he's jolly well mistaken. For one thing, I've nothing to pay him with. At least—that's not absolutely true; but the little I have I'll require for myself.'

'It's not that: he's not that sort. And anyway he's not here now——'

'Not here? Where has he gone?'

Tom's hands clenched. 'Oh, I don't know. What does it matter where he has gone! Philip, do you remember talking about a dream—you called it a dream—a dream through which you got back to the past. Try to remember. It's important. *Awfully*. I can't tell you *how* important it is.'

Philip looked at him. 'Got back to what past?' he asked.

'To your own past. To—to what you are now.'

'Don't you think we'd better change the subject?'

'I knew you'd say something like that,' answered Tom bitterly. 'I'm trying to make you remember something—something that happened. If I could only even make you realize how much depends on it!' He spoke with all the self-control he could command, but the thought that he might *never* succeed created in his mind a hardly bearable tension.

'I don't even know what "*it*" is,' Philip replied, 'so I can't very well realize its importance. You seem to me to be talking nonsense, but I know you like to do that and I've no particular objection if it pleases you.' He had begun to look bored, however, and Tom's sense of defeat deepened.

'Don't you remember Uncle Stephen?' he asked.

'I never saw Uncle Stephen in my life.'

'Philip—Stephen I mean——'

'I haven't the ghost of an idea what's worrying you or what you've got into your head. That's the honest, absolute truth; and if you can't speak more plainly——'

'Don't interrupt me.'

'Well, don't talk so wildly then.'

'But I must. I must make you remember. And I'm speaking as plainly as I can.'

He paused, and for a minute or two sat with his eyes narrowed and his head turned slightly away from the other boy, as if concentrating all his

faculties on some interior vision.

‘I want you to think,’ he began slowly, ‘of a room—at night. . . . There is a lamp burning. . . . There is a bed—low and narrow—and beyond the bed—at the foot of it—a marble figure, broken, the arms missing, and the legs broken off below the knees—it is a statue of Hermes. There is someone sitting beside the bed—me. There is someone sitting up *in* the bed—you—with the pillows arranged behind you. You ask me to get a box from a cupboard in the wall, and I bring it to you—a flat wooden box ornamented with brass. Out of the box you take a leather case which opens when you press a spring, and inside is the picture of a boy painted, I think, on ivory—your own picture. There is a name on the inside of the lid—Stephen Collet.’

‘You’re right enough about the miniature,’ Stephen said with a dawning interest. ‘How on earth did you know? Father got it done as a birthday present for mother; but I’ll swear it’s never been out of our house—at least I shouldn’t think so. Mr. Collet *must* be a relation of ours—a cousin of my father’s, or something. And they must have written to him about me. Is *that* how you guessed who I was?’

‘Oh, don’t bother about how I guessed,’ said Tom desperately. ‘Think of what I’ve told you. Of the room. Think—think.’

‘Well, I *am* thinking.’

‘What do you remember?’

‘I suppose you’ll be furious if I tell you, but what I remember is a missionary who once stayed over the weekend with us: my father’s a parson, you know.’

‘Yes?’

‘This missionary had had a sunstroke. It happened in Africa, I believe. He recovered all right, but sometimes—— I say, there’s no use beginning to blub! I didn’t mean anything. . . . Tom!’ He jumped up and leaned over the younger boy’s chair.

Tom tried to smile. ‘It’s all right,’ he answered huskily. ‘Only—only—it’s *awful*; and it’s all my fault!’ He hid his head in his arms which were stretched out on the table.

‘What is awful? What has happened? Tom, old man, what *is* the matter?’

Tom looked up wildly. For a moment, surely, though faintly and through a rougher, younger voice, he had heard the voice of Uncle Stephen! But it was only Philip who stood there patting him on his shoulder.

‘If you’ve got into a scrape perhaps I can help you: I’m pretty well used to them.’

Tom did not lift his head. He felt too miserable even to say that he had not got into a scrape. . . . Uncle Stephen had warned him of the danger, but like an obstinate fool he had refused to listen. For one sickening moment he felt the full weight of having betrayed Uncle Stephen. If even he had had sufficient strength of mind to keep awake last night this might not have happened: but he had felt sleepy and so had slept. His bitterness was too great to admit of self-pity: he was no good: he had prated about faithfulness, and he hadn’t been able to be faithful to the one person he loved.

‘If you like I’ll go back to the Manor House with you,’ Philip—or Stephen—offered. ‘I’ll do anything you want.’

Tom sat up. He drew his hand across his eyes, leaving a black smudge, but a glimmer of hope had been created by these words. Was it not just possible that in Uncle Stephen’s own room something might happen; the cloud might be lifted; and if it broke for even an instant he believed all would be well.

‘Will you, Stephen?’ he said gently. ‘If you do I’ll—I’ll—— It’s very good of you.’

‘No it isn’t. Come on: we’ll go at once.’

Tom got up, ‘I’m sorry I can’t explain why I want you to come,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry about everything. I would try to explain only—it would be just like all the rest.’

‘Yes,’ said Stephen hastily, ‘don’t bother. Time enough when we see Mr. Collet.’

Tom followed him from the room, and they passed through the yard and round to the front of the house. Here Stephen abruptly thumped him on the back much as one might thump a dog. ‘It’s sure to be all right,’ he said, encouragingly. ‘You never know your luck. Did you tell him you were going to stay all night at the other house—Mr. Collet, I mean?’

‘Yes—no—I don’t know. . . . Stephen, dear, don’t talk to me please, I want to think.’

But all the thinking in the world, he knew, would help them little if this last experiment failed. What would happen then? Nobody would believe him. The whole thing was too unreal, too fantastic. He might call it an

accident, but it was an accident which upset every law of nature and made the plain solid earth no better than a quicksand.

They plunged out of sunshine into woodland shadow, walking on dark moss, with a green roof above them, and the rustling of leaves in their ears. These tree voices were softer, thicker and more blurred than they would be in autumn, when the leaves had grown thin and dry. This was the liquid murmur of life—rich, luxuriant. Stephen had begun to whistle and the clear notes were answered from overhead and every side by trills and pipings that wove a delicate arabesque of sweetness round his common tune.

Tom looked at his watch. It was after ten. An hour ago Mrs. Deverell would have discovered that he and Uncle Stephen were not in the house. . . . Unless Uncle Stephen *was* there—all the time—asleep—dreaming! That had not occurred to him before, and the thought made him slightly dizzy. Better to wait: better not to think: it was all so uncertain. . . .

He hurried on, a slender eager figure, with Stephen close behind him, but when they reached the edge of the shrubbery he stopped. In the distance he saw George McCrudden wheeling a barrow, and the sight somehow was faintly, temporarily reassuring. He gathered from it at any rate that there had been no alarm raised as yet, and from behind the taller sturdier Stephen, with his arms round him, and peeping over his shoulder, he gazed at the house.

‘What’s our next move?’ Stephen asked placidly.

‘We’ll go in,’ said Tom: but he did not stir till George had disappeared. ‘Thank you, Stephen, for coming with me.’

‘Oh, that’s all right. Only you’d better tell me what you want me to do.’

‘I—I don’t know yet.’

So much, indeed, depended on what Mrs. Deverell might already have done! And the first thing was to find out. While they were approaching the house his eyes searched window after window, but all were empty. Nor was there anybody in the porch—or in the hall. Suddenly Mrs. Deverell appeared.

She came out quickly from the dining-room at the sound of the closing door. ‘Why, whatever has happened, Master Tom?’ she cried. ‘And where’s Mr. Collet?’

Tom saw her glance at Stephen, who grinned cheerfully in response. But Mrs. Deverell had no time just then to give to strange boys. Her eyes

questioned Tom. ‘When Sally came and told me there was neither of you in the house I got quite a turn! I never *have* felt easy about leaving the master all alone at night, cut off from everything and everybody, without as much as a telephone in the house. There should be someone within call, even if it was only Robert. Suppose he was to be taken ill; or tramps were to break in!’

‘I’m within call,’ said Tom.

Mrs. Deverell looked as if she thought *that* made little difference. ‘When will the master be back?’ she asked.

It was the question Tom had been dreading. ‘He won’t be back. . . . At least I don’t know *when* he’ll be back. . . . Perhaps not for some time.’

He tried to make his news sound as ordinary as possible, but the effect was to bring Mrs. Deverell’s attention on him in a swoop. ‘Not for some time!’ she repeated. ‘He’ll be back for dinner, won’t he?’

Something inside Tom was behaving exactly like a guilty conscience. He forced himself to return Mrs. Deverell’s gaze, but his cheeks burned. ‘No—and I’ve had breakfast. Uncle Stephen was called away on business—very early. It was important—and—and I went part of the way with him to see him off.’

‘You mean he’s gone by the train!’ Mrs. Deverell exclaimed.

‘Yes—I mean, no. Earlier than that. . . . He went in a motor car. The one that brought the message. Very early. A—a little after five, I think.’

Mrs. Deverell’s astonishment increased. ‘Why, he’s never done that—not in all the years I was with him!’ she pronounced half incredulously.

Her voice, her expression, her whole manner, had begun to exasperate Tom. ‘I can’t help it,’ he answered. ‘It was quite sudden, or of course he would have told you.’ Then he added, to get everything over at once, ‘Philip is to stay with me till he comes back.’

‘But, Master Tom, your bed wasn’t slept in last night.’

Tom’s face grew sullen. It was just as if she had set a trap for him. ‘Yes it was,’ he contradicted. ‘I made it after I got up.’

Mrs. Deverell did not ask him why he had done so; she said no more; but Tom knew it wasn’t because she was satisfied. She didn’t *look* satisfied: she looked as if she had ceased to question him only because she saw he wasn’t going to tell her the truth. Her eyes turned from him to Stephen, and

immediately Tom realized how disreputable was Stephen's appearance. Fortunately Mrs. Deverell already knew about him—the boy at the other house—the boy for whom she had packed so many baskets. 'If you would let me have Master Philip's clothes,' she said, 'I could mend them and clean them.'

Tom was filled with gratitude. 'That's awfully decent of you, Mrs. Deverell. I *will* let you have them. My things will be too small for him, but he can wear a dressing-gown or pyjamas. Come, Philip.' And he hurriedly pushed him in the direction of the study.

They had not gone more than halfway down the passage, however, when Mrs. Deverell called after him, 'Master Tom, do you mean that Mr. Collet won't be back to-night?'

Tom turned round. He wondered how many times she was going to ask him this question, but with an effort he answered in his natural voice, 'I really don't know, Mrs. Deverell. I've told you all I *can* tell you. We're not to expect him till we see him. It may be some—some days.' He faltered again, on the last words, and he knew they left Mrs. Deverell as bewildered as ever. Again he pushed Stephen on in front of him, and opened the study door.

Once inside, he felt inclined to lock it behind them, but resisted the temptation. They stood there, side by side, Stephen looking nearly as puzzled as Mrs. Deverell herself.

'What's up?' he asked. 'I thought I was being brought here to *see* Mr. Collet, and now you say he mayn't be back for a week!'

'Yes.'

'But is it true? Some of what you told her was lies, and all of it *sounded* like lies.'

'I know it did. . . . Most of it was.'

'What's the idea, then? What *really* has happened?'

'I—I want you to wait, Stephen:—not to be impatient.' Tom's voice was almost imploring. 'If you are, I can't bear it. Will you try? Will you try even a little?'

Stephen looked uncomfortable. 'That's all right,' he answered. 'I know you've got something on your mind, and it seems to be something you're frightened to tell.'

Tom turned to him irresolutely. 'It's not that, but—— You—you don't —— This room doesn't remind you of anything?'

Stephen shrugged his shoulders: then he remembered his promise to be patient. 'That's the way you talked in the other house. It's no good. What on earth are you so scared about? Anyone would think you'd *done* something! Even if you have, I won't give you away.' He waited a moment, and at last, as if giving it up, 'Hadn't I better let her have my clothes?' he said.

'Not yet: there's something I want to do first.' Tom crossed the room and began to move his fingers tentatively over the dark panelling till he found what he sought. He pressed on one of the carved, flattened roses, which sank in, releasing the spring of the secret door.

Stephen, who had followed him, uttered an exclamation.

'It only leads to Uncle Stephen's bedroom,' said Tom dully. 'I'd better go first: it's very dark—or it will be when I shut the door. I must shut it, because Mrs. Deverell may come in.'

He did so, and then, striking a match, began to climb the steps. 'Will you hold a light for me, Stephen?' he said, when they had reached the top of the flight.

Another match flared up, and Tom, after some fumbling, opened the second door. This he did not trouble to close, but sat down on the side of the bed while Stephen, who seemed to be more pleased now with the way things were going, gazed curiously about him.

Tom did not speak. Nor did he look at Stephen who, after closing and opening the secret door several times, and inspecting much more briefly the statue of Hermes, was now at the window. But even without looking he knew his experiment had failed.

Stephen approached him. 'Well?' he asked, with a subdued expectation in his voice: 'Is this all?'

'Yes,' answered Tom.

'But you must have had *some* reason for bringing me here? What was it?'

'I thought——something might happen.'

'To me?'

'But I see now that it won't——unless——'

‘Unless what?’

Tom looked up at him. ‘Unless you sleep here.’

‘In this room? What do you expect to happen if I do sleep here? What do you *want* to happen? If you’d only tell me that, you know, instead of——’

‘I wish you would sit down, Stephen. I can’t talk to you while you’re standing up and moving about.’

Stephen sat down in the low chair where Tom himself had sat when Uncle Stephen was ill. ‘I’ll do anything you like,’ he said good-naturedly. Then a sudden thought occurred to him and he turned to the smaller boy, who was sitting on his two hands, his toes turned in, staring moodily at the opposite wall. ‘It’s not Mr. Collet who has done something, is it? He hasn’t gone away and left you, or anything like that? . . . But of course that’s nonsense,’ he added after a moment.

‘All the same, it *is* something like that,’ said Tom dejectedly, ‘and it was my fault. . . . I’m going to tell you about it. Will you promise to listen without saying anything till I’ve finished?’

‘I’ve been asking you to tell me for the last hour.’

‘Well, I’m going to do it now: I’m going to tell you everything—from the beginning: it’s the only way.’

But having announced his intention, he still, for a while, added nothing further. Stephen also remained dumb, leaning back in his chair, his legs stretched out, his hands in his pockets.

‘The first thing that happened,’ Tom began at length, ‘happened before I left home. . . .’ And with only an occasional pause, he told the adventure of himself and Uncle Stephen, from that first dream he had had in Gloucester Terrace down to his vigil in the empty house last night.

When he had finished there was a silence. Tom could not read from Stephen’s bent head what he was thinking, yet he could see that some kind of struggle was going on within him. Once he glanced up quickly, but he did not speak; and it was a strange glance, it might mean that he believed Tom to be crazy, for beneath its incredulity was a hint of aversion, perhaps of fear. At last he asked a question, in an oddly repressed voice. ‘What date is this—what year?’

It was a question which produced an electrical effect upon Tom. Why hadn’t he thought of it! *That*, of course, must settle the matter finally—at

least so far as convincing Stephen went. ‘Tell me what year you think it is,’ he asked breathlessly.

Stephen raised his head, but did not answer. Perhaps it was Tom’s eagerness, something in the bright intentness of his eyes—at all events there was visible in his own eyes a failure of confidence. Tom, with a hand that shook a little, fumbled in his jacket. He found a letter—two letters. Their envelopes were postmarked. He found a small calendar. ‘Look!’ he said; and Stephen looked.

Tom watched him with parted lips, but Stephen turned from him. ‘You see!’ said Tom.

Still Stephen did not answer. And then, unexpectedly, he flushed—deeply, painfully—which was what Tom had never seen him do before. He rose to his feet, walked to the window, and leaned out. Tom watched him without a word. Did Stephen mind? He hadn’t thought of it like that, somehow, but his heart smote him now, and he too got up. After what seemed a long time Stephen turned back to the room. Whatever he may have been thinking or feeling was no longer visible in his face; the countenance Tom saw was filled only with a half-mocking bravado. ‘This,’ he said, walking up to Tom and catching him by the arms, ‘is going to be the greatest sport that ever was.’

Tom gazed mutely while Stephen rocked him, unresisting, to and fro. His eyes grew rounder and more and more filled with consternation. Among all the effects he had imagined as resulting from his story, this at least he had not dreamed of. He gazed up at Stephen in a kind of fascination till Stephen, still gripping him closely, gave a short laugh. ‘Don’t you see,’ he said—‘don’t you see that however it goes, we’re bound to be up against it? *Nobody* is going to believe such a yarn. Why, I don’t believe it myself, though I’ll try to make the most of it while it lasts. That is, if it *does* last; for I’ve an idea I’m going to wake up soon.’

‘But——’ Tom stammered.

‘But what? I must say you don’t look too pleased about it!’

‘But—— It’s *real*, Stephen. And—and—everything is still where it was.’

‘How do you mean, still where it was? Everything is jolly well *not* where it was.’

‘I mean—you still have to get back.’

‘Get back! So far as that goes——’ Then, as he saw the expression on Tom’s face, ‘Oh Lord!’ he groaned, ‘you don’t mean to say you would rather I was that old——’

‘Stop!’ cried Tom, his cheeks flaming. ‘If you say another word——’

‘You’ll hit me, I suppose. . . . After all, I’m talking about myself.’

‘You’re not. You’ve no right—— I only *told* you so that you could try to get back again.’

Stephen released him. ‘Aren’t you asking a good deal? . . . Besides, I *am* Uncle Stephen.’

‘You’re not,’ cried Tom. ‘You’re not even like him. Uncle Stephen didn’t *want* to become a boy again. He only did it to please me. It was all my fault. And I only wanted it just once—just this last time, for a little.’

‘Well, you’ve got what you want,’ said Stephen. ‘There’s no use making a fuss: it’s not *my* doing. Besides, if I’m going back I’ll go back, and if I’m not I won’t. To talk of “trying” is silly. If it happens at all, it will happen as it did before—when I’m asleep. At least I should think so.’ A sudden suspicion appeared in his eyes. ‘Is that why you want me to sleep here?’

