THE REBELS

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THE REBELS

by

HENRY TREECE

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NOTE

Every character in this book is entirely fictitious and no reference whatever is intended to any living person.

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How shall they thrive, the stern-faced children who
Turn from each other's hearts, yet smiling speak
In hawk's tongue and the word of lions? And how
May father bless the tender flesh he fetched
Out of the empty, unrelenting dusk?
Thew that should thrust a boat towards the sea
To beach upon the gold, the Western Isle,
Has used its force to drag a brother down;
How can they thrive, these rebel lions who
Gasp through the summer's lion-coloured days?

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PROLOGUE

WILLIAM GREGORY

born 1885

PROLOGUE

OUTSIDE, against the attic slates of the tall house, the summer rain drummed heavily as though, having decided to break through the sultry air, it did not know how to stop, and so must pour down for evermore.

The tall dark-haired young man went to the little window and brushed the sleeve of his jacket across the pane, rubbing away the grime in a narrow streak so that he might look outside. The sky was still full of rain. There would be no strolling along the hedgerows that afternoon at any rate. "Poor Nell," he said. "You'll miss your walk today, old lady. Aye, that you will—and there won't be so many summers left for you to walk in now." He turned away from the thick green glass of the narrow window. "But you've had a good life," he said, "A good life, in its way. A roof over your head and a fire to lie by and a meal when you wanted it. You can't grumble, old lass; there's many folk who don't have that—that and love. And you've always had love, always a friendly hand and a soft word. You'll take the memory of that with you when you go, at least."

He turned back to a heap of miscellaneous objects that lay in one corner of the damp room, against the blistered panelling. There was an old cabin-trunk, varnished a deep brown, with the words 'William Fisher, Port Elizabeth', painted on its lid in white; a pile of dusty pink-covered papers, 'Chatterbox'; a small heap of old clothing, a slouch-hat, a belt, and a felt-covered water-bottle, which gave off a dry and rusty smell when he uncorked it and held it to his nose. "South Africa!" he said. "What a fearful place it must have been. Dry and friendless and full of horror!"

Behind the cabin-trunk stood a number of assorted lengths of thin gas-piping, to the end of one of which was secured a candelabrum of jets, with dusty-white glass shades, some of them still unbroken. They were shaped like flowers, or like the skirts of a dancer as she whirled in the air, poised on her toes. They were so incongruous that the young man smiled to himself to see them, so different from the light-shades he knew; for their time, so daring, and in all truth so innocent.

"Those old boys thought they were doing something wonderful," he said, "with their glass shades and their horse-hair sofas!" He smiled and then felt down behind the cabin-trunk to see what he could find there. He brought back a faded photograph and a large shell. They were both thick with dust

and at first he wondered whether to bother with them, but the rain once more swished against the attic-window viciously. The young man shivered and wiped away some of the dust from the picture.

It had a red plush frame, and its glass was shattered across one corner. The photograph behind the glass was very faded and yellow, though by holding it up near the little window, he could distinguish the sort of thing it was—a family group with the photographer's name scrawled rhetorically across the bottom right-hand corner. 'Francis Poole, The Arcade, Walsall.'

"You'd be an old man now if you were alive," said the youth, and was about to fling the picture back behind the trunk when the expression on one of its still, pale faces stayed his hand. It was a girl in the front row, who sat with her feet tucked below her long sober-coloured petticoats, leaning her head against the knee of a stern-faced lady in a high-necked black velvet bodice. The girl's eyes were large and dark, so much could be seen despite the picture's sad fading. These eyes seemed to stare out from that sober, stiffly dressed group, yearning, even frightened. They were eyes that would gaze out into the uncertain future from the faded sepia background until the last trace of pigment left the cardboard which bore Francis Poole's proud and professional signature; eyes that would never cease to ask their mute question until the thin light that penetrated the dim attic had wiped them from the photograph and had left the pasteboard blank again.