‘Yes, it is,’ said Tom brokenly.

Stephen contemplated him for a minute or two with a slight frown. His mood appeared to change. ‘Look here——’ But he checked himself and put his arm round Tom’s shoulder. ‘Why won’t I do as I am?’ he coaxed ingenuously. ‘Don’t you like me? You always seemed to.’

‘Yes I do.’

‘Well, then, what’s the matter?’

‘I could never make you understand,’ said Tom, turning away.

Stephen looked perplexed. Again he thought. ‘No, I suppose not,’ he admitted, with a shade of reluctance. ‘You’re such a queer chap. . . . Of course, I know you were Uncle Stephen’s darling. Still—— I say, if I promise to give the thing a chance, will that do? If I sleep in this room tonight? Hang it all, you can’t expect me to do more than that! There isn’t any more *to* do.’

‘You *will* do it?’ Tom gulped.

‘Yes, if I say I will.’

‘And—and suppose nothing does happen,’ Tom went on, ‘you won’t go away from me?’

‘Go away! Why should I go away?’

‘I mean, you won’t leave me, you’ll stay with me?’

‘For how long?’

‘You won’t go away at all—ever. All that—about going to sea—you’ll give that up?’

Stephen hesitated. ‘I believe it would be better if I *did* clear out.’

‘No,’ cried Tom in sudden alarm. He gripped Stephen by the wrist and held him. ‘Promise that you won’t leave me.’

‘But why?’

‘Because you must.’

‘But I don’t see what good it can do. If I’m going to remain as I am now you won’t want me hanging about. After all, it’s only Uncle Stephen you want. Honestly, I think it would be better if I kept to my first plan.’

‘You can’t,’ said Tom, ‘you *can’t* go.’ What was in his mind was that he must be near Stephen—that he must be there when Uncle Stephen returned—but it seemed impossible to say this, and what he did say was, ‘If you go I’ll go with you.’

Stephen welcomed it as the happiest of solutions. ‘Of course! Why not? You see, it’s all very well for us to promise that we’ll keep together, but we won’t be *allowed* to keep together—at any rate, not here.’

Tom stood thinking. ‘If it comes to the worst——’ he began.

‘Yes? By “the worst” you mean me, I suppose:—me remaining as I am?’

‘I’m sorry, Stephen. I know it must seem beastly of me to talk like this. . . . But—we must make *some* plan.’

‘Well, I’ve just made one. Or rather, you made it.’

‘What?’

‘To go away together.’

Tom looked down. ‘How are we going to live?’ he asked. ‘Uncle Horace won’t give me any of my own money.’

‘We’d have to rough it, of course.’

Tom did not reply, but he knew he had small capacity for roughing it; at least, not in the way Stephen meant. To cadge for odd jobs, for food and a sleeping place—such a prospect might hold no terrors for Stephen, but *he* had not the physique for it. He was far from sickly, but it did not take a great deal to knock him up. One thorough wetting would be sufficient. Stephen might be able to work his way alone—in fact, Uncle Stephen *had* done so—but with Tom as a drag upon him it would be hopeless.

‘What I’d like best,’ he said, ‘would be for us to stay on here—at any rate in the meantime—if it could be arranged with Mr. Knox.’

‘What has Mr. Knox to do with it?’

‘Well, I told you he was going to be my tutor—after the holidays—and he could tutor us both.’

‘I see.’ Stephen’s tone was unenthusiastic. ‘Well—what then?’

‘Then—I suppose—we’d be his pupils,’ Tom replied. But he said it half-heartedly, for he knew himself it was not a brilliant conclusion. Nor could he add that long before the holidays were over Uncle Stephen would have returned, though this was what he believed—what he *must* believe, or else his whole world would be plunged in darkness.

‘It sounds all right for you,’ Stephen admitted, ‘but it’s not particularly like *my* plan. I want to go abroad; to see places.’

‘But you’ve *done* all that, Stephen,’ Tom reminded him. ‘It’s over.’

‘So *you* say.’ Stephen knit his brows for a minute; then he said, ‘At any rate, it doesn’t much matter. I think you’ve forgotten *one* difficulty.’

‘I know what you’re going to say, but would you be willing to try it?’

‘Oh yes; perhaps.’

‘Then that’s all right.’

‘It isn’t all right. You needn’t imagine your guardians will agree to it. At a pinch, and to save trouble, or out of kindness, somebody might offer to help me in my original plan of going to sea; but that will be the most.’

‘You mustn’t mention anything about going to sea.’

‘And after all, you can’t blame them. Even if this business is true—— Look here, I’m going back to Coombe Bridge.’

‘Surely you’ve had proof enough!’ Tom expostulated.

‘I can’t help it. I know I’ve had proof. At least there’s that calendar you showed me, and the portrait. Still, I can’t realize it, and perhaps if I saw the old place, and that it had changed. . . . You know—if what you say is true—my father and mother must be dead,’ he went on in a lower voice. ‘Everybody must be dead. I never thought of that. It’s rather—I don’t like it.’

‘We’ll go to Coombe Bridge then,’ Tom promised hurriedly. ‘We’ll go together. . . . Stephen, I’m most frightfully sorry. The whole thing is my fault. But whatever happens I’m going to look after you.’

Stephen did not answer. Only he put his hand on Tom’s shoulder, and between his finger and thumb pressed lightly the lobe of his ear. Tom started. He drew in his breath, for that particular caress was strangely familiar to him, it was associated in his mind only with one person, and on Stephen’s part he knew it had been unconscious. ‘I mean,’ he muttered, ‘that I’ll be quite comfortably off later on and—’

But Stephen was not listening: he was looking straight before him. ‘It’s strange,’ he said, ‘but I’ve a faint, faint—’ He broke off abruptly and stood there, his hand still on Tom’s shoulder. ‘No—it’s no good. For just a minute I thought—’ He awoke from his reverie. ‘I say, there’s not much use in our hanging about up here all day. Let’s go out or something.’

‘It must be dinner-time,’ said Tom. ‘I believe I heard the gong. We’d better go and see.’

But he spoke so much more cheerfully that Stephen turned to him in surprise.

CHAPTER XXII

The day was over—the evening too—and Tom sat alone in his own room. He had put on a dressing-gown over his pyjamas and was turning the leaves of a book Mr. Knox had lent him, glancing absent-mindedly at the pictures. The book was *The Prince and the Pauper*, and since saying good-night to Stephen he had read fifteen chapters of it, a hundred and forty-eight pages. It was now twenty-five to two.

Earlier than he had expected, for he seemed to have been reading for hours. Yet all the time something which had nothing to do with the adventures of either prince or pauper had been floating in and out of his thoughts, and the moment he closed the book this something took complete possession of them.

His face grew troubled. Presently the book slipped from his knee to the floor, and he let it lie there. . . .

What was happening in Uncle Stephen's room? Could he persuade Stephen to repeat the experiment if to-night it failed? These questions he asked himself, and though he could not answer them they led to others. Supposing the experiment *did* fail, how many days could they count on before Mrs. Deverell began to ask further questions? Not many, he thought; and if he tried to put her off a second time very likely she would go to Mr. Flood. It might be wiser for him to take that step himself: certainly it would be well to get *somebody* on their side. But who was there? Uncle Horace and his step-mother were impossible: there remained only Mr. Flood and Mr. Knox, and Tom felt that neither of these would give him the kind of help he needed. The lawyer, though friendly, was dry and matter-of-fact: probably the first thing he would do would be to communicate with Uncle Horace. Mr. Knox might be sworn to secrecy, but——

The chief difficulty, as Stephen himself had pointed out, was Stephen. Even if he resumed the name of Philip Coombe, he still would be asked to give an account of himself—to explain why he had been living at the other house and where he had come from. How could he do this! How could he give any account that would bear examination! As Philip he had no past—no home, no parents, no friends—there was nobody he could refer to, nobody who could speak for him, nobody who had even seen him except Tom, and, once, Deverell. If he said he had run away from home, he would be asked where this imaginary home was, and the first inquiry would reveal its non-

existence. Mr. Knox of course knew, just as Mrs. Deverell and Sally knew, that there had been a boy staying at the other house, but that would make no difference. The questions would be asked just the same. 'As if it mattered *where* he came from!' Tom sighed. Tobit had not asked his angel where he had come from, nor who were his relations. The angel had appeared and Tobit had taken his hand and they had walked by the bank of the river: and the angel had a fishing-rod and they had caught a fish. Then they had rescued a woman from her demon lover and cured Tobit's father of his blindness. . . . He could not remember the rest of the story, but he knew everybody had been happy because nobody had asked questions. . . . The earth *might* be a kind of heaven! It wasn't really impossible. Happiness depended on kindness and understanding and—and—on not insisting that everybody should have the same feelings and thoughts. . . .

But these reflections did not throw much light on the present dilemma. *Perhaps* Uncle Stephen would be there in the morning, and in that case nobody outside the Manor need ever know he had left it. It would be sufficient to tell Mrs. Deverell that he had come back after she and Sally had gone home. Tom felt a sudden desire to visit the other room and *see* if he had come back. The impulse brought him to his feet. It held him trembling with excitement, suspense, and longing. It *might* be that Uncle Stephen was there now! He took a step forward and then stopped. He must be prepared to find only Stephen: he must not be disappointed if he found only Stephen. Nor would it follow, because Uncle Stephen had not yet returned, that he would not have returned by morning. The change might take place gradually. It was only three hours since he had left Stephen, and Stephen might have lain awake for a long time. With such warnings he fortified himself, determined not to move until he had gained complete self-command.

He lit a candle, crossed the room, and opened his door. On the threshold he stood for a minute, peering out into the darkness. His naked feet made no sound on the thick carpet. He walked along the passage till he reached the broad central flight of stairs descending to the shadowy hall, but here again something seemed to hold him, and to hold him longer. Noiseless though his movements had been, he felt they had attracted attention. Not human attention, but that of the house. It *knew* he was there—knew what he was doing, just as each evening it knew of the departure of Mrs. Deverell and Sally. His unwonted activity at an hour when he should have been in bed and asleep had disturbed it; it knew someone was abroad, that something unusual was happening, and there had been a moment perhaps when the nature of its response had hung in the balance. Then, as he had crept on from

one to the other of its outspread wings, there had been a soft sigh of recognition. For it was Uncle Stephen's house, and it regarded him just as Uncle Stephen's watchdog would have regarded him—as belonging to Uncle Stephen, as belonging to itself.

He had never been afraid of it. Even now, the necromantic beauty of its shadowy stair and glimmering window held him only because it seemed to breathe of Uncle Stephen's presence. The house protected him; it would allow no evil thing to harm him. He entered the passage which led to Uncle Stephen's room. He reached Uncle Stephen's door and gently turned the handle. Not hurriedly, but without hesitation, and holding his candle before him and above the level of his eyes, he approached the bed.

He stood there for a moment with held breath. He had made no sound either in opening or closing the door; the sleeper had not stirred; but the sleeper was Stephen. One arm lay outside the linen counterpane: Stephen's face was flushed, his breathing low and sweet. As Tom stood gazing down at him his heart melted. What dreams were passing through that mind? Probably none: he was sleeping too soundly to be dreaming; but he looked so young and guileless!

Tom turned away, and the light of his candle floated over the watching Hermes. He approached nearer till it reached the slightly bowed head. He took off his dressing-gown and knelt down before the pedestal, placing his candle on the floor beside him. . . .

He remembered the night of his arrival at the Manor. The memory brought with it a longing that he might again be blessed. Or perhaps memory itself had been quickened by that longing, which grew and grew, while with shut eyes he waited. A spirit was near him—whether the spirit of Uncle Stephen or the spirit of the God, he did not know. But the response he yearned for washed over him in wave after wave, brimming the room, holding him closely clasped and breathing into his breath. . . .

He remembered Uncle Stephen's words—that in approaching the God in a spirit of love and worship he became a priest. He remembered that in ancient Greece there had been boy priests. He remembered the beautiful opening of Euripides' play, where, after the speech of Hermes, the young boy Ion decorates the porch of Apollo's temple with laurel branches, drops the lustral water on the ground, and chases the birds away. The scene was infinitely lovely as it floated before him now. It was as if the sunlight of that morning long ago had been caught and imprisoned in the words, to burst out with renewed glory when their spell was whispered. And all this loveliness

was eternal. It could never fade until the earth grew cold and dead, or some cloud descended on the world, darkening men's minds until nobody was left who sought for and loved it. . . .

His troubles dropped from him. He believed that the God had welcomed him, and was his lover, his friend. This was Hermes the shepherd, Hermes who, Uncle Stephen had said, guarded young boys, and would guard him. His eyes half shut, and on his face was a strange dreamy expression, gentle and happy. Nobody had ever seen him quite like this, and nobody ever would, for he was more than half out of his body, on the confines of another world. The whole house, he now knew, was the spiritual creation of Uncle Stephen and this God; and here, in this room, he was in its very heart, which was beating in tune with his own.

When he rose at last, his knees were stiff and sore and for a moment he staggered, but it was as if his mind had been bathed in some fresh mountain stream, and he knew that he could sleep. Putting the candle on the table by the bed, he looked down again at the slumbering Stephen. To Tom the whole room was still humming and vibrating with a secret life. This impression was so vivid, indeed, as to produce in him the strange feeling that merely by stretching out his hands he could make the surrounding air break into a flame. But Stephen slept on. Nothing that had taken place had disturbed him. It had passed over him and round him, leaving him untouched, as the fire had played harmlessly over the wise men in their burning fiery furnace. And gradually for Tom too its waves began to subside. His mind grew quiet, and he became all at once aware that his God was pouring sleep upon him—softly, ceaselessly, compellingly. Tom's eyes slid round to him, liquid and dark. The pale, honey-coloured marble was still warm and breathing, but the spirit was only lingering there till Tom himself should be safely tucked in and his eyes sealed. 'Sleep—sleep,' a faint voice whispered. 'Sleep——'

Tom smiled drowsily. He must go back to his own room; but somehow his own room seemed miles and miles away, and to leave his present sanctuary would be like going out into a cold wet winter's night.

There was no longer anything but silence. The whisper had died away, but its command was overwhelming. Tom's chin sank forward on his breast. He blinked and opened his eyes: he was dropping asleep on his feet. Stephen had pushed aside one of the pillows, which had fallen to the floor. Tom replaced it: then crept under the clothes and blew out the candle.

CHAPTER XXIII

The miracle had not happened: Tom seemed to know that even in his dreams, for he heaved a deep sigh before his eyes opened. Instinctively he clung to the sleepiness that prevented complete realization. He put his arms round Stephen's neck and wriggled himself closer till their heads lay on one pillow. He hoped it was very early, and that they need not get up for a long time. He did not want to awake; the day before him, he knew, was going to be full of trouble; he put his other arm round Stephen and buried his nose in the short crisp hair above his ear. He listened to twittering bird notes, he felt rather than saw the drowsy sunlight floating through the open window.

But Stephen would not let him stay like this. Tom might snuggle up against him and murmur that he wanted to go to sleep again, but Stephen was wide awake. He proposed getting up and going for a swim. 'I had the rummiest dream,' he declared. 'At least it seems so now.' He gave Tom a little shake. 'Are you listening? Wake up!'

'I'm not asleep,' said Tom. But a warm delightful languor was diffused through his body, and he nestled closer.

'You're next door to it. Remember, I don't intend to tell you this twice. . . . You'll be sorry, too, because it's very much in your line: in fact you were in it. . . . All right, I'll not tell you. And please don't breathe into my ear.'

Tom slightly altered his position. 'Is that better?' he asked.

'Not very much, and I don't see why you aren't in your own bed. You certainly weren't here when I went to sleep last night. . . . It was about your uncle—my dream. I dreamt I was in the room downstairs—the room with all the books—and you were there too.'

'Yes?' Tom still kept his eyes tight shut.

'Don't you see?' said Stephen, giving him another shake. 'Don't you see how queer it was? Of course it must have been the result of what you told me yesterday, but it was queer all the same.'

'Why?' Tom whispered. 'I don't see anything queer about it.'

'Well, it was: you'll understand why presently. Do lie over a bit: I'm far too hot: besides, you're choking me.'

Tom moved grudgingly. ‘You might be more comfortable,’ he mumbled. But Stephen had spoiled his own drowsy sensations, and he lay on his back blinking up at the ceiling. ‘What happened?’ he asked.

Stephen stretched out his arms and sat up. He looked down at Tom. ‘Nothing happened. I was just there: it’s not that that was queer.’

‘Was I in the room?’

‘Yes; I’ve said so already: I knew you weren’t listening.’

‘What was I doing?’

‘You were sitting on the hearthrug untangling a heap of string and winding it round a stick.’

‘I did do that once.’

‘Very likely. Most people have wound a ball of string.’

‘What was queer then?’ said Tom, with a shade of impatience. ‘Was Uncle Stephen there?’

‘I’m coming to that. . . . Uncle Stephen was there in one sense.’ He paused deliberately, but Tom would ask no further questions. ‘He was there in the sense that you called *me* Uncle Stephen. . . . But what really was queer was the way I thought of you.’

‘Thought of me?’

‘Yes. Though I don’t mean “thought” exactly. It was really the way I *felt* about you. I was frightfully fond of you. I didn’t know anybody *could* care for another person so much.’

To this Tom made no answer, and Stephen after a moment went on. ‘You see, I’ve always liked you quite well; but this was a good deal more. In fact, it strikes me now as rather absurd.’

‘Yes, it would,’ said Tom.

‘Well, hang it all, you’re not an angel! You’re a pretty averagely bad boy—with faint streaks of a better nature.’

Tom buried his face in the pillow. ‘Is that all?’ he asked in a muffled voice.

‘Yes, I think so.’ Stephen kicked aside the clothes and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. He took off his pyjamas—Uncle Stephen’s they were—and proceeded to test the muscles of his arms. Tom, peeping out at

him, watched this latter performance moodily. Somehow it had the effect of making the return of Uncle Stephen infinitely improbable, though last night that return had seemed imminent. But nothing could be more remote from Uncle Stephen than this boy light-heartedly parading his nakedness and rejoicing in the strength of his body.

Stephen stood beside the bed, looking down at him and smiling. 'Well?' he said.

'Well what?' muttered Tom. 'Aren't you going to put some clothes on?'

Stephen smiled more broadly. 'Not at present. Aren't you going to get up?'

Tom slowly assumed a sitting posture, and still more slowly put his feet to the ground. Stephen bent down and, half lifting him, pulled him out into the middle of the floor. 'Look here,' he said, 'don't be so frightfully dumpy about it.'

'I can't help it,' Tom muttered. The pleasanter Stephen was to him, the more difficult everything became. He half wished he would be *unpleasant*—or at any rate that he didn't look so nice. He wouldn't look at him. He put his hand against Stephen's breast and pushed him back almost roughly. 'I'm going to my own room. *Your* bathroom is the first door on the left.'

'Come and take your bath with me.'

'No. . . . Leave me *alone*, Stephen! You're a bully—that's what you are.'

'Well, I like that! When a minute ago you were hugging me.'

'Yes, and you wouldn't let me.' He struggled free and, picking up his dressing-gown, ran along the passage back to his own room.

He got into his bath and let the water run over him. But he did not enjoy it, his mind was too full of worries and perplexities. A few days ago he would have loved having Stephen here! And now, though Stephen was far more friends with him than he had ever been before, he was getting no good out of him, it was all wasted, because he couldn't be happy. While he was drying himself and dressing he tried to review the situation dispassionately. How *could* it go on as it was? Mrs. Deverell would think it strange that there was no letter for him this morning from Uncle Stephen. Perhaps she would expect one herself. And it would be only natural for Uncle Stephen to write her a note to explain matters and give instructions about what was to be done in his absence. Tom wondered if the news of his absence had already leaked out. With Mrs. Deverell, Sally, George and Robert all knowing about

it, it could not be long before it became public property. It was not as if such a thing had ever happened before. It would be regarded as an event, a mystery: Mrs. Deverell seemed to have taken that view from the first. It would be discussed; there would be all kinds of gossip; soon it would reach the ears of Mr. Flood and Mr. Knox, and Mr. Knox very likely would think it his duty to call—not out of curiosity, but just out of friendliness. On the top of this there was the money problem. Tom knew nothing of how the house was run—whether Mrs. Deverell received an allowance for household expenses, or whether Uncle Stephen paid for things himself by cheque. He supposed the bills could be allowed to run on, but he knew George and Robert were paid weekly, for he had seen Uncle Stephen paying them. What was he to do about that? They would need their wages for their own expenses, and it wouldn't be fair to keep them waiting. He would have to borrow from somebody—and the only person he could think of was Mr. Flood. Poor Tom, as he completed his toilet and surveyed himself in the mirror of his wardrobe, looked as if all the cares of the world were on his shoulders.

He came downstairs to breakfast and instead of sympathy found Mrs. Deverell regarding him with a grim reserve, and Stephen with amusement. True, the amusement was mingled with liking—Stephen had distinctly altered in this respect—but that didn't make it more helpful so far as their problem was concerned. Tom wished Mrs. Deverell a subdued good-morning and took Uncle Stephen's place at the head of the table. He began to fumble with the tea-pot, which Mrs. Deverell at once removed from his hands.

'No letter from your uncle?' Stephen inquired pleasantly.

Tom blushed and gave him an angry look, but he was obliged to answer, because Mrs. Deverell was listening. Why couldn't she clear out? 'The post isn't in yet,' he muttered. 'Anyway I don't expect a letter for a day or two.'

He wondered if he could forge a letter. It might help to keep Mrs. Deverell quiet, and he had gone so far that it did not seem to matter much if he added forgery to his other crimes. When the meal was over he and Stephen went out on to the lawn. On an ordinary occasion Tom would have been full of suggestions for passing the morning. There was still his raft to be built, there was still the river to be explored. But now he felt too restless to settle down to anything, and at the same time was conscious of a reluctance to go far from the house, though nothing was to be gained by loitering there, and he knew it would be better if he could distract his mind from brooding.

‘Did you remember to make your bed, Stephen?’ he suddenly asked.

‘No. Why? I didn’t know I was supposed to make it.’

Tom sighed. ‘It’s only that Mrs. Deverell may think it queer that you slept in Uncle Stephen’s room.’

‘Shall I go back and make it now?’

‘No, it doesn’t matter: she’s sure to have discovered it by now. Anyway I forgot to *unmake* mine, so she’ll know where we both were.’

‘Then you didn’t go to bed last night after you left me?’

‘No.’

‘What were you doing?’

‘I sat up reading till I came to your room.’

Stephen laughed. ‘It seems to me we’re pretty poor conspirators.’

‘It’s hard to remember everything,’ said Tom. ‘She can think what she likes,’ he added gloomily. ‘I don’t care.’

‘Of course not. Anybody can see you don’t care.’

‘Well, I can’t help it,’ muttered Tom. He sat down on a garden bench and stared morosely at a thrush trying to swallow an uncomfortably large worm. But he felt Stephen was right and that he was not showing a proper spirit. It wasn’t as if he didn’t *know* Uncle Stephen was coming back. There had been more than one sign to encourage him. There had been his vigil of last night. There had been those few minutes yesterday when Stephen had seemed just on the point of recalling everything. He hadn’t succeeded; the result had been only two or three unintelligible words; but still—especially when taken with the dream he had told Tom that morning—there had been enough to prove he was not *completely* Stephen. A final state of equilibrium had not been reached; *some* kind of spiritual ebb and flow must be going on under the surface. Of course, it might be that Uncle Stephen was losing not gaining power in this conflict, but Tom would not believe that. The chief impediment, he felt, was that the boy who had dropped down now on to the green bench beside him and was gazing idly into the distance, did not *want* to be anything but what he was. He wasn’t trying. He was just enjoying himself, and enjoying teasing Tom, and from all Uncle Stephen had told him Tom knew that on those other occasions the will and the desire had been primary agents.

Stephen *had* become very quiet all of a sudden! And it was not like him to sit like this. Through the cool, bright sunshine there came the sound of Robert whistling a hymn tune. Robert himself remained invisible: he invariably did. He seemed to live and conduct all his labours in thickets and behind bushes: he was the shyest person Tom had ever met. Tom stole a cautious glance at Stephen; but he did not want to disturb him, and remained quiet as a mouse. Robert's tune also had ceased. Tom turned ever so little so that he could watch Stephen's face. What was it that made the chief attraction of a human face? Was it the line or the colour or the expression? Why should the dirt on Stephen's hands, where unconsciously he had been rubbing them against the iron bench, be pleasant? Dirty hands weren't as a rule pleasant. The remarkable reflection occurred to Tom that Stephen would still be beautiful—to him at any rate—if he were dirty all over. That was strange, though he remembered he had always found young chimney-sweeps attractive: their dirty faces made their eyes so extraordinarily bright. But this was the kind of thought he had to keep to himself. There were a good many thoughts he had learned to keep to himself. Not that he would have minded telling them to Uncle Stephen. Uncle Stephen was the only person with whom he had ever felt there was no need to conceal anything. He was, too, the only person who had ever really loved him. His mother had loved him, of course, and Deverell too had loved him, but they had only loved part of him, because they had only known part of him. Uncle Stephen knew all—good, bad, and indifferent.

A hideous screech from a motor horn interrupted Tom's cogitations. Surely it couldn't be a visitor to the Manor! The only possible visitor was Mr. Knox, and *he* rode a bicycle. There was no doubt of it, however; a car had entered the avenue, and Tom in alarm gazed fixedly at the point where it would come into view.

There was another hoot. It was not Mr. Flood's car; it was a big car; and next moment it swept round the corner and sped on to the house. Tom uttered a faint, protesting exclamation. But really it was sickening! For there, in the driver's seat, spick and span in dark blue uniform, sat the dour and saturnine Shanks. Simultaneously he felt Stephen's body tauten and, turning, saw that his face had lost its absent-mindedness and become intensely alert.

'Don't,' he murmured, not quite knowing what he meant, only that he was sure Stephen had become filled with a zest for action and would do or say something irremediable.

'Don't what?' Stephen answered.

‘Don’t do anything,’ Tom completed feebly.

At the same time he held out a restraining hand. ‘It’s Uncle Horace and Mr. Knox,’ he said. ‘But they haven’t seen us.’

Stephen had half risen. He shook off Tom’s hand: his face was alive with curiosity and excitement. ‘What’s that thing they’re in? I never saw anything like it. How does it work? I’m going to have a look at it.’

‘No, no,’ Tom implored him. ‘It’s only a motor car. You’ll see plenty of them. *Please*, Stephen, stay where you are.’

Stephen submitted, but not without a visible struggle, and meanwhile the car drew up and the two visitors got out. They went straight into the porch.

‘What are we going to do?’ whispered Tom. ‘I never dreamt of Uncle Horace coming. He can’t possibly have heard——’

‘Don’t worry; it will be all right.’

But how was it going to be all right? Tom couldn’t imagine anything more all wrong! ‘You don’t know Uncle Horace!’ he said, casting a covetous glance at the shrubbery, ‘He’s far cleverer than either Mr. Flood or Mr. Knox. He’ll find out the whole thing in about two ticks.’

‘He won’t. You leave it to me. Just tell them what you told Mrs. Deverell.’

Stephen spoke confidently, even with a mysterious elation, which inspired in Tom the utmost misgiving. But he had no time to inquire into its source, for Uncle Horace and Mr. Knox had already ended their colloquy with Mrs. Deverell and were now bearing down upon them. The curate waved his hand, and Tom had sufficient presence of mind to wave in return, but he felt a weakness in his stomach as he rose to his feet.

Stephen gave him a shove. ‘Don’t stand there staring at them as if you were stuffed! Go and meet them. What are you in such a pee about?’

But Tom still hesitated.

‘I tell you it will be all right,’ Stephen went on impatiently. ‘That is, if you don’t give the whole show away at the very start.’

‘I won’t,’ Tom promised, but he felt he would, or at least that it was extremely likely. He followed Stephen’s injunctions, however, and advanced to meet his visitors.

Mr. Knox greeted him with extreme friendliness. So, for that matter, did Uncle Horace, who radiated geniality in an astonishing manner. ‘Good morning, Tom. I suppose you’re surprised to see me. But I ran down this time to pay Mr. Knox a visit.’

‘I’m very glad to see you, Uncle Horace,’ Tom replied faintly.

‘Yes—yes. We’ve had our little quarrels, but I don’t think we’re enemies yet. Our last meeting was unfortunate, but I dare say there were faults on both sides.’

‘There were faults on my side at any rate,’ said Tom.

‘Odious little prig!’ he thought immediately afterwards, but Uncle Horace positively beamed. ‘Your step-mother sent her love to you. I told her I didn’t think I’d be seeing you—but there it is. Jane sent hers also: she wanted me to bring her.’

‘I hope they are very well,’ said Tom.

‘Very well, thank you: very well indeed.’

A sudden pause followed this exchange of amenities, and for a moment nephew and uncle regarded each other a trifle self-consciously.

‘Did you drive down this morning, Uncle Horace?’ Tom inquired, still in the same flute-like tones. ‘You must have made a very early start.’

‘No, no: arrived yesterday. But we had a break-down a few miles out of Kilbarron and were late. So, as Shanks seemed doubtful about the return journey, and the hotel looked passable, I decided to put up there for the night. Shanks wanted to overhaul the car, and that gave him plenty of time.’

‘Uncle Stephen isn’t here,’ said Tom, lowering his eyes. ‘I suppose Mrs. Deverell told you.’

‘Yes. She told us he mightn’t be back for a day or two.’

‘At least,’ Tom amended.

But Uncle Horace’s attention had veered towards the unknown boy hovering in the background, and Tom performed an introduction. ‘This is Stephen—Philip, I mean,’ he said nervously.

‘Philip Stephen,’ Uncle Horace repeated, holding out his hand.

The mistake was instantly corrected by Stephen himself. ‘No, sir; Stephen Collet. Philip’s only a kind of nickname.’

Tom drew a quick breath. Luckily nobody was looking at him, for he knew his face had betrayed the shock Stephen's unexpected avowal had given him. 'He's my friend,' he stammered. 'He's staying with me. Mr. Knox knows about him.'

The moment he had made this speech he realized that it, too, was wrong—sounded as if he were apologising for Stephen, vouching for him. Mr. Knox noticed his embarrassment and came to the rescue. 'You're the boy who has been living in the other house?' he said, shaking hands with Stephen in his turn. 'Tom told me about you, but I don't think he mentioned your name. It's an odd coincidence, for I suppose really you are no relation of Mr. Collet's. I remember he told me Tom was his only nephew.'

'So he is,' Uncle Horace chimed in.

'My father was a relation,' Stephen answered quietly.

Uncle Horace looked at him, but made no reply. Mr. Knox's scrutiny was more prolonged and ruminative. 'Forgive me for staring, Stephen,' he apologized, 'but——' He turned to Uncle Horace. 'Don't you see a likeness?'

'A likeness?' Uncle Horace hesitated. 'A likeness to Mr. Collet, do you mean? Well, I have only met him once, you know.' He paused again. 'Still—now you mention it—— Yes, perhaps——'

'To me it is striking,' said Mr. Knox. 'As a matter of fact I was trying to think of whom he reminded me even before I heard his name. The very unusual colour of the eyes—so dark a blue. And the shape of the forehead——'

'Won't you come in, Uncle Horace,' Tom suggested desperately, but Uncle Horace brushed the interruption aside with a gesture. 'Your father, you say, is a relative of Mr. Collet's?' he questioned, his eyes fixed on Stephen's face.

'Yes, sir. He *was* a relative; but both he and my mother are dead. My father was Mr. Collet's son.'

'His son!'

Tom drew back. Stephen had deliberately done this, and it left him helpless. It was the plan, he supposed, he had concocted a few minutes ago—the plan which was to set everything right! Well, if assurance could do it, the assurance was there. Stephen's gaze was serene and steadfast, his face unclouded. Tom waited in a kind of angry suspense for what would come

next, but to his astonishment it came in Uncle Horace's suavest tones. 'I always understood Mr. Collet had never married.'

'No, sir. My father was his natural son.'

Tom choked back the protest that rose to his lips. How could he protest, even though he believed Stephen had invented this story wantonly—because he enjoyed it?

Uncle Horace had turned away. His gaze rested with unusual dreaminess on the quiet sunlit park. Mr. Knox, too, looked only puzzled. Tom's head drooped.

He followed the others slowly, for they had begun to walk back towards the bench he and Stephen had vacated. They reached it, and Uncle Horace and Mr. Knox sat down, before another word was spoken. Even then, Uncle Horace's first remark was more like a continuation of his private thoughts than a question. 'Both your parents are dead, you say?'

Tom had squatted down on the grass: Stephen remained standing and facing Uncle Horace, a picture of candid and artless boyhood. 'My father died when I was two years old,' he explained. 'I don't remember him. My mother was drowned only a few months ago—in a boating accident—near Sorrento.'

'Very sad—very sad,' Uncle Horace mused. 'You had been living abroad, then—till you came here?'

'Yes, sir, in Italy. I think it was because it was cheaper there than anywhere else. We weren't very well off, you see, and we never stayed long in one place—I don't know why.'

'But you went to school, I suppose?'

'Only for a few months—once—in Rome. My mother taught me. She had been a teacher before she married. She was English.'

Mr. Knox, who so far had been as dumb as Tom himself, now made a remark. 'I could have sworn you were the product of an English public school,' he said.

Tom was startled: he even glanced reproachfully at the curate. It was fortunate that Uncle Horace disliked interruptions. Therefore, instead of encouraging Mr. Knox, he pursued his own inquiry. 'Then you've lived all your life abroad, have you?'

'Yes, sir.'

‘And you came over here at Mr. Collet’s invitation?’

Stephen hesitated. ‘No-o,’ he replied, drawing out the word reluctantly. ‘But—he was the only person I *could* go to. I mean—there wasn’t anybody else.’

‘I see. . . . You knew his address, of course?’

There was a slight pause, and Tom waited anxiously. Uncle Horace *was* asking a terrific number of questions—even for him! Tom had never known him so bad before. But he supposed it was because Uncle Stephen was mixed up in the matter, and Stephen himself did not appear to mind.

‘No, sir,’ he said. ‘I had to find it out after I came over. I mean, I didn’t know the exact address: I couldn’t write to him—or at least I didn’t think I could. I came because I had to do *something*. . . . My mother used occasionally to get work from newspapers—translating English stories into Italian. And now and then she had a pupil for Italian conversation; but even with that we only just managed to scrape along, and I wasn’t earning anything. She wouldn’t allow me to take the only kind of job I might have got—as a message boy, or in a shop.’

Uncle Horace nodded: he seemed pleased with Stephen. On the other hand, though he hoped he was mistaken, Tom was almost sure that Mr. Knox was *not* pleased. He was looking at Stephen and there was in his eyes just a shade of—no, not incredulity, incredulity was too strong a word to describe the vague dissatisfaction lurking in the curate’s expression. It was as if there were something in what he had been listening to that he did not quite like, that slightly jarred upon him. Tom saw him on the point of making a remark, and then repressing it, and then finally yielding to the temptation to bring it out. ‘You weren’t living at the Manor, were you?’ Mr. Knox asked.

Stephen turned quickly, and for the first time appeared to scent an antagonist. His eyes momentarily sought Tom’s, who had been watching the whole scene motionless as an image, the tip of his tongue slightly protruding between his lips. ‘He was living at the other house,’ Tom broke in quickly. ‘I told you that.’

‘Yes, I remember your telling me. Camping out, I suppose. It can’t have been very comfortable.’

Tom’s face darkened. ‘We only used one room,’ he replied. ‘An upstairs room. It was quite comfortable.’

The pronoun was not lost on Mr. Knox. He regarded Tom rather sadly. ‘*You* didn’t stay there, did you?’

‘Have you heard from your uncle yet?’ Uncle Horace interrupted with a hint of impatience. ‘Has he told you when he is coming back?’

Mr. Knox immediately withdrew from the discussion, and Tom answered, ‘No.’