The young man peered at the girl's thin face with its long melancholy jaw and its heavy black hair. In one hand she held a flower though he could not now discern what it might have been. The other narrow palm was placed across her small breast as though in some stylised pose dictated by the brisk and watchful Francis Poole of Walsall. She did not look as though she had enjoyed having that picture taken. Perhaps she had been forced to sit there, with her trembling hand across her thin chest, for ages while the others were being arranged—although, come to think of it, the whole group had the solid, obedient look that said it had not taken long to get them into position, and keep them there. They stared from the picture like gundogs all atremble with subdued and obedient anxiety.

The central figure was a stoutly built man with a white square-trimmed beard and a shiny-peaked yachting cap. To his left was the grave lady in the black velvet bodice, holding a small child on her knee. Beside the bearded man stood a solidly-made young fellow in a high-cut jacket, in the lapel of which he wore a precisely posed flower, a neatly trimmed rose, it seemed. The flower of a young man who favoured the known and the accepted rather than the adventurous, the exotic. His hair was cut short, even over the ears,

against the current fashion of the time, and his upper lip already carried what must have grown to be a luxuriant moustache. This was a young person of definite ideas but of little imagination, one might have guessed. By his side stood a small lad in sailor clothes, his curly head surmounted by a broad-brimmed straw hat. He held a telescope in his right hand, gingerly and even uncomfortably, as though it might have been loaned to him for the occasion, to be kept intact on pain of terrible punishment! On the other side of the photograph, beside the mother, stood a tall slim girl wearing a flounced white dress and swinging a flowered hat on one elegantly crooked arm. She might almost have been termed beautiful had not the curl of her upper lip carried in it something of disdain for the whole proceeding . . .

Or was it disdain for the young boy who stood at her side, almost on the farthest edge of the picture? He seemed different from the others, even at a distance of thirty years or more, and with a difference which not even the art of Francis Poole could nullify. The young man in the attic held the photograph near to the light of the window and stared . . . This of them all was a familiar face, in a strange ghostly way, a face which he felt he knew. He peered deep into the damp-pocked sepia, then suddenly he laughed—laughed at the ill-fitting Sunday clothes, the slouching hangdog stance, the unkempt raven hair that hung unbrushed over the forehead, like a dead bird's wing. He laughed at the great beak of a nose—yes, a hawk's beak rather than a nose! The beak of a creature that would give in to no man; no, not even to father, in his important yachting-cap; not even to the great Francis Poole himself!

The young man turned the picture over reflectively and saw that names had been scratched across the back of it in ink, an almost indecipherable ink now, that appeared only here and there. Yet by holding the cardboard cross-wise to the light and by following the incisions of the steel nib, he could just make out the names . . . 'Father . . . Mother . . . Tom.' Tom was the one with the short hair and the moustache . . . 'Enoch'. That would be the little one in the sailor suit . . . 'Phyllis'; the girl with the flounced dress and the sneering lip. Yes, of course, Aunt Phyllis! And to think that she had been almost beautiful once! It seemed impossible. Then, the one beside her was Elijah! There was no doubting that nose, that defiant, hangdog slouch! That refusal to conform! Dear man! Dear Elijah! So he had always been like that!

And the little sad-eyed girl who sat with her feet tucked out of sight, who was she? Her name had almost vanished now. But the youth peered down at it, worrying at the shallow scrawl like a terrier above a rat-hole . . . "Susan," he read. "Good lord! You were Susan! My dear, you were Susan!"

He put the picture down, gently now, and stood for a moment thinking. Then he seemed to notice the shell for the first time. It was a large sea-shell rather like an immense cowrie, of a deep pinkish colour. Under its layer of dust he felt that its outer surface was rough but rough with a regularity that caught his interest. He wiped it on the sleeve of the old jacket that lay on the floor. Then he saw that there were words carved on the shell, carved in that curious form of Gothic which seems the special province of monumental masons. The words were quite clear, almost unblemished by time and decay and he read them easily:

> "ENOCH FISHER, born March 12th, 1867. Taken to God on September 15th, 1881. Believe in Me and I will stretch out My hand to succour ye, though fire should burn and the floods roar. Suffer little children to come unto Me."