‘Where is he?’

‘I—— He didn’t tell me.’

‘But I thought you saw him off? The housekeeper said you did.’

‘Yes, I drove part of the way with him. You see, it was quite unexpected. This man called for him.’

‘What man?’

‘A very nice man.’

Uncle Horace looked at Tom and the look was entirely in his old manner. Tom blushed. It was more, however, from indignation than embarrassment. Here had Uncle Horace been swallowing all Stephen’s outrageous story without a protest; yet the very first thing *he* said aroused suspicion.

‘Don’t you even know his name?’ Uncle Horace persisted. ‘Weren’t you introduced to him?’

‘Yes.’ Tom had a sudden happy thought. ‘His name was Spinelli,’ he declared confidently. ‘Uncle Stephen knew him long ago in Italy. They were, I think, partners.’

‘Partners?’

‘I mean they worked together. I’ve forgotten the word.’

‘Accomplices?’ suggested Uncle Horace grimly.

‘Collaborators.’ But next moment Tom laughed.

‘What are you laughing at?’ Uncle Horace snapped.

‘Well, it *was* rather funny,’ Tom apologized.

‘What was funny?’

‘Your joke—the way you said it. . . . You know you do say things like that, Uncle Horace, and you must know they’re funny, even though you may be cross when you say them.’

Uncle Horace gave him another look, but not really an angry one, and Mr. Knox took out his watch. 'I think I must be going,' he remarked.

'Why?' Tom asked. 'It's very nearly dinner-time, and Uncle Horace will be having dinner with us. Do stay.'

Mr. Knox wavered, glancing at Uncle Horace, who immediately said, 'I shan't be staying either.'

'But you must,' cried Tom. 'I know what you're thinking, but you must, all the same.'

Uncle Horace flushed, and Mr. Knox involuntarily asked, 'What was he thinking?'

Tom did not answer. His eyes were still fixed on Uncle Horace. 'Uncle Stephen would want you to stay. He'll not be pleased with *me* if you don't.'

'All right—all right,' returned Uncle Horace hastily. Then, after a moment, he added, 'Come with me for a little stroll, Tom. I want to have a word with you. And at any rate if you're to be my host you ought to show me over the grounds.'

Tom got up at once, though it was not without a feeling of anxiety that he left the others behind. Something in Mr. Knox's manner made him uneasy. It suggested either that he had taken a dislike to Stephen or else was not satisfied with his story. But he would hardly continue to question him when they were alone, for he was the last person in the world to try to drive anybody into a corner. Tom had a high opinion of Mr. Knox. He did not think he was clever, but he knew he was a gentleman. That was the difference between him and Uncle Horace. Uncle Horace *was* clever, but he wasn't—— Well, not quite in the sense that Mr. Knox was, anyway.

Meanwhile, Uncle Horace, fortunately all unconscious of these reflections, was stepping delicately over the lawn in highly-polished shoes. Tom wondered if his shoes were ever not highly-polished, if he ever did *not* look as if he were dressed for an afternoon party. 'How many suits have you, Uncle Horace?' he asked innocently.

'Suits!—suits!—what do you mean by suits!'

Tom took Uncle Horace's arm, for somehow he felt he had been stupid about him, and that his bark was worse than his bite. 'Nothing,' he answered. 'But you must have a lot. I mean your trousers never have baggy knees and your waistcoats never go into wrinkles and——'

‘I try to keep myself decent, if that’s what you’re getting at,’ Uncle Horace replied grumpily.

‘Yes, but other people try. I try myself. This suit was new about a fortnight ago, and look at it now.’

Uncle Horace looked. ‘You ought to keep your trousers in a press,’ he said shortly. ‘I expect you don’t even bother to fold them. . . . But it’s not that I want to talk to you about, and you know it.’

‘I’m quite willing to talk about anything, Uncle Horace; only I’d rather talk about something that—that won’t make us angry.’

Uncle Horace glared at this peculiar nephew, who was clinging to his arm (in itself a novel experience) and whose odd, freckled face was turned up to him with bright, singularly pleasant eyes. ‘You know, you’re either a most accomplished young Jesuit or else——’

The alternative he left unspoken. ‘I *do* want to please you,’ Tom said.

‘Well, if that is all, you know how.’

‘You mean by going back to Gloucester Terrace? Suppose, Uncle Horace, I had come to you, and you had got very fond of me. . . . That might have happened, mightn’t it?’

‘Um,’ said Uncle Horace.

‘But mightn’t it?’

‘You’re very persistent; how am I to say what might have happened?’

‘But you don’t dislike me?’

‘Well, well—suppose it *had* happened?’

‘If it *had* happened, and you had done everything you could for me, wouldn’t you think I was rather a—a squirt, if I gave you up just because some other people didn’t like you?’

‘A squirt!’

‘Yes. You must know very well what a squirt is, even if you’ve never heard the expression before.’

‘I haven’t. I understand it to mean somebody who is ungrateful?’

Tom laughed. ‘Yes, and a whole lot more. Why won’t you let me talk to you naturally, Uncle Horace? That’s what I mean by being friends.’

‘You can talk as naturally as you like, but you know my views on the subject you’ve raised, and nothing will be gained by repeating them.’

‘I don’t want you to repeat them.’

‘I came down, as I told you, to have a talk with Mr. Knox, and we had that last night.’

‘Mr. Knox likes Uncle Stephen, I think.’

‘So it would appear. He also—— Well, what he said inclined me perhaps to alter my judgment a little.’

‘Uncle Horace, if I tell you something will you believe me, will you help me, will you be my friend?’

But Uncle Horace was not to be rushed into making rash promises. ‘It depends on what the something is,’ he replied.

‘You know what it is.’

‘Then why do you want to tell me?’

Tom looked up at him gravely. ‘Because I don’t think you—understand it. You think I just want to stay here because I like it better than Gloucester Terrace, but it isn’t that: at least, it’s much more than that.’

‘What is it then?’

‘It’s very hard for me to explain—unless—unless you try to understand.’ Tom’s head drooped, and his voice became husky and uncertain. ‘I love Uncle Stephen. . . . I couldn’t bear to be taken away from him. . . . You won’t try to do that, will you?’

Uncle Horace walked on without replying. Tom’s arm was pressing upon his, but he gave no sign of being aware of it. Neither did he repulse it. Presently he said, ‘Why are you talking like this now? On my last visit you took a very different tone. Why have you changed? There must be some reason.’

‘I suppose it’s because I haven’t Uncle Stephen with me now,’ Tom said simply.

‘That seems a poor reason.’

‘And it’s partly because *you*’ve been different,’ Tom added.

Uncle Horace frowned, though not at his nephew. He was looking straight before him at the landscape. ‘I think the chief trouble is that you’re a

great deal too emotional,' he brought out deliberately, but not unkindly. 'All along that really has been my chief reason for wishing to see you back at Gloucester Terrace.'

'But suppose it was you I was fond of, Uncle Horace; you wouldn't think I was too emotional then.'

'That's where you make a mistake. I *should* think you were too emotional. A great deal too emotional. Why can't you be like other boys?'

'Like Eric and Leonard?' said Tom doubtfully.

Uncle Horace hesitated. 'Well——' He glanced at Tom and left his remark unfinished. He found another. 'There's not the least danger of your ever becoming like Eric and Leonard.'

'But you'd rather I was,' Tom said in discouragement. 'I know what you mean. I know I'm—— You see, they're so different in *every* way. At any rate you *have* them, they're your real nephews.'

'Yes,' said Uncle Horace drily. 'I don't want you to be like Eric and Leonard. I don't want you to be like anybody but yourself. The only thing I do wish is that you were a little more—normal.'

'But——'

'There are no "buts" about it,' said Uncle Horace firmly. 'It isn't so much of the present as of the future I'm thinking. You won't be a boy always, and you won't always have your Uncle Stephen to depend on. He ought to see that for himself, instead of encouraging you.'

'He doesn't encourage me,' said Tom. 'Once or twice he spoke to me very much in the way you're speaking now.'

'Umph,' said Uncle Horace.

'But he did! I don't know why you're so against him! *Will* you help me, Uncle Horace? I know I've sometimes been cheeky to you, and——'

'That has nothing to do with it,' Uncle Horace interrupted testily. 'One would imagine you thought I took a kind of spiteful pleasure in trying to come between you and Mr. Collet!'

'I never thought that,' Tom replied, 'but I do think you don't like him.'

'Perhaps I don't. One can't like everybody. At any rate, now there is this fresh complication.'

Tom for a moment did not understand. 'What complication?' he asked.

‘This other boy—this Stephen.’ Uncle Horace halted. ‘I think we’d better turn back.’

‘But Stephen has been here all the time,’ said Tom. ‘Ever since I was here.’

‘In that case I don’t see why Mr. Collet wants you. Isn’t his grandson enough for him? Doesn’t he care for him?’

‘Of course he cares for him. . . Only, they haven’t very much in common. Anyway, Stephen is only here on a visit: he isn’t going to stay: he doesn’t want to stay.’

‘Why doesn’t he want to stay? It looks to me as if his grandfather took little or no interest in him. Otherwise he would hardly let him go about dressed as he is.’

‘That’s his own fault,’ said Tom quickly.

‘Where is he going to when he leaves the Manor? Has he said what he wants to do?’

‘Well, of course, he won’t be leaving for some time—I don’t know how long exactly. But I can tell you one thing he wants to do. He wants to go to Coombe Bridge.’

‘Why?’

‘I suppose because his people came from there. I mean the Collets—they belonged to Coombe Bridge.’

‘He only wants to see the place, then?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, is there any objection to his going? Does Mr. Collet object?’

‘No. We were thinking of going while he was away. We were talking about it this morning.’

‘You can’t get to Coombe Bridge from here,’ said Uncle Horace. ‘At least, not by train. I don’t know anything about buses, but by rail it would be a most roundabout journey.’

‘Where *could* we get a train?’ Tom asked. ‘Isn’t there a junction where we could change?’

‘There’s no junction that would be of any use. Coombe Bridge isn’t on this line at all—nowhere near it. You’d have to go back to town.’

Tom thought for a moment. ‘Will you be going back to-day, Uncle Horace?’

‘Yes, after lunch.’ But the words dropped rather drily, as if he understood what the next question would be.

‘Could you take us with you?’

Uncle Horace did not reply, and Tom did not repeat his request. Neither did he relinquish Uncle Horace’s arm nor look offended. It seemed to him, after all that had taken place, that Uncle Horace had every right to refuse.

‘In the car, do you mean?’ Uncle Horace said at last. ‘I thought you wouldn’t trust yourself with me!’

‘*Will* you take us then? I know I oughtn’t to ask you.’

‘It will mean staying the night at Gloucester Terrace,’ Uncle Horace warned him. ‘Even if we start immediately after lunch we shan’t be home much before six.’

‘I know. Do you think they’d mind putting us up for a night? Couldn’t we go to an hotel?’

‘Two nights,’ said Uncle Horace, ignoring the hotel. ‘You’ll have to break your journey on the way home too.’

‘Well, for two nights.’

‘How do you know we won’t keep you when we get you?’

Tom looked down. ‘I think I’ve been rather stupid about that,’ he said.

‘You weren’t so stupid. If I’d got you before I *would* have kept you.’

‘Why have you changed, Uncle Horace?’

‘I don’t know. Probably because *I’m* stupid.’

‘You’re not. You’re being most frightfully decent about everything, and I won’t forget it.’

‘Well—I wonder where the others have got to. Knox will be thinking he oughtn’t to have stayed.’

‘But wasn’t there something you wanted to say to me?’

‘I’ve said it. Or at any rate part of it, and we’ll let it go at that.’

‘Thanks awfully, Uncle Horace. . . . I mean for giving us a seat in the car.’

‘Yes, I know what you mean. And for the other too, I dare say. I’ll get Shanks to send a wire to your step-mother while we’re at lunch. One person, at all events will be on the doorstep to welcome you.’

‘Who? Jane?’

‘Yes; Jane.’

Uncle Horace consulted his watch.

‘Will you say anything about Stephen in the telegram?’ Tom asked as they drew near the house.

‘Stephen? No. I can’t go into explanations about Stephen by telegram. Besides, it’s not necessary; there’s only your own room available and he’ll have to share it with you.’

‘I know. Uncle Horace, I don’t like going back like this. It seems pretty rotten—just as if we were making use of them. I think we ought to go to an hotel.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Uncle Horace. ‘If there’s any difficulty you can stay with me.’

CHAPTER XXIV

On the way home Uncle Horace himself drove: Shanks sat beside him, and Tom and Stephen behind. The rain which had begun to fall before they left the Manor had now increased to a steady downpour; the car swished over the wet road between dripping hedges; but there was little traffic; Uncle Horace must be doing nearly fifty. . . .

Shortly before starting there had occurred a slight awkwardness. It had been due to Mr. Knox. Just when everything was going well Mr. Knox suggested that Stephen had better change his clothes and put on a collar. *Some* kind of action had been necessary, and the two boys had left the room. ‘Silly ass, what business is it of his!’ Stephen spluttered angrily while struggling into one of Tom’s shirts, the sleeves of which were a great deal too short and the neckband too narrow. Uncle Stephen’s socks fitted him, but these, and Tom’s shirt, exhausted their available resources. Therefore, when they came downstairs again, Stephen’s appearance was very little altered. He muttered something about his things being at the other house; the curate said nothing; and luckily Uncle Horace by this time was impatient to set off.

So they had started—more than an hour ago—dropping Mr. Knox at his lodgings—and from the beginning Stephen had been far too much interested in the car to bother about his clothes or anything else. This interest increased as the journey proceeded. He watched every movement of Uncle Horace and asked Tom innumerable questions. His conversation, indeed, had taken the tone of Eric’s and Leonard’s, lacking only the deadliness of their expert knowledge, so that the smaller boy had begun to look bored and cross.

Suddenly Stephen nudged him in the ribs, a habit Tom particularly disliked. ‘I wonder if he’d let me drive?’

‘How can you drive when you’ve never learned?’

‘All the same I think I’ll ask him.’ And Stephen actually leaned forward to tap on the screen.

Tom immediately pulled him back. ‘Don’t be stupid! As if anybody’s going to begin to teach you now! You might have more sense!’

‘Have *you* learned? I mean, why haven’t you?’

Tom did not reply, and Stephen pursued obstinately, ‘It looks quite easy. If he’d been *my* uncle I bet I’d have got him to teach me.’

‘Would you! He won’t even allow Eric to touch it.’

‘Selfish old beast!’

‘He’s not,’ said Tom, loyal to his recent alliance with Uncle Horace. ‘At any rate, everybody who has a car is like that.’

Stephen gave up the idea of driving, and looked out of the window. ‘I hope it’s not going to be like this to-morrow,’ he said. ‘What’ll we do if it is? Do you think I could borrow a waterproof?’

Tom did not answer. To tell the truth, he felt extremely doubtful about Stephen’s reception at Gloucester Terrace, quite apart from the borrowing of waterproofs, and even though he was being introduced under the auspices of Uncle Horace. But the house didn’t belong to Uncle Horace, and for that matter Tom wasn’t at all sure of his own welcome. His step-mother couldn’t be feeling particularly friendly towards him at present: there was no reason why she should: for it wasn’t even now as if he were coming back to stay. He was only coming back to suit himself, and when you looked at it like that it did seem pretty thick! He wished they were going to an hotel.

There was no use wishing, however, and no use trying to re-open the subject with Uncle Horace. The whole thing was getting more and more difficult. All his relations with people had become difficult and unnatural. His relations with everybody—with Mrs. Deverell, with Mr. Knox, with everybody he knew—had become secretive and defensive.

‘For goodness sake cheer up!’ Stephen said abruptly. ‘We’re not going to a funeral.’

Tom drew back into his corner. ‘I didn’t know I wasn’t cheerful.’

‘Well, you know now. It seems to me about a year since I heard you laugh.’

‘I don’t see anything to laugh at.’

‘That’s just it. It’s a little depressing.’

Tom was too offended to reply.

‘I’ve told you it will be all right,’ Stephen went on, half impatiently, half amused. ‘We’ve got to take this as a kind of game—at any rate for the time being. Look how beautifully everything went this morning.’

‘Not so beautifully as you imagine.’

‘You mean Knox. What does it matter about Knox? You’d think he was a bishop.’

‘It’s all very well talking like that,’ Tom burst out hotly, ‘but there’ll be Mr. Flood too. Mr. Knox is too decent to say much, but Mr. Flood knows all about Uncle Stephen.’

‘I doubt it.’

‘He does: he’s his solicitor: and he’ll know very well you weren’t telling the truth.’

‘He may think so, but he can’t *know* without making inquiries.’

‘He will make them.’

Stephen yawned. ‘Well, let him,’ he returned carelessly. ‘You’re very hard to please. I thought you’d have liked my story, even though parts of it were so sad. . . . Uncle Horace was just a little casual about the sad parts, don’t you think?’

The ghost of a smile flickered across Tom’s face, and Stephen immediately smiled back.

‘All the same,’ Tom went on, ‘Mr. Flood *will* find out. He’s bound to. He’s in charge of Uncle Stephen’s private affairs. You’ll have to give him proper information—I mean, addresses and that kind of thing—and then he’ll write at once, or telegraph.’

‘He won’t. He’ll wait first to see if Uncle Stephen comes back. Can’t you understand that they *must* think he’ll come back. *They* don’t know what you know, and they’ll leave it to him to decide whether he has a grandson or not. I shouldn’t be surprised myself if he had several.’

‘Then why did you invent all that story? It won’t help us in the long run, and I never told so many lies in my life.’

‘They’re not lies—not real lies—they were forced on us.’

‘They weren’t. Not those particular ones anyway. They were made up just for your own pleasure and because you thought them funny. They weren’t a bit funny. All you did was to make Uncle Horace and Mr. Knox think Uncle Stephen wicked.’

‘Wicked?’

‘Yes—immoral.’

It was his last protest, however, and he did not speak again until he said, 'We're nearly there.'

Uncle Horace had in fact begun to slow down, for they had reached the outlying houses of the city, and in a few minutes more were on the tram-lines, threading their way among an increasing traffic. It was nearly six, and in spite of the rain the streets were full of people. Stephen glanced about him eagerly.

The car branched off the main road, and Tom too stared out of the window. It was all exactly the same as when he had seen it last. There were the same people coming home from business to the same houses; the same message-boys on the same bicycles; the same milk vans; the same dogs; even most of the advertisements on the hoardings were unchanged; and yet he felt as if he had been away half a life-time. . . .

The next turning would be Gloucester Terrace. . . . There it was: there was the house: there was the next-door cat on the window-sill.

The car drew up.

But in spite of Uncle Horace's prediction Jane was not waiting on the steps to receive them. Nor was anybody else: they had to ring twice; and then it was Eric who opened the door.

'Hello!' he said, while he stared past Tom at the other boy.

'Go on in; go on in,' cried Uncle Horace irritably from the rear. 'Don't stand there blocking the way.'

'Sorry.' Eric drew to one side, and at the same time both the kitchen and the dining-room doors opened.

Through the former emerged Mrs. Barber. 'Well, Tom!' she exclaimed, and then she too caught sight of Stephen.

The brief distraction enabled Tom to avoid an embrace: he shook hands instead.

'This is Tom's cousin, Stephen Collet,' Uncle Horace announced fussily. He waved a general introduction—'Eric—Leonard—Jane.'

Eric and Leonard shook hands; Jane was still hugging Tom; Mrs. Barber, looking very much mystified, seemed uncertain what to do.

'Tom had better show Stephen his room,' Uncle Horace went on, taking charge of the situation. 'You got my wire, of course.' His intention, Tom

thought, was to remove him and Stephen out of the way while he explained matters.

He obeyed the hint, and even before they had reached the second flight of stairs he heard the dining-room door closing. He glanced back over his shoulder and saw that Jane had not followed the others, but was standing in the hall gazing after him, her attitude exactly that of a dog who has not been taken for the expected walk. Tom put his finger to his lips, beckoned, and swiftly and silently Jane sped up the stairs.

‘Tom dear, it’s lovely to have you back again,’ she murmured, sitting down beside him on the edge of the bed. ‘And it’s nice to have Stephen too. . . . Will that can of hot water be enough for both of you, because if it isn’t I’ll get another.’

‘Heaps,’ said Tom. ‘Stephen can wash first. I’ll tell you what you might do though. You might get him one of Leonard’s collars.’

‘And a shirt,’ said Stephen, taking off his jacket.

‘And a shirt,’ Tom repeated.

Jane looked a little surprised, but she departed without a word. When she returned Stephen was splashing at the wash-basin, so she sat down once more beside Tom.

‘You needn’t say anything downstairs about borrowing Leonard’s things,’ Tom warned her. ‘You see, we had to leave in a hurry. I’ll send them back, and Stephen can wear one of my ties: then he’ll be all right.’

Jane still seemed slightly puzzled, so Tom continued diplomatically: ‘You didn’t know I had a cousin, did you?’

‘No; I don’t think anybody knew you had a cousin. I must say he’s not a bit like you.’

‘Why should he be like me?’ Tom replied. ‘Cousins aren’t often like one another.’

Jane did not dispute this, but while she watched Stephen drying himself an increasing curiosity grew more and more visible in her face. At last she gave utterance to it. ‘What has happened? Why have you come back? Have you left Uncle Stephen?’

Tom frowned. ‘No, of course not. Uncle Stephen is away on business, and Stephen and I came up because we’re going to Coombe Bridge to-

morrow. We're only going for the day, however; we'll be back here to-morrow night.'

'To stay?' Jane asked.

Tom hesitated. 'Well, not exactly to stay. We'll have to leave the next morning.'

Jane looked at him. 'Then I'll hardly see you at all,' she said.

'Of course you'll see me. I'll be here all this evening and part of to-morrow evening.'

Jane's face had clouded. '*That's* not very long. Besides, the others will be there: I won't see you by yourself.'

'You must come and pay us a visit at the Manor.'

'I can't help it,' he went on, as Jane failed to respond to this not very heart-felt invitation. 'We *must* go back the day after to-morrow.'

'Then I'll come to-night and talk.'

'Come where?'

'Come here. To you.'

'You can't. Stephen will be here.'

'Stephen won't mind.'

Tom began to lose patience. 'Don't be silly! How can you go rushing about boys' rooms? You know what happened last time. Anyway I'll lock the door, so if you like to kick up a row and get caught it will be your own fault.'

Jane drew away from him. 'I think you've altered,' she said coldly.

Tom stared gloomily down at the carpet. He might have guessed how it would be! 'I dare say I *have* altered,' he muttered. 'There's been plenty to _____'

'Tom dear, I'm sorry,' Jane interrupted impulsively. She clasped her arms round his neck and gave him a hug. 'I won't ask any more questions and you needn't tell me anything you don't want to. And I won't come to your room. I wouldn't have come anyway: I only said that to tease you. But it was horrid of me to say you'd changed, because you haven't, not a scrap. At least, not to look at—I've just counted your freckles.'

The first notes of a gong rose from the hall, and Tom got up to take Stephen's place at the washstand.

'I suppose I'd better go down,' Jane said, 'but there's plenty of time for Stephen to change his clothes: that was only a warning. I'll tell them you won't be long.'

The door closed behind her, and Stephen remarked, 'She seems quite a decent kid.' He began to undress, and presently made a second remark. 'In fact I don't see anything the matter with any of them, in spite of all you told me.'

Tom wheeled round, the water dripping from his hair, his cheeks hot, and his eyes flashing. 'No,' he answered with a sudden bitterness. 'I expect you'll be bosom friends with the whole family.'

Stephen gave him a sidelong look. 'Is there any harm in my saying they seem decent?'

'You know very well I always told you Jane was decent.'

'Well, what's the trouble then?'

'It's just that you take a delight in siding against me. I'm not talking about Jane. But because I told you the others hated me you at once begin to like them, though you've barely spoken to them. If it was somebody who did care for me——'

'Your gamekeeper?' Stephen suggested.

'Yes; you can sneer! But he was a jolly lot more——'

'Here,' said Stephen, gripping him by the shoulders—'don't be a young ass. To begin with, you know I don't care a fig for the whole jing-bang of your relations.'

'They're not my relations.'

'Well, whatever they are.'

'Yes, I do know it; and that's why you needn't have said——' He stopped. 'I'm sorry, Stephen. It was stupid. I don't think I'm fit to be in decent company at present.'

'That's rot too,' said Stephen. 'You're much the decentest person here.'

Once again the deep notes of the gong floated up to them.

‘We’d better hurry,’ said Tom. ‘I suppose they don’t know you’re changing.’

Uncle Horace was still there when they entered the dining-room, but he did not join in the meal. Tom was glad to see him. It was perhaps the first time he had ever known the presence of Uncle Horace to ease off a situation, but it certainly had—for him at least—this effect now. Only, when he *had* waited, he might for once have sacrificed his dinner and eaten with them. His refusal to do so struck Tom as shockingly bad manners.

It was a curious repast. Not the food, but the demeanour of the eaters of the food. He could see that Eric and Leonard, especially, were puzzled by Stephen—that they were inclined to form a favourable impression of him, and were at the same time held back by the fact of his relationship to their step-brother and to the unknown and mysterious Uncle Stephen. He could follow exactly the logical procession of their thoughts. Anybody who was friends with Tom! But possibly he really wasn’t friends, and he couldn’t help being a cousin—it was a misfortune rather than a fault. . . . If only they knew how obvious all their ideas and feelings were, they wouldn’t take even the little trouble they did to disguise them. He could tell, as surely as if they had whispered it in his ear, that on the very first opportunity they would try to draw Stephen away from him and into their private camp. They wouldn’t succeed, however: he knew that now. . . .

And Stephen had begun to talk to Mrs. Barber. He was talking of his plan to visit Coombe Bridge. Mrs. Barber wanted to know what time they would like to start. ‘They’ll have to start early,’ Uncle Horace said. ‘It will take a couple of hours to get there.’

‘Are there any Collets at Coombe Bridge now?’ Mrs. Barber asked, and Stephen replied that he didn’t think so.

‘It’s most remarkable how families die out!’ But after a pensive moment she abandoned this line of reflection and asked instead if Stephen had liked living abroad. She herself had never been in Italy, but she had been in France and Switzerland, and neither country had appealed to her as a permanent home.

‘Don’t you sometimes find yourself talking Italian by mistake, Stephen?’ Jane asked.

‘Never,’ said Stephen, and winked at Tom.

It was an outrageous thing to do: anybody might have seen him! Tom's face was crimson. As if things weren't bad enough without starting to play the fool!' I suppose there's a railway guide in the house,' he mumbled. At the same time he frowned at Stephen and received a broad grin in return.

'There should be a guide somewhere,' Mrs. Barber thought, and Jane said, 'It's in the drawer of the hat-stand.'

'At least it *was* there,' she added, jumping up from the table.

Tom stared down at his plate. He wasn't going to look at Stephen again. He wished he wasn't sitting opposite him.

Jane returned with the guide. 'Rather ancient. The year before last. And a Christmas Number too.'

'It doesn't matter, dear, the trains won't have altered,' said her mother—'not to a little place like Coombe Bridge.'

'Those are just the trains that *are* altered,' Leonard contradicted. 'They alter them every month or two.'

'Ten-forty. Twelve-fifty-five,' Jane read aloud, as she resumed her seat beside Tom.

'The ten-forty will do,' said Tom.

'Ten-forty—ten-forty—ten-forty—arrives three-twenty-nine.'

'Oh, don't be silly. Here—show it to me.'

'Don't *you* be silly,' returned Jane, gripping the book more firmly as he attempted to take it from her. 'No, that's wrong. Ten-forty— *Stop*, Tom! How can I see if you keep pulling at it! Ten-forty arrives at twelve-twenty. . . . That's *right*,' she declared, still clinging tenaciously to the guide, which Tom also grasped.

'Give it to me,' he said impatiently. 'I want to find out about coming home.'

Jane still held on. 'Trains coming home,' she chanted. 'Let me see. There's one at—'

Tom turned away, putting his fingers in his ears.

'Oh, all right! *There*—take the old thing! Baby!' She dropped it in the middle of his jam.

'Jane!' Mrs. Barber said sharply.

‘Well, he thinks nobody can do anything except himself, and he’s the very one to get it all wrong.’

Tom, having gained his point, was indifferent to criticisms.

‘There may be a bus,’ Uncle Horace suggested from his armchair, and Tom turned the pages to see—very much as Jane had turned them, but with the satisfaction of doing it for himself.

Uncle Horace, leaving the family group in one of its more characteristic moments, rose from his chair. ‘Well, it’s time I was moving on. I may possibly drop round again later, and if not I’ll look in to-morrow evening and hear the Coombe Bridge news. Good-bye, everybody, for the present. Don’t get up: I can find my own way out.’

But Tom did get up. He was aware that all eyes were turned upon him, and those of his step-brothers with contemptuous dislike. Sucking up to Uncle Horace, they would call it. He didn’t care. He followed Uncle Horace into the hall and helped him on with his coat. Uncle Horace accepted the help. He accepted it, too, without impatience, though Tom got the sleeves mixed up and was not tall enough to be of much assistance. Uncle Horace, having disentangled himself, put on his hat, and Tom opened the hall-door.

On the threshold Uncle Horace turned to his nephew and held out his hand. ‘I don’t fancy I *will* be back,’ he said, ‘so I’ll say good-night to you.’

‘Good-night, Uncle Horace. And—thank you ever so much—for everything.’

Uncle Horace, on the point of stepping out into the street, suddenly paused. ‘Look here, Tom,’ he began, and paused again.

Tom looked up at him expectantly.

But Uncle Horace, after a moment, merely flashed his most brilliant smile. ‘All I was going to tell you is, not to worry. Good-night.’

CHAPTER XXV

Stephen at the last minute had bought a newspaper, but, to Tom's surprise, he had not read it. He had rustled its leaves, glanced at a few headlines, looked at the photographs on the back page, and offered it to Tom. It now lay on the floor between them.

The train was slowing down. So far it had stopped at nearly every station, and Tom had begun to feel oddly restless, almost excited, though he could not have told what he looked forward to. Coombe Bridge meant nothing to him, nor even so far as Stephen was concerned did he see what benefit could come of their visit. There was nothing to be learned at Coombe Bridge that they did not know already.

The train drew up and their carriage came to rest directly in front of a group of market-women. Tom guessed what would happen, and got up to help with the baskets. There were plenty of half-filled coaches on the train; most of the women were stout, and all of them were hot; but where one entered the rest followed, and soon they were packed so tightly that for Tom and Stephen only standing-room was left. Stephen let down the other window with a bang.

'Well, if that isn't too bad now! We've been and taken their seats. It's them baskets that takes up all the room.'

'Ah sure, they won't mind for all the distance we're going: it's not worth changing now.'

'Indeed I never looked whether there was room or not: they're always in that big a hurry they wouldn't give you time to look round.'

The glowing matron who had last spoken, and who had plopped herself down in a corner seat, suddenly pulled Tom on to her lap. She did it without a word, and so unexpectedly, that he was there and her stout arms about him before he knew what had happened.

He struggled indignantly away from her and took up a position at the door, very red in the face, while the others laughed.

'My, but he's proud!' exclaimed the forsaken lady. 'I suppose even his own ma's not allowed to touch him!'

'I'm too hot,' Tom answered through his confusion. 'I'd rather stand.'

‘What’ll he do when he’s married? He must be one of them that has to have a separate bed.’

Another laugh greeted this sally, and Tom, after a moment, smiled himself.

‘I’ll sit on your knee if you like,’ he said, ‘but you won’t find it comfortable, because I’m a good deal heavier than you think.’

‘Divil a knee! But perhaps you wouldn’t be so backward in other ways.’

She removed the lid from a basket and the other ways were revealed as gooseberries. ‘Here, hold out your cap, and don’t say I’m not a forgiving woman.’

She filled his cap, and Stephen, who had no cap, was allowed to fill his pocket. Then she leaned forward and addressed a friend at the further end of the compartment. ‘Who would you fancy he resembles, Lizzie—the way he wrinkles his nose. He’s the very spit of him.’

Lizzie turned a meditative gaze on Tom. ‘You mean my Jimmie?’ she said dubiously. ‘But it’s nothing barrin’ that trick he has.’

‘It’s the whole look of him—the way his ears sticks out, and the brow—I’ll warrant this one is good at his books too.’

The comparison was pursued by the entire company, while an uneasy suspicion (shortly to become a certainty) grew up in Tom’s mind that Jimmie’s earthly career had ended several months ago. He was glad when a more cheerful topic was started, gladder still when they got out.

Stephen had noticed nothing, nor did he help Tom and an impatient railway porter with the baskets. With his back turned he hung out of the window, seeming to be absorbed in the landscape, slowly and deliberately spitting out gooseberry skins. From his attitude, from his silence, Tom concluded that they must be drawing near their destination. He wondered what Stephen was thinking, but he could not guess. He spat out his gooseberry skins more and more absent-mindedly; he seemed to have become oblivious to Tom’s existence.

‘We’re nearly there, aren’t we?’ Tom asked, but Stephen did not look round. Then presently he muttered over his shoulder, ‘Next station.’

Tom leaned back in his seat. He shut his eyes. There was no use trying to feel sleepy, however, so he opened them again and looked at Stephen.

The engine whistled. . . . They were approaching their station. Stephen was again hanging out of the window, but he drew in his head as they passed under a bridge. The brake jarred; they glided up to a platform and stopped.

Stephen had already opened the door. He jumped out and Tom followed. Nobody else got out, and there was nobody waiting to get in. The platform looked extraordinarily empty. And whether it was this emptiness or not, Tom experienced a peculiar sensation, as if the whole adventure had fallen flat.

It was absurd. What had he expected to happen? A porter was at a white wooden gate waiting to take their tickets. He hurried after Stephen. . . .

Coombe Bridge itself was nearly as deserted as the station. To Tom it seemed a moribund spot, even when compared with Kilbarron.

‘All these wretched little houses are new,’ said Stephen shortly.

They turned a corner and were in the main street. At the end of it was a market square, and behind that a church, with a road branching off on either side of it.

‘They’ve taken away the pump!’ muttered Stephen.

‘Where was it?’ Tom asked gently.

‘There, on the green—where they’ve stuck up that awful thing.’

The awful thing Tom recognized as a War Memorial, but he said nothing.

Suddenly Stephen stopped before a shop—a draper’s and clothier’s.

‘I know this place,’ he said.

‘What do you want to do?’ Tom asked, for Stephen had come to a standstill in the middle of the footpath, and was looking back in the direction of the railway station.

‘I don’t know,’ Stephen replied. ‘I wish I hadn’t come.’

But he approached the shop and pushed open the door, which emitted a sharp ping as he did so. Tom followed him inside.

The interior was cool and dusky after the glare of the street: the shop was empty. The sound of the bell, however, brought a middle-aged woman from some hidden region at the back. Stephen had advanced to the counter, and in a low indifferent voice she wished him good-morning. Her whole appearance was curiously lethargic; she had an air of being not in the least

interested either in them or in what they might want; she simply stood there as if waiting for them to go.

‘Could you tell me if a Mr. Collet lives here?’ Stephen asked.

The woman raised heavy-lidded dull brown eyes. ‘Here? Do you mean in this house?’

‘No: I mean anywhere in Coombe Bridge.’

‘Collet. I don’t remember the name. . . . Wait a minute.’ She retreated without haste in the direction she had come from, but only as far as a curtained door. Opening this, ‘Pa,’ she called listlessly, ‘you’re wanting a minute.’

There was a perceptible pause: then various sounds arose from the other side of the door, though none of them verbal. Sounds of a pipe being knocked out, of a throat being cleared, of a chair being pushed back over a tiled floor—followed by a sound of shuffling footsteps accompanied by the sharp tapping of a stick. An old man, bent, white-bearded, with red twitching eyelids, emerged through the dim aperture.

‘I’m a’wantin’—who wants me?’ he asked querulously, in a thin cracked voice.