The young man held the shell in his hand, wondering, half-afraid. Then, almost as though in embarrassment, he bent and took up the felt-covered water-bottle. It was badly battered and its cloth jacket was coming away at the edges. Across its side was written a number and two initials in thick indelible pencil:

"14782 D.B."

His forehead wrinkled for he suddenly recalled a red stone-flagged passageway and a big walnut clock ticking in a corner, and a big man by an open door that led into a garden, and the big man was holding the water-bottle out to him, offering it to him. But the boy could not remember who the big man was, and his forgetfulness brought with it an unaccountable sadness. Suddenly it seemed to him that everything in that dim attic was calling out to him, "Remember me!" As though each object vied with the other for his attention, his memory, his love. But something was holding back memory, preventing the messages from coming through to him clearly; something else that stood in the way, troubling him. He was young and bewildered and lonely now, and some part of a past that was not wholly his was reaching out to him with frail and dusty hands that he did not cherish, for his life was before him and he could not love these ghosts of the attic . . . These dusty things that had suddenly begun to come perceptibly alive as the rain lashed on the thin roof-slates over his head.

Defeated, he put the shell back behind the brown-varnished trunk and stood for a while, irresolute, listening. Now the rainspots began to fall more lightly and a faint gleam of sunlight moved across the dim room from the

little green window under the eaves. It was like a symbol of release and the youth made his way to the ladder that led to the floor below; but he was some time in finding the first rung as he groped down blindly with his foot, for his eyes had filled with tears, though he did not know why this should be.

At last he made his way through the old conservatory where the untended plants curled riotously about each other and even made their way through the broken panes towards the roof. He pulled the door gently to behind him and turned the key in the lock. Then he walked down the long weed-grown path towards the great green gates that gave on to the street.

Outside the gates a tall man sat upright in a pony-trap, his legs wrapped in a grey travelling-rug. He turned sharply when he saw the boy. “Damn it, William,” he said, “I thought you were never coming. Your Aunt Phyllis will think we’ve had a spill.”

The boy said, “Sorry Uncle ’Lijah, but I was looking at a photograph. A picture of the family, I think, from the look of it.”

The tall man grunted. “Hm!” he said. “I’ll burn it if I ever come here again. Such things only bring back old memories!”

SUSAN FISHER

born 1865

I

"SUSAN! SUSAN! WHERE are you? I want you!"

I can never think of my youth without hearing again the knocking and the sad whining cry from my mother's sick-room; and then I see myself running again across the big red-tiled kitchen, through the conservatory where the plants flung down their heavy breathless scent, past the foot of the steep high stairs, and so to her door.

That door will never leave my mind, though God lets me live to be ninety—which I earnestly pray He may not, for I have seen enough suffering, known enough evil, to suffice as it is . . . But it is the door of which I speak now, and not of myself. It was a tall, narrow door, always painted cream, in contrast with the heavier sombre colours of the rest of the house. Its handle was of carefully polished brass, by the side of which there was screwed a long, oval dutch tile, with a blue-painted scene of canal-boats and windmills on it. This tile was intended to protect the cream paint-work from our dirty fingermarks we were always told, though now I do not recall that any of us were ever allowed to have dirty fingers—except perhaps Elijah, the 'Black Sheep' of our family, and the one I came to love best of them all . . . He seemed to be outside all the ordinary laws of the family; at first because he would not conform to them, and later because the family seemed to abandon him, and let him go his own way among the pitbanks and the gipsies, a spiritual brother of their ragged tents . . .

The two upper panels of the door were of coloured glass, but of such deep tones, of red and old gold and menacing purple, that little light ever passed from one side to the other of those panes. It is this glass, I think, that comes most readily to my mind when I sit here against my sunny wall, knitting and looking back across the years that are dead.

But then I was a young girl, hardly more than seventeen and small for my age, they said; and when I heard mother knocking on the floor with the light bamboo curtain-rod that she always kept at the bedside, I would run until I got to that door and saw the coloured glass of the panels. Then I would stop, as though I might be entering church, for that is what the glass reminded me of. Then I would call to mind my sins, my guilt, as I looked up at the deep vibrant colours.