‘This young gentleman is looking for a Mr. Collet. Is there any Collet lives in Coombe Bridge?’

‘Collet?’ The old man peered at Stephen. ‘Collet, did you say?’

‘Yes,’ Stephen answered.

‘An’ what might a’ put the name of Collet into your head, young gentleman?’ The old man drew closer. ‘There’s been no Collets in Coombe Bridge—not since the Reverend Henry Collet died, and that must be nigh and next forty years ago. No, there’s no Collets left except what’s dust and bones in the graveyard. Who might *you* be, if you’ll pardon the liberty?’

‘*My* name is Collet: I’m Stephen Collet.’

The old man continued to blink his eyelids rapidly while he stood pondering. He was a rather dirty and far from pleasant old man. It was not a pleasant shop either, Tom thought. There was something wrong with it—something decidedly wrong.

‘That would be the name of the second son,’ the old man said cautiously. ‘I mind hearing about him, but both the sons had left home before ever *I*

came to this place. The shop belonged then to my uncle. I was brought up to the farming. I was on the land till I was nigh on thirty years of age, and——’

‘Yes, pa; but the young gentleman wants to know about Mr. Collet.’

‘Well, amn’t I tellin’ him,’ the old man snapped with an unexpected waspishness. ‘I was well acquainted with the Reverend Collet: not that I was one of his denomination. But I had converse with him when he would be coming into the shop maybe. And he would mention his sons. They had both left home, and Henry, that was called by him and was the eldest, was doing well; but the young one was a rover and they could get no tidings of him. He had the true Collet blood in him, that one, for they were mostly a wild lot—not fearing God or man. You wouldn’t be his boy, would you?’

‘No.’

The old man looked down and began to mutter incantations into his beard—or so it seemed to Tom. Then once more he took a long look at Stephen and broke, rather startlingly, into a laugh.

‘The Reverend Henry Collet is buried deep in the churchyard of his own church,’ he said with a glee that was somehow shocking. ‘And the last time I seen his grave there was a hare sitting up on it with its ears cocked. Not that I hold with them superstitions—that comes from the devil—or so they say.’

‘Pa!’

‘Is there anybody else who knew him?’ Tom interrupted, for he wanted to get out of this shop as quickly as possible.

‘Are you a Collet too?’ the old man said softly.

‘Yes—or at least my mother was.’

‘Ay—ay—the family’s comin’ back it would seem. . . . There was something strange about them all—even about the Reverend Henry. . . . The churchyard is no place for hares. It looked at me the way the little gentleman might be looking now, and it never budged though I threatened it with my stick. It was after that the rheumatism took me bad and I was lyin’ for three weeks.’

‘Don’t you be heeding him, sir,’ the woman said in an undertone. Then more loudly, ‘Pa, the young gentleman asked you a question. Can’t you tell him if there’s anybody still living here might have known Mr. Collet?’

The old man without turning his head slid his eyes round at her. For a moment they expressed an astonishing malevolence: then he began again to

mutter into his beard. ‘No, there’s no one would have known him—no one at all—no one unless it might be Miss Charlemont.’

Stephen turned to the woman. ‘What Miss Charlemont is that?’ he asked.

The woman’s eyes were strangely still—stupid—stupid and slightly glazed. ‘It’s the lady living in the red house on the hill he’d be meaning—Miss Alice Charlemont.’

‘Has she lived there long?’

‘Ay, she’s well up in years. Not what you’d call ancient, like Pa there, but she’d be turned sixty.’

‘Let’s go,’ whispered Tom, plucking Stephen by the sleeve, for Stephen stood motionless, plunged in meditation.

‘Go straight through the square,’ said the woman, for the first time showing signs of animation, ‘and take the turn on your right after you pass the church. It’s not above half-a-mile. Keep on till you get to the top of the hill and you’ll see the house from the road. You can’t miss it, for it’s the only house there.’

The old man again was peering at Stephen, with an extraordinary mixture of slyness and suspicion. And again he broke into a chuckle; after which he turned abruptly and hobbled back to where he had come from.

‘You needn’t be payin’ any attention to him,’ said the woman. ‘Sometimes he’s like that. You’d never know beforehand whether he was goin’ to be sensible or not.’

Tom thanked her and gave Stephen another tug, this time effectively.

‘I don’t like those people,’ he said, when they were out in the sunshine again. ‘The old man especially.’

‘He’s dotin’,’ Stephen murmured absently.

‘He may be dotin’, but I don’t like him: I think he has horrible things in his mind.’

Stephen shook off his reverie. He smiled faintly.

‘And I think they’ve begun to get out,’ Tom went on. ‘That shop was awfully queer.’

‘I didn’t notice anything. Except that it didn’t look very prosperous.’

‘Something is going to happen there,’ Tom persisted. ‘I knew the minute I went in. And he hates his daughter—or his daughter-in-law.’

‘Does he? I wasn’t much interested in either of them. The woman knows nothing and the old man is cracked. . . . I was thinking of Miss Charlemont.’

‘Well, I hope she won’t be like them. That is, if we are going to see her.’

‘Don’t you want to go?’

‘I want to do whatever *you* want. Do you know Miss Charlemont? Was she here—before?’

‘How can I tell? The woman said she must be sixty. The Charlemont girl I knew—Alice Charlemont—was fourteen.’

Tom hesitated. ‘Would you rather not go?’

‘Oh, I’m going, but there’s no need for you to come.’

‘Did you know her well—*your* Alice Charlemont, I mean?’

‘Yes. She used to lend me her pony.’

‘Did you like her?’

‘Yes—well enough.’

‘I don’t think you do like many people.’

‘I like them if they’re my sort.’

‘*I’m* not very much your sort.’

‘Not in some ways, but—— Oh, well, it’s hard to explain. There are different kinds of liking. I don’t think I’d ever want to be with one person all the time, or to live in one place all the time, or to live one kind of life all the time. You’re different, I know. You’d be quite content, wouldn’t you, to settle down at the Manor with Uncle Stephen for the rest of your life? But you ought to remember Uncle Stephen had *returned* from his adventures. It wasn’t that he’d never had any. According to you, he’d had plenty.’

‘Uncle Stephen wanted me to stay at home.’

‘Yes, he would—naturally. He wanted *you*, and of course if you didn’t stay at home he couldn’t have you. He was an old rascal, you know.’

‘He wasn’t.’

‘And he was jolly lucky to find you. You suited him as well as if he’d helped God to make you. How many boys, do you think, would have wanted

to read Greek with him, to play chess with him, to live in that old house with him? About one in ten thousand. I'd have been fed up with it in two days.'

'I don't see how that can be,' said Tom. Nevertheless his brow puckered as he thought it over, for it did actually seem to be true.

'That is the house,' said Stephen, catching him by the arm. 'There, through the trees.'

Tom looked up in time to see it, but almost immediately it was hidden by a turn in the road.

Straight in front of them were two tall iron gates, and beyond these was an avenue, which wound about corkscrew fashion, either with the design of making the grounds appear more extensive than they really were, or of minimizing the steepness of the approach. 'If she's at home,' said Stephen, 'she can't very well not feed us, and that's what we need most at present.'

The house, built on the brow of a hill, was square and solid and completely devoid of ornament. It was in fact the very house Tom again and again, in childhood, had drawn on paper—with its rows of windows all exactly the same, its door in the middle, and its chimneys, from one of which the conventional trail of smoke was rising. Not a leaf was allowed to touch the precious bricks, and the steps were so spotlessly white that it looked as if visitors must use the back door. Tom wiped his feet on the grass, but Stephen was less particular. He rang the bell, which responded with an alarming exuberance. He must have given it a frightful tug!

Miss Charlemont was at home, they learned, but no invitation to come in followed the announcement. They were left standing in the porch while a message was carried to her. Tom stooped down to stroke a somnolent tabby basking in the sun.

Suddenly the door opened wide. 'Miss Charlemont will see you if you will kindly step this way: she'll be down in a few minutes.'

They were ushered into a bright morning-room the furniture of which was covered in gaily-flowered chintzes. The paper was gay also, a rose-coloured pattern on a white ground, and all the woodwork was white. The sun shone in through two windows, and there were flowers in bowls and vases. . . . Rooms! Tom fancied he was rather a specialist in them, and this one certainly was pleasant: therefore so must be Miss Charlemont. The servant retired and came back with a tray on which were wine-glasses and a decanter and a blue china biscuit box. 'Miss Charlemont hopes you will take

a glass of wine and a biscuit while you are waiting,' she said, and then left them alone.

'Very decent of her, I must say,' murmured Stephen, filling the glasses and taking a sip.

Tom watched him with pellucid, oddly childish eyes. 'What kind of wine is it?' he asked, also sipping. 'Port?'

'Port—no: it's sherry.' Stephen wavered. 'At least I think so. You don't drink port before meals. Anyway it's quite good. Let's get drunk before she comes down.' He hastily emptied his glass and refilled it.

'Don't be piggy,' said Tom.

'Why not? I've never been really squiffy except once—last Christmas—staying with a chap called Rockmore. Besides, I expect you'll like me better when I'm tight.'

Tom's face flamed. 'I don't like you now, anyway,' he said. 'You'd think you were being beastly on purpose.'

'So I am. This visit is having the wrong effect.'

Tom had no time to say more, for just then the door opened, and an elderly lady with smooth grey hair, small, and very alert and active, entered. There was something birdlike about her—in her brightness, her quick movements. She smiled at them both, turning from one to the other. 'Which of you is Stephen Collet? No; don't tell me.' She advanced swiftly to Stephen and kissed him. '*That* question at least was unnecessary.'

Tom from the beginning felt out of it. His presence might not actually be unwelcome, but it certainly was superfluous. Miss Charlemont had eyes only for Stephen.

'It's wonderful!' she kept on saying. 'It's not a mere family resemblance: you might be the very Stephen Collet I used to know. He was a friend of mine; a dear dear friend, though we were only children. *That* will tell you how long ago it was. . . . And you say your name is Stephen too!'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Oh, don't be so formal, child! You must call me Aunt Alice. And you too'—she suddenly remembered Tom—'I'm afraid I didn't quite catch your name, dear.'

'That's cousin Tom—Tom Barber,' said Stephen. 'His mother was Henry Collet's daughter.'

‘Yes, yes. I’m afraid I don’t remember Henry very well. He was older than Stephen, and I scarcely ever saw him. But Stephen and I were playmates—when he was home for his holidays.’ She paused, her eyes rejoicing in the boy who stood there smiling at her. ‘I don’t think I ever in my life got such a surprise as when Annie brought me your name. . . . And, you know, I haven’t got you *yet*,’ she went on—‘where you come in. . . . But I shan’t bother you now. Lunch is ready; you must explain it all to me afterwards.’

Miss Charlemont led the way to the dining-room. She struck Tom as being a somewhat scatter-brained person, though extremely kind. ‘Isn’t it fortunate there *is* lunch,’ she babbled on happily. ‘Very often I have nothing but an egg and a cup of tea myself, but to-day by some special providence there is a roast fowl, and I’m sure you’re both starving.’

They sat down at the table, and Tom with a shade of uneasiness watched Stephen drinking another glass of wine—this time Burgundy—which had been poured out for him. Moreover, there was a glint of recklessness in his eyes Tom did not like at all. So he signalled a warning across the table while Miss Charlemont was giving an order to the maid, though he would have preferred to get up and remove the decanter, which had been placed at Stephen’s elbow, and from which he now proceeded to help himself once more.

When the maid had left the room Miss Charlemont returned to personal matters. ‘You must give me a *complete* account of yourselves,’ she said; but she addressed Stephen, and it was Stephen she meant. ‘I’ve lost all sight of your family for I don’t know how long, and one hears nothing in an out-of-the-way spot like this. Of course, to begin with, I suppose you must be Henry Collet’s son, or grandson—and that would make you *my* Stephen Collet’s nephew, or grand-nephew.’

‘You’ve got it all wrong, Aunt Alice,’ Stephen replied gaily. ‘Henry Collet hadn’t a son. He had only a daughter, and it is Tom there who is his grandson. Don’t you really know who I am? I thought you were only pretending, but now I don’t think I’ll tell you. I’ll give you three guesses.’

Miss Charlemont laid down her knife and fork. Once more she subjected Stephen to a close scrutiny: then she nodded her head two or three times and looked extremely wise. Stephen had begun to laugh, and his young eyes met her old eyes boldly. ‘If I didn’t think you were making fun of me,’ said Miss Charlemont, ‘and if I hadn’t always been told that Stephen Collet was a bachelor——’ She broke off, and Tom groaned inwardly. ‘Now we’ll get all

the natural son business!’ he said to himself; and however lightly Mr. Knox and Uncle Horace might regard such matters, he was sure Miss Charlemont was unaccustomed to them.

‘*Who* told you, Aunt Alice?’ Stephen questioned playfully.

‘Never mind who told me,’ Miss Charlemont replied. ‘Well—everybody——’ she went on rather vaguely. ‘Everybody who ever mentioned him.’ But Tom could see she was becoming more and more uncertain. ‘You don’t mean you *are* his son!’ she exclaimed at last. She shook a reproachful finger at him. ‘That wasn’t fair of you. I think you might have told me at once instead of letting me make a goose of myself.’

‘But I really thought you knew,’ Stephen protested, laughing. ‘Particularly when you recognized me straight off like that. And then—well, I was sure you would know who I was, just because I *had* come specially to see you. Of course, Tom came too, but that was different: he happened to be with me.’

Miss Charlemont sat silent a moment, and a faint flush came into her cheeks. ‘So your father sent you!’ Her eyes had grown very soft, and she sighed, but it was not from sadness. ‘Well, dear, that was extremely nice of him, for I thought he wouldn’t even have remembered there was such a person after all these years. But why did he wait so long? Why have I never heard?’

‘*Is* it long since you heard of him, Aunt Alice?’

‘Yes, dear. And the last I heard was that he was living all alone——’

‘But don’t you see that that explains it?’ cried Stephen triumphantly. ‘He only married shortly before I was born. . . . I mean, about a year before,’ he added, with a quick glance at Tom. ‘And it was abroad and nobody in this country knew anything about it. He *has* hardly any friends over here. In fact you might say he has none—except you. Shall I tell you the whole story, Aunt Alice? I mean all about his marriage, and how it happened. Would you like me to?’

‘Yes dear, of course. . . . And perhaps it is my own fault that I know so little. He went away when he was a boy—no older than you are now—and he never wrote. Afterwards, when I heard he had come back to this country, I thought of writing. I debated the idea with myself many times, but it always ended by my deciding against it. You see, I thought that if he had wished to renew our friendship he would have done so himself, and—and that it wasn’t my place to remind him of what perhaps he had no desire to

recall. I wish now I hadn't been so stiff and stupid, for I won't deny that his sending you to visit me like this has touched me very much.'

Tom suddenly felt sorry for her, and at the same time indignant. It was as if Stephen had invented this graceful action of Uncle Stephen's for no other purpose than to lead Miss Charlemont on to make herself absurd.

Meanwhile the maid had come back into the room, and while she remained there Miss Charlemont spoke of the weather and apologized for having nothing more to offer them than dessert—if she had only known they were coming she would have had a really nice lunch for them. But the moment they were alone again she turned eagerly to Stephen. 'I think, dear, I interrupted you. You were about to tell me something.'

'Yes,' said Stephen, sipping his wine, while his gaze rested dreamily on a picture above Tom's head. 'It was about father's marriage. But I don't want to bore you.'

'You won't bore me,' Miss Charlemont assured him.

'At any rate I'll try not to,' said Stephen, suddenly looking straight into Tom's eyes. 'You see,' he went on, after this ominous assurance, 'it was all most unusual. In a way, you might call it romantic.'

Tom glared, but Miss Charlemont sat mutely expectant, an expression of profound interest on her mild and innocent face.

Yes, it was romantic—and unusual. Uncle Stephen, it seemed, some seventeen years before, had revisited Italy, and during this visit he had married, and he had married a nun. He had heard her singing in chapel and had fallen in love with her voice. There had been an elopement—more in the nature of an abduction, it appeared, as Stephen added fresh details—followed by a year of perfect happiness. The story grew more and more picturesque as the narrator warmed to his task. Tom glanced at Miss Charlemont and hastily averted his eyes. There she sat, lapping it all up like cream, an absorbed expression on her face. Couldn't she *see* how preposterous it was? But no; she accepted it; and a deeply sentimental sigh escaped her when Stephen ended dramatically, 'My mother died two days after I was born.'

Miss Charlemont awoke out of her trance. 'It's really wonderful!' she breathed. 'And you told it wonderfully, Stephen—so sympathetically; it brought the whole thing up before me! It's almost like a novel by Marion Crawford—in fact *very* like a novel by Marion Crawford—I've forgotten its

name—but where your father listened day after day to the nuns singing in chapel, and to that one voice——!’

As for Tom, he had sat through this brilliant performance with a darkening countenance. He had known that Miss Charlemont could not be told the truth, but there was a difference between not telling her the truth and mystifying her to this extent. *That* seemed to him as ungentlemanly as it was unnecessary. After all, they were her guests. ‘I think you’ve drunk enough of that stuff,’ he suddenly said across the table, and in a tone that brought Miss Charlemont’s eyes round to him with a startled look.

She hesitated, and perhaps something in Stephen’s manner did at last strike her, for she murmured timidly, ‘I think, dear, you *may* perhaps find that Burgundy rather heavy on such a hot day. Wouldn’t you like to mix it with a little soda water?’

Stephen, his hand still grasping the neck of the decanter, stopped dead, and Tom went on coldly: ‘If you’re going to do all you said you wanted to do we ought to be starting soon.’

Miss Charlemont again interposed, and Tom knew from her manner that she resented the way he had spoken. But he didn’t care: he wasn’t going to have any more of this kind of thing. ‘You want, I expect, to see the Rectory and the church,’ Miss Charlemont murmured. ‘They are both quite near: in fact you can see the church steeple from the window.’