I do not think that any of the children ever entered mother's room but in that state of guilty-mindedness; none of them save Elijah perhaps, or the eldest son Tom, who was strong-minded and 'right' in his ways, like our father himself. Tom did not stop before the coloured door, I imagine, to call to mind the weight of wickedness which he must shed before he entered that room. Tom was the sort of young man who never stopped in his progress to consider anything. He seemed always to feel that, as the future head of our family, God would not let him be wrong—though sometimes I have shuddered to think of the sort of God Tom's must have been at that stage of his life.

So I would pause before the door, heavy with sin, and call fearfully, "Mother, did you want me?"

And the faint high querulous voice would come back, full of complaint and unhappiness. "Susan! Susan! Are you there? I thought you were never coming. I thought you had gone out and left me." How sad those words would make me feel, for I never did go out. Indeed, I was too afraid of going out to leave her. She was my sole responsibility, I felt . . . Or was it the rest of the family that made me feel like that? I do not know; but I always became confused when my mother accused me like that. It made me feel that I had indeed intended to go out, leaving her, thinking selfishly only of my own pleasures and not of the poor invalid who lay in the dark mahogany four-poster, dying as we had been warned of a malignant growth, a cancer; in the bed that had been father's wedding-present to her so many years before.

"I am sorry," I would say when I was in the room and smoothing her head. "What is it, mother? What can I get you, dear? Will you have the salts or a little drop of brandy in a spoon?"

But she would only shake her head hopelessly. "Sit with me, Susan girl," she would say. "I am lonely. Sit by the window where I can see my daughter." And I would sit in the old cane-seated chair before the big bow-window, gazing through the tumult of fern-tendrils in the lush window-box, through the heavy-leaved lilac trees that father had had planted close to the window for privacy's sake at the time when this downstairs room had become mother's parlour and we inquisitive children were forbidden to look into it from the long garden.

I must have sat many many hours there, in the window, which was darkened by the green of the leaves, saying nothing, just listening to the fire purring—for since she had been so ill mother had a fire in her room even in

the height of summer—listening to her breathing so painfully and calling out quietly to my father who was dead, or to the little ones she had lost, like everyone else in those days, earlier in her married life. Yet sometimes I was overcome with self-pity as I sat there, a prisoner to compassion, especially when I heard the others outside, laughing in the garden and planning what they would do when Saturday came and the horse-bus called at the end of our street.

It was then that I would remember my deformity, my strange painful ankle-bone that made me limp a little and would not let me run and dance like my brothers or my elder sister, Phyllis. "God must have intended you to be patient, to wait on others," she once said to me. "That is why he gave you that ankle, to remind you. For your place is in the home, dear." She would often say things like that when I was young; and then she would smile to me sweetly and go to change her dress; always a new one, a beautiful one—shot silk, or taffeta, or in the right season, when the sunshine called us out on picnics, sprig muslin . . . Yet she seemed kind to me in those days for she always gave me the old ones to wear when she became tired of them or the hems got torn at a dance.

But our elder brother Tom was not always so kind. It was as though he did not dare allow himself any expression of tenderness at all in those days. When he spoke of my ankle he would say, "You had better be careful, Susan. It seems that you have been punished already for the original sin that is in you. Remember that the just God who has visited you once is not likely to overlook you if you disregard the warning a second time!"

I think he was genuinely anxious for my welfare, in his grave humourless way, though at first his words troubled me and even stopped me from sleeping for a while, for I knew not where my sin could possibly lie; but later I came to accept them, to accept my state of sinfulness, though I could never understand why it should be so. And at last I even came to accept my crippled ankle and to think of myself without grief as being different from the others, a poor thing who was meant by God to serve and not to be served.

Yet sometimes in my own little room at the top of the house, I would look at myself in the mirror that Phyllis had given me when father bought her the new cheval glass, and I would note my shining dark hair and big eyes and my long hands . . . Then I was guilty of sin again, for these things gave me pride, such a fierce dark pride that for a while I saw myself as the lady of Baggerley Hall, the great house at the edge of the Black Country which, family tradition whispered, was my grandfather's by right but had

been stolen from him by a noble lord in some false dealings over a coal-pit. And when this sin was on me, I saw myself driving out along the broad avenue that led from the house towards Kinver Edge, those long pale hands resting with negligence against the polished ebony of my carriage; my dark hair strung with a row of delicately-lustred pearls; my great eyes half-closed beneath their heavy languid lids, as I smiled with condescension to the humble tenants who stood bareheaded by the roadside to see their lady pass . . .

But always this dream died sadly, for it led inevitably to the great Hunt Ball and even in my wildest fantasies my ankle was still lame. What should it profit a great lady to be comely if she could not dance among the pink coats and the swirling white dresses? Then I would come away from my tarnished little mirror, hating my hands and my hair and my eyes. Hating myself and the sinful pride which I was unable to control.

And at such times I would sit on the cabin-trunk that father had had made once when a great sadness was on him, and I would look out across the night through my high window . . .

Below me, over the high wall and the wide green gate of our garden, lay the street, Wood Street, with its lamps spluttering and groups of small ragged children playing in the yellow light, shouting and skipping, their long shadows leaping crazily back and forth across the cobbled roadway. And beyond them, out of reach of the lamps, a darkness lit faintly by the warm deep glow of a foundry that lay at the end of that little street . . . Then beyond that, a high gorse-covered hill, among whose deep green tunnels we crouched in summer-time and down whose clay slopes the more adventurous boys and sometimes even the girls careered on stolen tea-trays, unknown to their watchful families . . . And beyond that hill, a wasteland of marsh and of tussocky grass that rose gradually until it reached the cluster of houses which marked the outskirts of Walsall . . . And so on and on, up the hill to the gaunt spire of the church . . . And beyond that yet again, the open sweet-smelling countryside, the rose-embowered cottages and whitewashed apple trees . . . Not the Black Country any more, but Great Barr, Sutton Coldfield, Pelsall. And then names which even I did not know.

But when I leaned far out of my window and looked to the right there was no mistaking the nature of the countryside, the poor pitted face of a land that had once been beautiful, once upon a time, before men found clay at surface level and so flung up their hunched and nightmare kilns; or before men found their precious ironstone and so created huge belching monsters that poured their sulphurous smoke up into God’s clean air to make it foul

and destructive of men's hopes; before men cut criss-cross into the meadows and ran their oily water through the lush fields and sent barges across the pastures, laden with coal for furnaces and bricks to build factories. And above all, before men flung out the excavated rubbish, the ordure of the soil, the slag, the shale, the smouldering wastes, across stream and valley, creating a stinking landscape of despair where once children had chased white butterflies.

As I leaned on my high window-sill and looked to the right, I could see just beyond the scattering of houses that marked the limits of Darlaston the low beast-like brick-kilns, their ovens burning through the night, low down and near the hard clay of the ground they squatted on; strange fires past which men walked busily, their coarse shirts open to the waist, tending their monsters until dawn, their long shadows thrown spasmodically across the surrounding lands . . . And beyond them, waste land, the grey and melancholy steppes of ruin where reed-fringed pools lay steaming in the sun, choked with iron bedsteads, sodden news sheets, broken pottery, cast-off clothing, the dead creatures of kennel and farmyard. And past these pools, hills that God had never put there with His own hand; shamefaced carbuncles of waste matter, sparsely covered by gorse or sapless grass; mounds that seemed to try to hide their true identity in that second-hand clothing of feeble green. And then again, past such hills, the town of Wednesbury, black, sturdy, ignorant and kind; an ancient Saxon stronghold that had long since lost any beauty or nobility it might ever have had and was now a place where those men who dug the coal, who smelted the iron, who sailed upon the canals, who moulded bricks, slept and ate, fought and sat in cellars to watch gamecocks thrust out each other's eyes. A place of well-meaning, savage ruffians, a typical Black Country town; a swarming hive of strange contradictions where one might stand on the steps of the tall church on the hill and look down across crumbling roofs to a bull ring where but a generation earlier the laughing citizens made their way, bemufflered and moleskinned, to watch the local bull terriers rip the face from a chained and bewildered bull . . .