Stephen had relapsed into silence: he even had the grace to look slightly ashamed of himself. He glanced deprecatingly at Tom, but Tom turned away. He was really angry, and he would have been angrier still if Miss Charlemont had not been so foolish. But by the time coffee was brought in she had completely forgotten her misgivings. Perhaps she had never felt any, and had only been annoyed with Tom for interfering. At all events, it was perfectly clear when at last they rose to go, that she would have liked to have kept Stephen with her for the rest of the afternoon and to have sent Tom to explore the church and the Rectory alone. She told Stephen she was going to write that evening to his father, and before saying good-bye made him promise he would come and stay with her.

‘Sorry,’ Stephen began, the moment the door had closed behind them.

‘You needn’t have made fun of her to her face!’ Tom exploded. ‘Especially after she’d been so decent.’

‘But I didn’t. I mean it wasn’t really of her I was making fun. It was of the whole thing—of you and me and our explanations and all the rest of it.

Besides, I *can't* feel that it matters a straw what I say or what I do. . . . I know it does matter,' he added hastily, 'but I can't *feel* that it does. And then — Somehow, I can't think of it as real. I can't think of Miss Charlemont as real. The only person who seems real—besides myself—is you: and that, I suppose, is because you belong to both times.'

'So does Miss Charlemont.'

'She doesn't. She's no more like my Alice Charlemont than that monument was like the old village pump. Hang it all,' he went on half impatiently, 'whatever *you* may be doing, *I'm* living in a kind of fairy tale. You ought to remember that. I don't think you'd find it so easy yourself.'

'I dare say it's difficult,' Tom admitted, relenting a little. 'But I'm doing all I can to try to make it less so, and you might help me.'

'I'm going to help you. I want to help you—naturally—because I think something must be done pretty soon. . . . I think it was partly coming back to this place made me like that. It was just—I don't know. . . . But——' He walked on for a few yards with his hands in his pockets. 'Don't you see, there's a way I *might* look at it all that would make it pretty beastly. I've tried not to look at it like that; I've tried to make the best of it, and I don't think you're quite fair. I know you want to be, but I don't think it's possible for you to be fair to both me *and* Uncle Stephen. It's quite natural that you should choose him: only—you oughtn't to forget there is this other side.'

'I'm sorry,' said Tom contritely.

'It's all right,' Stephen answered. 'You've been as decent as anybody could be. It's not your fault: it's just the way things are.'

'I only meant that by talking the way you did at lunch——'

'I know. I'll try not to do it again. I knew at the time you didn't like it.'

But Tom felt unhappy. He had not realized this other point of view: he had only realized Uncle Stephen's. He could understand it now. He could imagine what his own emotions would have been had he suddenly been projected into the future. He would not have taken it nearly so courageously and cheerfully as Stephen had. To be alone like that—for that was what it amounted to! And Stephen must feel he was unwanted. The only friend he had was Tom himself, and there could be no illusion in his mind that Tom wanted him. . . . And yet, he *did* want him. It was only that he wanted Uncle Stephen more. . . .

They walked on in silence, but Tom had the impression that their pace was insensibly slackening. It was when the road took a sharp turn, however, that he became sure of it, for Stephen now gripped him by the hand. 'That's *our* house,' he said. 'I'm not going any closer.'

He was frowning, and Tom saw that something had begun to affect him powerfully. Yet in spite of his words, after a moment or two he walked on. Thus they reached the entrance to the Rectory and passed it, Stephen with his eyes fixed on the road ahead.

'Shall we turn back?' Tom asked. It was merely a suggestion, for he was now hopelessly in the dark as to what Stephen wanted to do. They were within a stone's throw of the old church, and all around were the quiet grassy mounds and headstones of a country graveyard.

Stephen shook his head. What was passing in his mind Tom could not imagine, but he raised the latch of the wooden gate and they went in.

There were few trees. The place was exposed to whatever winds might blow. The low stone walls, the straggling gorse-bushes and ragged bramble and heather, gave little or no shelter. It must be a bleak spot enough in spring and autumn and winter, Tom thought; yet on this grey, still, summer afternoon, which had clouded over in the last hour, it was beautiful and peaceful. The gravel paths were smooth and black; the place, though it had this lonely appearance, was not ill-tended.

Stephen led him straight to a grave near the farther wall. Tom saw a plain, rounded headstone, on which names and dates were cut. His own mother was not buried here, nor was his grandfather. The names most recently recorded were those of his great-grandfather and great-grandmother:—Henry Collet, who had died in 1889; Margaret Collet, who had died two years later. They were Uncle Stephen's father and mother: they were the present Stephen's father and mother: the two boys read the brief record, each to himself, and turned away. They sat down on the rough low wall. In the valley below them, across intervening cornfields, they could see the houses of Coombe Bridge.

For perhaps ten minutes they sat there without speaking: then Stephen said, 'Will you come back with me to Kilbarron?'

Tom wakened out of his daydream. 'To Kilbarron? But——'

'I know. Will you come with me?'

'To-day? This afternoon?'

‘It’s the first thing I’ve ever asked you to do?’

‘Yes, I’ll come,’ Tom said.

‘Then we’ll go now.’

They got down from the wall, and, without another glance at the grave, left the churchyard and started on their walk back to the village.

‘Why do you want to go to Kilbarron?’ Tom asked, for such a desire, if it were more than a mere whim, seemed to him strange.

‘I don’t know. Perhaps I’ll know when we get there.’

‘They’ll be expecting us at home, of course,’ Tom went on softly. ‘We told them what train we’d catch.’

‘Yes.’

‘And they won’t be expecting us at the Manor: it will be shut up for the night. Mrs. Deverell will have gone home, and very likely she’ll have gone to bed. We won’t be able to get in.’

‘I wasn’t thinking of the Manor,’ Stephen answered. ‘I was thinking of the other house: we’ll be able to get in there.’

But having said this, for a long time he kept his lips closed, and Tom, walking beside him, left him to his thoughts.

His own mood, though it had changed less completely than Stephen’s, was not what it had been in the morning. The aspect of Coombe Bridge itself struck him as different. Perhaps it was because the day had altered, and with it the colour of everything: perhaps only because places are always different when you are leaving them.

Stephen broke his silence at last. ‘I think we’ll buy our food here,’ he said. ‘I suppose a loaf and a pat of butter will do. We’ll have to see if we can get a bus.’

It was odd how he seemed to be acting now with a definite purpose, and yet not to know what that purpose was.

‘I’m sure there won’t be a bus,’ Tom said.

‘There must be some way of getting there, and it’s not four o’clock yet. We’ll find our way somehow. You don’t mind, do you?’

‘No.’

The grocer from whom they bought their bread and butter could tell them little about the journey, but a stationer proved more helpful. He happened to be a motor-cyclist, and he not only sold them a map and marked it, but also worked out carefully the stages of their route, wrote down two or three buses which would take them part of the way, and assured them that they might expect to reach Kilbarron not later than half-past nine or ten.

This seemed to be all right, and the first few miles were covered even more quickly than their time-scheme had allowed for. It was not till they were more than half way that they began to lose ground. Then a failure of one of their buses meant a long extra trudge, and it began to look as if midnight was more likely to be the hour of their arrival. Tom had begun to wonder if he would be able to last out the journey. He did not mention this, however; he was determined to keep on as long as he could. Sometimes they got a lift which took them a short distance, but after each of these lifts he found it increasingly difficult to keep up with Stephen's steady tramp. Fortunately, Stephen from the beginning had been silent and preoccupied. When they descended from their last bus ride—either disappointingly brief or remarkably rapid, for it seemed to Tom that it was over in a flash—it was ten minutes to twelve and they still had, according to the map, a journey of several miles before them.

It was a perfect night for walking—windless and clear, with a full moon to light their way. The country was unknown to them; they were not approaching the Manor from the Kilbarron side; but Tom was too weary to take an interest in his surroundings, or indeed to see anything but the high thorn hedges and the white road. After another mile or two his feet began to drag ominously. He had done his best and he was still determined not to give in, but when he sat down on a bank to tie his shoelace he felt as if he could not get up again.

‘Would you like to rest for a few minutes?’ Stephen asked. ‘I don't think it can be very much further.’

Tom shook his head. ‘Resting will only make it worse.’ He got stiffly to his feet.

Yet though he could hardly put one foot before the other, his spirit was content. He was happy—happy and tired—very happy and very tired. Ever since they had left Coombe Bridge, though they had scarcely spoken a word, he had felt like this, and as if he were being drawn into closer and closer communion with Stephen. Or was it Stephen. . .? When he had been asked a minute ago if he would like to rest—was that Stephen. . .? Yes, of course it

had been Stephen: Stephen was walking beside him now. Only—somehow— It was because he was half asleep, and the pale light was so strange, and everything was so quiet, as if they had the whole world to themselves. . . . He dragged on, his feet white as the white road. He hung on Stephen's arm, hung more and more, and this was strange too, because he knew he would not have done so a few hours ago. But now he didn't mind—didn't mind showing how tired he was—felt there was no need to pretend about anything. There had been only one person with whom he had ever felt like this, felt happy in this particular way, this way that left no room for doubt or fear, that was without shadow because it contained the assurance of giving no less than it received. He was happy, and, because he was happy with this *kind* of happiness, a certain childishness which was an essential part of his spirit no longer feared to peep out. . . .

But he *was* tired. He had long ago given up trying to make out what way they were taking: he left it entirely to Stephen. He was not very clearly conscious of anything now except that he was walking beside Stephen down an endless and moon-washed road. . . .

All at once they stopped. It had seemed to Tom that they would walk on and on for ever, and this sudden pause brought him up with a sharp jerk, the effect of which was as much mental as physical. He realized that for the last twenty minutes he must have been in a state bordering on somnambulism. He blinked.

Stephen was looking at him oddly. 'Well, don't you know where you are?'

Instantly Tom knew, and when he knew he began to recognize. But he sighed. 'Stephen, dear, I simply *can't* climb that wall. You go. I'll lie down underneath it and you can come and find me in the morning.'

'The gate's a long way round,' said Stephen doubtfully.

'I know. The gate's impossible. Now we've stopped I can't go on again: all the works have run down.'

'Come: I'll give you a leg up.'

'I need two legs, and two arms: my own feel like melted candles.'

'You're a terrible chap: come on now.'

Stephen lifted him bodily and Tom, with an effort that narrowly escaped landing him on his head on the other side, managed to get astride the wall. He stretched down his hands.

‘Don’t bother,’ said Stephen, ‘I can manage all right.’ And he clambered up beside Tom; then dropped down into the long grass.

Tom dropped also, and Stephen caught him. ‘Steady—steady!’ he said.

‘Sorry,’ murmured Tom.

‘We’re practically there.’ He waited a moment and then added, ‘Look here, I’m going to take you on my back. Climb up.’

‘You’re certainly not,’ Tom declared, pushing him away.

Stephen yielded unwillingly. ‘But you look dead-beat. Why didn’t you tell me sooner?’

‘I didn’t know sooner. It’s always like this. I can go on for a long time, and then there’s a sudden collapse. It’s well, isn’t it, we didn’t start to go round the world together the way you wanted to do?’

‘It was stupid of me not to see you were so tired.’

‘I ought to have been able to do it,’ said Tom. ‘It doesn’t seem to have affected you much.’

‘I’m used to tramping. Besides, I *am* tired. And very sleepy too. It will be daylight soon.’

Tom began to walk, but with uncertain steps. ‘Do you know your way, Stephen?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then I’ll leave it to you. If you go first I’ll follow.’

But they had not got a hundred yards before he stumbled.

Stephen stopped. ‘Look here, I’m *going* to carry you.’

‘You’re not.’

Stephen sat down. ‘Get on my shoulders. I can carry you better that way than on my back.’

‘I don’t want to,’ said Tom.

‘Well, I want you to. Don’t be obstinate.’

‘It seems so silly.’

‘It’s much sillier to make a fuss about it. If I’d suggested it on an ordinary occasion, simply as a joke, you’d have thought nothing of it.’

‘Yes, but then I wouldn’t have been giving in.’

He made no further difficulties, however, and Stephen, grasping him by the ankles, rose from the ground.

‘Catch hold of my hair; that will steady you.’

Tom fumbled.

‘Don’t tug it,’ said Stephen. ‘Hold my ears instead. You won’t hurt me: the least little touch will give you your balance.’

Tom took an ear in each hand, while Stephen trudged on.

‘You’ll be able to guide me that way, too; but don’t pull too hard.’

Tom gave a small pull, and Stephen moved to the left.

‘That’s right: you’ve a better view than I have, so keep a look-out.’

‘I love you, Stephen,’ Tom whispered.

‘You’re not to think of that now.’

‘How can I help thinking of it when I’m holding your ears.’

‘Well, think of it then, but don’t talk about it: I have to watch where I’m going.’

‘I mean you yourself,’ Tom went on, ‘as you are now. I wanted to tell you, because—I mayn’t be able to tell you later on.’

Stephen did not reply, nor did Tom himself very clearly understand what he meant. Suddenly, while he was thinking, there was the old familiar broken-down wall before them. Stephen stepped carefully through one of the gaps and over the loose stones. In a minute or two, threading his way between the trees, he had found the path. The way was now easy: a further fifty yards brought them out into the open—into the garden—with the low creepered house before them, and the stone boy watching them from his dark pool. Tom’s heart stirred with an unaccountable emotion. He clambered down from Stephen’s shoulders and stood beside him on the grass. The silence dropped like oil upon his senses. Every leaf hung as if painted on the air.

Only for a breathing space they stood thus before going on to the house. The back door was on the latch, as it had always been, and they climbed the stairs to Stephen’s room. Stephen lit the two candles he had bought in Coombe Bridge, and set them to stand in pools of grease upon the chimney-piece. Then they ate their supper.

They took off their shoes and prepared for the night. The window was wide open, but so still was the air that outside not a leaf stirred, and the candle flames stood up straight and motionless. The moon had dimmed and there was a faint reflection of daylight in the sky. Stephen blew out the candles.

‘We’re here at last,’ he said,’ and now do you know why I wanted to come?’

‘It’s too late to talk,’ Tom answered drowsily. ‘Wait till the morning.’

He was already on the threshold of sleep, with the door ajar and infinitely alluring. ‘Good-night,’ he whispered.

Stephen did not answer. Tom leaned closer. Then he shut his eyes, and almost instantly sank into the dark unconscious world which lay below his dream-world, and in which, from night to night, his life was mysteriously renewed.

CHAPTER XXVI

Through uncoiling mists of drowsiness Tom heard his name called, but it seemed to him a part of the dream from which he had not yet awakened. The dream had been all happiness and he tried to cling to it and in the effort half opened his eyes—sufficiently to see the sunlight on the wall and the shadow of moving leaves. He opened his eyes completely and turned round.

Instantly he tumbled from the bed and ran across the room. ‘Uncle Stephen!’ he cried, and next moment his arms were round Uncle Stephen’s neck.

‘You’re back—you’re back—you’re back,’ Tom repeated, rubbing his nose up and down Uncle Stephen’s cheek. He did not seem able to say anything else, and it was as if by these words and these instinctive animal movements he were keeping Uncle Stephen with him, making sure of his solidity. He hugged him tightly, once—twice—then became still. . . . ‘Yes, you’re back,’ he said.

‘You’ve got to tell me everything, Tom—and very slowly and quietly, leaving out nothing. You can begin while we’re having our breakfast. And remember your troubles are over—every one of them—and you’ve nothing to worry about any more.’

‘But *must* I tell you?’ Tom demurred. ‘Don’t you remember any of it? There’s so much has happened, and a lot of it must be happening still. I mean, I don’t know what they’re doing now—only I’m sure they’re doing something—Uncle Horace and Mr. Flood and Mr. Knox and my step-mother and even Miss Charlemont. I expect we’re being searched for at this very moment. You see, we were expected back at Gloucester Terrace last night, and we came here instead. Uncle Horace will have telephoned to Mr. Flood, and they’ll be making inquiries at Coombe Bridge. If they don’t hear anything about us to-day they may even tell the police. There are all the stories we told, too. Miss Charlemont’s is a new one, and——’

‘Poor old Tom. I do remember a good deal—rather hazily—and for the last hour or two I’ve been trying to remember more—ever since I woke up. I was not with you, Tom, when I woke up: I was back in my own room at the Manor. I came over here at once. Mrs. Deverell had not arrived—it was too early for her—which simplified matters; but she will have arrived by this time, for I’ve been here for over an hour. . . . I want you to tell me the whole

story in your own way. The *whole* story, remember, because there is much about which I'm not at all certain. It seems to me that between us we've managed to create a pretty kettle of fish. Isn't that so?'

'I'm afraid it is.'

'I can remember last night. I think the change, the dream, the enchantment, or whatever it was, had worn pretty thin last night. In fact, from the time we left the churchyard at Coombe Bridge till our arrival here all is clear. I can remember our journey and how tired you were at the end of it; I can remember carrying you: it is of what happened earlier that I am doubtful. There must have been a complete break somewhere. A break in consciousness, I mean—*my* consciousness. It is like this:—I can *think* back over last night, remember what I thought and felt; but of what came earlier I have only vague impressions, as if I had *watched* the earlier scenes.'

'You did more than watch, Uncle Stephen. Or at least Stephen did.'

'Yes, I know; but I can't get back into the mind of Stephen. That is where you can help me: by telling me the whole thing as you saw it.'

Tom told him. He talked sometimes with his mouth full and sometimes with his mouth empty, but always with his eyes fixed on Uncle Stephen's face. He did not minimize any of the complications that had arisen, nor gloss over the highly equivocal positions into which attempts to escape these complications had landed them. But, for him the whole aspect of the adventure was altered now that he had Uncle Stephen back again, and he even could be amused where before he had been nearly in despair. This frugal breakfast was in fact for Tom a very happy one. Perhaps some difficulties remained, but all anxieties were at an end, and his confidence was increased by the unruffled expression with which Uncle Stephen listened. Just so had the boy Stephen taken their troubles: one quality at least remained unmodified by time.

'Well, we now know where we are,' Uncle Stephen said, when he had heard the story out. His eyes looked straight into Tom's solemn eyes. 'Shouldn't you say, Tom, that it is a situation calling for all our diplomacy?'