And beyond all that, other towns almost exactly like Wednesbury, and then others, and others, where men were humped or consumptive or weak-sighted or white-haired, because of the trade that kept their families alive . . . Until, great smoke-laden Wen, we came to sprawling Birmingham, or Brummagem, as we all called the city, whatever our class or education . . . And beyond Brummagem, what was there? I did not know; perhaps Stratford, or Warwick, and then London? Perhaps. I did not know.

I only knew that if a man dared turn right and follow his nose, he would at last shake off the filth of the Black Country and come at last into Bewdley on the Severn; Bewdley, where the gracious houses came down to the broad waterside and where the swans glided in majesty and with a quiet mind, sweet princes among their gentle people . . . And beyond Bewdley, the great Forest of Wyre, then crooked-steepled Cleobury Mortimer with its merry public houses and its black and white dwelling-places, set below the whale-backed Clees that hid half-timbered Ludlow from the eye.

Once I had been that way in my father's wagonette, staying the night at Bridgnorth on the way back. The outing had taken two days, and that was the longest time I had ever been away from our house among the marshland and rust-tinged pools. There I had seen men with ruddy faces, men whose clothes were not marked with the dust and grease of their trade; men who spoke a free and leisured tongue, without bitterness or cursing. I had seen the corn-stooks mellowing in the westering sun and had looked breathless down from the slopes of Clee across the gently falling, coloured countryside that led the eye at last into Wales. And in that ochred sunlight, that glorious tawny sunlight, I had actually glimpsed the first of the great blue hills of Wales, the country of my fathers. I had glimpsed Heaven!

And that evening as we drove on, I was too full for words and sat on my cushion at my mother's feet with my eyes shut, trying to fix in my mind for ever and ever the picture of that sunlit glory of fields and hedges and spinneys and hills. "Oh, the lion-coloured days!" I mumbled to myself in a private ecstasy. "The lion-coloured days!"

And Phyllis had touched mother on the arm and said, but so that I should hear, "Hark at the child! She's sickening for something, mark my words, mother. We shall have trouble with her before Ludlow. She was too young to bring. The excitement has been too much for her. She is too highly-strung!"

And mother had said quietly, "Maybe, maybe; but you never know with bairns, especially at her age. It's a trying time." Then I was deeply sad because I knew that I could never tell mother or Phyllis the miracle of what I had seen, never pass on and share my joy with them. Nor with our Tom, who would have sneered at me in his solemn way; nor little Enoch, who was too young to understand; I could only tell Elijah. Only Elijah, and then only if I caught him in the right mood, when his mind was not set on poaching, or dogs, or fighting-cocks, or gipsies . . .

And all this I thought of in my high bedroom, looking out of the window before getting into bed, gazing above the long broad expanse of garden that

stretched out at the front of our tall house.

II

THAT garden and that house of my childhood now seem to me the very symbols of failure and despair, though I do not think they struck me like that at the time when they were my world, not consciously, at the least.

Once, before I was born, when even Tom was still swaying unsteadily on his feet in thick lace-fringed petticoats, my father was a partner with Quaker Griffith in an ironworks that lay somewhere near Bloxwich and had its own reach of the canal for loading. Founded by my grandfather, who had come from Wales to seek his fortune among the Midland men, it had flourished and had even become powerful in a community of hardworking egalitarian iron-fighters, who asked little more of their masters than that they should pay a just wage and should themselves take a turn with their hands in the works, if the occasion asked for it. And this grandfather was a big bull-necked man with a great square jaw, who would have died before he would have admitted that any one of his workmen could beat him at anything . . .

My grandfather had married a fitting woman, a woman who matched him for strongmindedness and singleness of purpose. That grandmother Dunn was respected and feared by most folk in her immediate neighbourhood, from Parson to pitman. Her ready advice was asked on all topics, from the best manner of decorating the church for Harvest Festival to the easiest way of bringing on labour to a young woman facing her first confinement. "Ask Mistress Fisher," the words went round—whether the question was one of making a brewing of parsnip wine or of redeeming the bed-linen from a pawnshop when the ticket had been lost . . . "Ask Mistress Fisher." That is her epitaph. I shall not have such a one to take with me to the underworld.

And though she was as ready to lend a guinea to a hard-pressed furnaceman as she was to give him the sharp edge of her tongue if she thought he deserved it, she was both loved and respected. In those days, Darlaston was a rough place, as I have said, perhaps only a whit better than Wednesbury, and that because it was smaller and perhaps because there were more of the old families still living there and exerting some slight influence of decency and of good manners. Yet it was not every woman's wish to walk the narrow ill-lighted streets of Darlaston after dusk. But when my grandmother walked abroad, the shouting and cursing in alley-ways fell

silent and dark-faced men turning out from the riotous taverns stopped and touched their caps . . .

It was a matter of family commonplace that my grandmother Dunn had once killed a man, and that while she was still only a young woman, not yet thirty I believe. It happened one afternoon in summer when she was ironing a shirt for my grandfather, who was to attend an ironmaster's Dinner that night at *The George* in Walsall. A local girl ran into the kitchen breathless and sobbing.

"Oh Mistress Fisher, Mistress Fisher!" she said. "That dirty man has been meddling with us again!"

My grandmother put down her flat-iron and said, "Where is he, Sarah-Ann?"

"Down by the old cinder wall where he always waits, Mistress," stammered the girl. "He always waits for us there and jumps out on us and lifts up his apron to show us."

"Yes," said my grandmother, a righteous woman, "And nobody does anything about it to prevent you from being molested. But what our men wunna do, that I will! Now go you home and see after your father's socks and that man will not trouble you any longer."

Then my grandmother took off her pinafore and put on her best bonnet and shawl. And she went quickly down to the old cinder wall where the half-mad old man still held a young girl by the shoulders, snuffling at her.

And without saying a word she took him by that part of his body which he was so often anxious to display and so dragged him back through the streets without mercy.

"Oh Mistress, oh Mistress!" sobbed the wretch. "Leave me go and I'll never do it again. I beg you, Mistress! I'll never do it again!"

But my grandmother never spoke until he fell down groaning. And then she turned and said, "May that teach you your manners, Samuel Smalley." And so she went back to her ironing-board.

And that evening the constable from the Bull Stake came down to the house and very respectfully told her that the man had died in Walsall Infirmary, but that she would hear no more about it as he was a dangerous character and a woman must defend herself, come what may.

My grandmother snorted, "Hear no more about it! Indeed! And I should think not, either!"

Then she gave the policeman a glass of her parsnip wine and he was himself glad to get away from the house so whole, after the look in her eye, he said.

That was my grandmother, the stock from which I came. How strange it is that our family seemed to owe so little to that strong pair. I lacked her strength of mind just as my brother Elijah lacked grandfather's forthright industry. I think that we perhaps belonged to an earlier age of the family; something weaker, more imaginative, perhaps more poetic even.

And that was the stock from which my own father inherited his foundry, being their only son and having been apprenticed to the iron-working from the age of fifteen.

I do not remember my father ever working at the foundry, or now exactly where it was, even, for things have changed so much in the years. By the time I was walking and able to understand things a little, he had already sold out his share in the works to a large Company from Wolverhampton, old John Griffith staying on as managing director. I think father was paid very adequately for his share, though I know that Griffith stood out against selling for long enough and my father's adviser, Lawyer Foster, counselled him not to accept the offer at the time. But whether he showed lack of business sense or not, father thought he was doing the right thing for he had always had a great longing to travel, to sail the seas, and even to his death still wore that black yachting-cap that never came within many miles of salt-water.

Yet father knew what he wanted. He was already about forty-five and seemed to feel that his years of vigour were numbered and that unless he saw the world now, he never would do. Besides, he had clinched a bargain with the incoming Company that my elder brother Tom should be taken into the firm and one day be given a position of high responsibility. So that father never felt that he had lost the ironworks completely. With Tom as managing director it would be like having it in the family again. And in the meantime his sold-up shares gave him enough to retire on and to live a comfortable if not luxurious life.