'Yes,' said Tom, 'I should.'

'And what does *your* diplomacy suggest we ought to do? What policy, do you think, will be least likely to land us both in the police court?'

Tom looked serious. 'The police court!'

‘I was only joking. Still, we’re not quite out of the wood yet. Our position is that we have eliminated in broad daylight a full-grown boy; and you can’t do that, you know, without questions being asked. Moreover young Stephen appears to have made himself extremely conspicuous.’

‘I never thought of that!’ breathed Tom. ‘Uncle Horace was frightfully interested in him, and Miss Charlemont wants him to go and stay with her!’

‘They’ll *all* want to know what has become of him.’

‘Why can’t they think he’s just gone away?’ Tom protested. ‘I mean of his own accord. It was what he always intended to do.’

‘If he had remained Philip I dare say we might have hoped for that, but as my grandson I’m afraid we can’t. You say Mr. Knox was struck by the likeness?’

‘Not half so much as Miss Charlemont was.’

‘Miss Charlemont I don’t think matters.’

‘But she’s going to write to you, Uncle Stephen; you’ll probably get a letter to-day!’

‘Even so, I think we may ignore her—for the present at all events.’

Tom pondered.

‘Mr. Knox only saw the likeness after Stephen had told him his name,’ he said tentatively. ‘He *thinks* he saw it before, but he didn’t.’

‘The likeness of course, if he’s really convinced of it, might help him to believe the truth,’ Uncle Stephen murmured half to himself.

‘You mean they won’t believe he has gone away?’

‘It’s not that, Tom. I don’t imagine anybody will dispute his absence. After all, he *is* absent. But the question will be *why* he went away, and where he went *to*: and, in short, what particular part was played by his grandfather in the matter? I’m afraid we can’t make that part look anything but dubious. Let us put it plainly. He arrives here destitute. I do nothing for him, and when he runs away take no steps to get him back again. In other words, leave him to shift for himself, to sink or swim, without friends and without money. It is difficult to put that in an attractive light. In fact it justifies all the suspicions of Mr. Pringle and your step-mother.’

Tom pondered again. He had felt all along that Stephen’s account of himself was not going to help them, but he had not foreseen this particular

predicament and he could discover no way out of it. 'What do you think yourself, Uncle Stephen?' he asked.

Uncle Stephen smiled. 'I don't know that I think anything, Tom. But we'll go out into the garden and see if that will inspire us.'

Tom got up. In spite of the impasse they appeared to have reached, he felt happy. As he sat on the stone steps in the sun beside Uncle Stephen he came to the conclusion that he also was happy. The problem, in fact, presented itself to Tom now merely as a kind of abstract puzzle. He looked forward with the liveliest interest to the solution Uncle Stephen would eventually find, but that he *would* find one he never for a moment doubted.

And it came even sooner than he had expected. 'How would it do, Tom, if we were to make a temporary break with the past; if we left the Manor in charge of Mrs. Deverell for six months or a year, say, while we went on our travels? How would you like to explore the south of Europe? I'd take you over all my old ground, and we'd potter about until we found the right place, and then settle down—probably somewhere on the Italian coast, but there'd be no need to decide till we were both sure.'

'I'd love it,' said Tom.

'It's what we'll do then,' Uncle Stephen answered, and the finality in his voice for Tom settled the question.

Uncle Stephen was thinking; Tom, leaning up against him, waited for his next words. But before he spoke them Uncle Stephen rose to his feet. 'I suppose we might as well stroll on to the Manor now: and then I'm afraid I'll have to send you to Kilbarron.'

Tom looked at him inquiringly, and as they walked slowly over the grass Uncle Stephen explained what he wished him to do. 'I want you to try to get hold of Mr. Flood, and Mr. Knox, and bring them out to see me. First, however, you must send a telegram to Gloucester Terrace—a rather expensive one, I'm afraid, for it must explain your return yesterday *with* me. That will relieve the situation there and give us time to make our arrangements.'

'Am I to say anything about Stephen?'

'No: they'll take Stephen for granted. But I'll write out the telegram for you when we get home, and then we'll attend to one or two other matters which must be settled before we leave. You see, our arrangement with Mr. Knox will have to be cancelled. Now that we've altered our plans, you won't be able to become his pupil. That is one reason why I want you to bring him

with Mr. Flood to the Manor. I'm going to tell them the whole truth, the whole story, though how they'll receive it I don't know. But I think we owe it to them. Besides, even if it proves to be too much for them, I believe they'll still remain on our side—at least to the extent of not standing in our way.'

Tom believed so too. 'This is my path, Uncle Stephen—the path I made to the other house.' He stepped on ahead, for there was no longer room to walk side by side. Presently he said over his shoulder, 'I think they might believe it if you were to show them that portrait, with the name and date on it, and take them up to your room.'

'I doubt if the room will have much effect, and, portrait or no portrait, their faith is going to be put to a pretty severe test. All the more severe because with neither of them, I fancy, is imagination a strong point.'

'I don't believe Mr. Knox ever thought Stephen was telling the truth,' Tom said. 'I mean about what happened in Italy and all that. If he did he behaved very queerly.'

'Perhaps. We shall see. But don't, Tom, begin to make explanations on your own account. I want you to leave this to me. You've done your share.'

'I won't say a word,' Tom protested.

'You've done a good deal more than your share,' Uncle Stephen went on. 'I think you must have been very good to Stephen.'

Tom coloured. Not until they reached the end of the path, however, and the Manor House came into view, did he speak again. Then, as he caught sight of Sally sweeping out the porch, he turned. 'What are you going to tell Mrs. Deverell, Uncle Stephen?'

'I don't intend to tell her anything,' Uncle Stephen replied. At the same moment Sally paused in her sweeping, looked up, and instantly disappeared.

'She's gone to give the news,' said Tom.

He was right, for Mrs. Deverell was at the door to receive them. 'Well, Mrs. Deverell,' Uncle Stephen said pleasantly, 'here I am back again, and I hope Master Tom behaved himself while I was away.'

'Yes, sir—him and the other young gentleman.'

Tom looked at her, and instantly knew that the allusion to the other young gentleman had been deliberate. Mrs. Deverell went on immediately,

‘You’re welcome home, sir. Only I didn’t know to expect you and I’m afraid it may be a few minutes before——’

‘We’ve already had breakfast,’ Uncle Stephen said. ‘But we had it rather early, so I dare say Master Tom would like a cup of tea. You could bring it to the study perhaps. You don’t want a full-sized meal, do you, Tom?’

‘No, thanks: what I really want is a bath.’

‘Well, run along then. That will give me time to write a couple of notes as well as your telegram. You’re sure to find Mr. Flood at his office, but Mr. Knox may be out.’

‘And the other young gentleman, sir—Master Philip—Master Stephen?’ Mrs. Deverell hinted.

‘Master Stephen has gone away,’ said Uncle Stephen quietly, but with a quietness that closed the conversation.

CHAPTER XXVII

As it happened, the very first person Tom saw when, about an hour later, he entered Kilbarron post-office was the curate. He was standing at the counter turning over the leaves of a directory, and when he closed the book Tom was at his elbow.

Mr. Knox was surprised, as he was intended to be, but he did not know how significant was the playing of this small joke. It was in itself an answer to the question he at once put, 'Any news from Mr. Collet?'

'Yes,' said Tom, 'I've a letter for you from him.' And he took it out of his pocket.

He handed in his telegram while Mr. Knox was reading Uncle Stephen's note. The curate refolded it and put it away before he glanced rather curiously at its bearer. 'Your uncle wants me to come to the Manor this morning, and if possible to bring Mr. Flood. But I suppose you know that already. Have you told Mr. Flood?'

'Not yet. I've got a letter for him too.'

'Then I'd better go with you to his office: it will save time. When did Mr. Collet get back?'

'He came with me—last night.'

'And Stephen?'

'Stephen hasn't come back.'

Mr. Knox seemed about to say something further, but after a moment's thought reserved it for another time, and in silence they went out into the sunlit street and walked together towards Mr. Flood's office which was not more than a hundred yards away. When they reached it Tom drew back. It had occurred to him that Mr. Knox and the solicitor might like to exchange a few remarks in private concerning this unusual invitation, so he took the second letter from his pocket. 'Will you give it to him?' he said. 'I'll wait out here.'

'Well—just as you like,' Mr. Knox replied. But he took the letter, and passed through the swing door.

Left alone, Tom strolled on as far as the nearest shop window, where, his hands deep in his trousers pockets, he stood apparently fascinated by an

arrangement of tinned meats and fruits, which was the principal feature of the display. But this was not what he saw. Nor was he thinking of either Mr. Knox or the lawyer. In imagination he was standing beside Uncle Stephen gazing at the ruins of the Parthenon, sitting beside him on the shore of the Sicilian sea, far far away from all this, under a bluer sky and a hotter sun. . . . Five, ten minutes passed. Occasionally he glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the solicitor's office, and at last he saw Mr. Knox coming out. Tom went to meet him. 'Mr. Flood is getting the car,' the curate explained. 'The garage is at the back. I suppose we might as well walk to the corner.'

They did so, while Mr. Knox added, 'I hope we didn't keep you too long. He was waiting for the post. In the end he decided to leave it till his return. Here he is.'

Mr. Flood drove up, waved a greeting to Tom, and opened the door for Mr. Knox while Tom climbed up on to the seat behind.

The car turned into the road leading to the Manor. Tom, perched up behind them, wondered what the other two were thinking about, for they said nothing. He also wondered what they would be thinking an hour hence. He had a feeling of excitement and elation, and enjoyed the short drive, though the dickey was uncomfortable.

The car swung round the bend of the avenue, and Uncle Stephen, who had been waiting near the porch, stepped forward to meet it. 'So he did get you,' he said, shaking hands with the curate, who had got out first, and then with Mr. Flood. 'I must apologize for dragging you here at such an hour. I expect it is the least convenient I could have chosen. It was very good of you to come.'

'Not at all—not at all,' the visitors replied politely.

'Well, I hope you'll forgive me when I have explained my reason. But come in, won't you? Tom, I think we shan't require you in the meantime, but don't be late for dinner.'

Tom promised, and as the others turned to enter the house he walked slowly away.

He crossed the lawn. There was his path, and presently he found himself retracing his steps to the other house. It was more from force of habit, however, than anything else. The other house was now only an empty house to him, and he had no particular desire to return to it: indeed he had a feeling that it would have been better had he never gone there at all.

And while he drew nearer this feeling deepened. There was a moment when, at the entrance to the avenue, he very nearly turned back. For a strange, an almost ghostly fear had suddenly touched him, like a faint cold sigh of autumn wind. He did not yield to it: he walked on: but no further than the fountain, where he stretched himself on the grass. Once only had he glanced at the house, and it was like a hollow shell, empty and drained of life. Yet he knew that nothing could have induced him to go inside and climb the stairs.

He lay there, his elbows digging into the soft turf and his chin supported between his hands. The hot sun beat down on him, but that was what he liked. The world into which he and Uncle Stephen were going he saw as drenched in sunlight. He had built up his picture of it much as a child puts together a jigsaw puzzle—from fragments of Theokritos, from a walk taken by Sokrates and Phaidros along the banks of the Ilissos, and from deepest impressions of his own summer woods.

Thinking of Uncle Stephen made him think of the conference which must be going on at that moment in the Manor study. He wondered how far they had got. Uncle Stephen at any rate would have finished his story; there had been more than time for that; they must have been talking for at least half an hour. Would Uncle Stephen tell them all about him, Tom, as well as about himself? He could hardly do otherwise, for the secret must lie really in a kind of collaboration. His desire and his imagination must have acted in collusion with Uncle Stephen's, and this union somehow had produced all the rest. Would Uncle Stephen tell them it had begun even before he had left Gloucester Terrace? For that, too, was a part of the story. Unknowingly he had sent out a message which had reached Uncle Stephen through the night and the darkness. Their first meeting had not taken place in the Manor study, but in Tom's room at his step-mother's; and this much at least he supposed they would believe—surely it was easy to believe—though the rest was more fantastic. The lawyer he felt, would *not* believe the rest. On the other hand, he would have to believe *something*. . . . What? That it was a delusion? That both he and Uncle Stephen were slightly mad: only not mad enough to be shut up or prevented from going away together? *That*, after all, was all they wanted, though it might not be a flattering solution. His thoughts sank into a kind of dreaming. They floated over the past and the present, drifting to and fro, rising and sinking, like loosened seaweed on a swelling sea. . . .

'Down—down—down.' He dabbled his hand in the water of the fountain, and gazing into the shallow pool, began to sing in an undertone

that one word. It was because he was looking down through the dark greenish water: yet there were poems by Sappho—fragments of poems—which contained no more than a word or two, but which were somehow beautiful and sufficient, like that broken statue of Hermes. . . .

‘And golden pulse grew on the shores. . . .’

All the most beautiful things he knew had come to him through Uncle Stephen. They had been there, perhaps, like anemones in a wood, waiting to be discovered:—still, it was a kind of gift if somebody brought them to you, or brought you to them. And not an ordinary gift, for they were things which could not be worn out or broken. Uncle Stephen was his master and he was Uncle Stephen’s pupil. In the old days a pupil had lived with his master. He had that kind of master to-day. . . .

Where was Deverell? If it had not been for Uncle Stephen he might have gone away with Deverell, and what would have happened then? What would have become of him? His whole life would have been different. . . . Why had Deverell loved him? What was it he had loved? Not his beauty at any rate, for he had none. . . . Everything seemed to depend so much on chance. It was by chance that he had met Deverell, by chance that Uncle Stephen was his uncle. And Deverell’s chances had all been unlucky. He had gone very likely straight into the darkness. He might find somebody else to love, but it was improbable and—— Tom knew there were two kinds of love. ‘I’ll never forget him,’ he said softly, ‘but what good is that to him? He won’t even know.’

He thought of Stephen. Stephen had gone back into dreamland. But dream and reality were hardly distinguishable, for what was real yesterday to-day became a dream. All the past *was* dreamland: it was only the present moment that wasn’t. Deverell and Stephen—they were equally near, or equally far. Involuntarily he glanced up at the window where he had first seen Stephen, but the window was empty. . . .

This place was making him morbid. Like the raven in the poem, it seemed, wherever he turned, to beat out one monotonous refrain—never more. He would go back. The discussion, favourable or unfavourable, must be ended. He rose to a kneeling posture and then to his feet. He looked farewell at the stone boy watching over his garden. . . . Never more. . . . He would take this with him as his last and most beautiful impression of the place. But even as he stood there, letting the picture stamp itself upon his mind, he felt again the impulse to kiss that faintly smiling mouth. He would not. He remembered the last time—remembered telling Uncle Stephen. He

turned his back and instantly felt an intense sadness. Why should he not kiss him? What harm could it do? It might be silly and babyish, but nobody would ever know, and it really was the kiss of good-bye. . . .

The stone was warm. The sun had warmed the curved pouting mouth and the smooth limbs and body; but when Tom's lips pressed on those other lips the eyes were looking away from him, and dimly he felt that this was a symbol of life—of life and of all love. No, no—not all—not Uncle Stephen's. Uncle Stephen's eyes were fixed upon him, looked straight into his spirit, that was why he was different from everybody else. 'Good-bye,' Tom whispered into the delicate unlistening ear.

He hurried from the garden, trying as he went to shake from him this incomprehensible mood and return to actuality. Surely the present crisis was absorbing and exciting enough, and the future was there, beckoning eagerly, filled with happiness.

And it was as if the influence he had felt could indeed reach only a certain distance, for as he hastened along the wood path his spirits rose rapidly. He had completely recovered them when through the trees he heard a low whistle, and knew that Uncle Stephen was come to look for him. Tom broke into a run.

'Where are they?' he asked as he burst out into sunlight. 'Have they gone?'

'Yes, but Mr. Flood is coming back. He wanted to attend to his letters: the post hadn't arrived when he left this morning.'

'And Mr. Knox?'

'Mr. Knox couldn't stay.'

'Is it all right?' Tom questioned eagerly, his eyes searching Uncle Stephen's face.

'From our point of view—yes.'

'And from theirs?'

'Well, theirs isn't ours, I'm afraid.'

Tom was silent.

Uncle Stephen walked slowly on, his hands behind his back, while Tom kept pace beside him. 'I should think Mr. Flood won't be here for another half hour,' Uncle Stephen said, 'but Mrs. Deverell knows; I told her we were expecting him.'

Tom did not ask what had taken place at the meeting. In a way he was even glad not to know. He wanted to forget the whole thing, and Uncle Stephen must have guessed this. ‘To-morrow we’ll start,’ he said. ‘That ought to give us plenty of time to pack. Mr. Flood will look after the closing of the house. You’re sure the plan appeals to you, Tom? You’re sure you are quite happy?’

‘Yes.’

Uncle Stephen laid his hand on the boy’s shoulder. He kept it there while they continued to pace slowly up and down the lawn, Tom silent, Uncle Stephen talking of their approaching travels. He presently, indeed, plunged into a stream of reminiscence; the prospect of revisiting old scenes and reviving old memories evidently attracted him, though it was not so much the thought of the direct renewal of impressions as the thought of renewing them through the eyes and the intelligence of the boy beside him that lay behind all he said. In that seemed to be his pleasure. They were as companions. Objects which he had loved before were dearer now. From the boy there came feelings and emanations—things which were light to the sun and music to the wind: and the old man’s heart seemed born again. . . .

Up and down they walked, waiting for Mr. Flood. And the sun shone, and Sally flapped a pink checked duster out of an upper window, and a thin trail of smoke floated away from the kitchen chimney across the sky, and on the next chimney a rook alit with a friendly caw.

August 1929

April 1931

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Inconsistency in accents has been corrected or standardised.

When nested quoting was encountered, nested double quotes were changed to single quotes.

Space between paragraphs varied greatly. The thought-breaks which have been inserted attempt to agree with the larger paragraph spacing, but it is quite possible that this was simply the methodology used by the typesetter, and that there should be no thought-breaks.

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[The end of *Uncle Stephen* by Forrest Reid]