So father retired to a pair of cottages at the edge of the town, where some of us were born and where we spent our earliest years. And then, before he was fifty, not having been able to go out on his dream-travels because of domestic affairs, he became very restless and began to have strong doubts about the wisdom of having sold the foundry. There was almost an acre of ground behind the cottages, which were situated right on

the roadside, and one bright morning father woke up with the notion of erecting a small factory in which he could instal buckle-making machines, for the small steel industries were at that time making great headway in the district.

At first my mother consented to the plan and soon drayloads of bricks began to arrive, worn and discoloured things which had once formed a works chimney that had recently been demolished and which had come on to the market at a cheap rate. Then we children began to watch the new factory rising behind our cottages and played among the cement-pits and scaffolding when the workmen had gone away at night.

But when the great square building had risen to a height of six feet or so, my mother took the plan into her own hands and called a halt. The family were growing up, she declared, and the two cottages were already too cramped. We would abandon the factory scheme, since father had enough money to see us all without want until we could earn for ourselves, and instead of a new factory we would build a house more worthy of a retired ironmaster.

At first my father was angry, then wavering, and at last compliant—for he carried within himself the very fault of irresolution for which he so often castigated us. So in the end he came to be resigned and our new house began to rise, a triumph to my mother, gaunt, tall, unlovely, but in its way proud and even defiant, for from a distance it reared its high gables above the other houses within sight, looking in its night-time silhouette as though it tried to belittle everything within reach. A strange hybrid it was, tall yet carrying below it two rotund bow-windows that made it look rather like a pot-bellied alderman when seen from the garden. It turned out to be an L-shaped house, for when the main body of it was completed, my mother felt the need of more room still, and so grafted on to the parent-body of the house was a long conservatory, and after that a kitchen, and after that a coal-house, and even then a privy.

So the buildings grew and multiplied to satisfy mother's recurrent whims; a midden, a great barn, two lots of pigsties . . . And my father watched it all sadly, seeing his dream of power fading, until the plants bloomed in the conservatory and the face of the house was shrouded with ivy and the thick-tiled roof of the privy became hidden with wintergreen.

Then at last he finally surrendered and sat in the sun, under his lilac trees before the bow-window, and watched the waves of the Atlantic receding into the limbo of all his lost dreams.

And that was where we spent most of our lives, in that tall gaunt house, one room of which, the room to which was attached the conservatory, hardly ever saw the light of day, but had always to be lit by the sputtering gaslamps, for which father had installed an engine, between the lavatory and the midden-wall.

That dark room is the one I remember best for it lay perpetually in the power of the vegetable-green light that was reflected from the lush foliage on the other side of its one window. It was the room in which was kept our most ornate furniture, the mahogany and dark-green figured plush; and all the other treasures of my parents—the black marble mantel clock shaped like a Grecian temple, the bull's head cheese-dish, the gilt-locked family bible on the cross-legged bamboo table, the Wedgwood china services, the heavy cut-glass bowls, the big coloured prints of Inkerman and of Balaclava.

In this room we held our Christmas feasts, our Readings from the Scriptures, our funeral suppers. It was the place of solemnity, the room where no one ever laughed, no, not even Elijah himself.

III

DURING these years we saw few people from the outside world of the street and the town, except occasional relatives or friends of our parents, or the scrubbing-women, and these last were usually either too downtrodden by life to open their mouths in friendly talk, or, contrarily, too forward and blasphemous for us children to be allowed access to them as they worked. I remember one of them, an old Irishwoman who always came to us keening in a black shawl and smelling of ale, a blackened clay stump between her fangs and her filthy toes showing through the holes in her patched canvas shoes. When she appeared on alternate Fridays mother always found me a job winding wool or unpicking old table-cloths in another room.

But there was one visitor to our fortress, an old scissors grinder, whose advent sent me hobbling to greet him whatever the weather and whose flow of coloured tales kept me at his knees, spellbound, my head full of words that would ring in my ears for a month until he came again.

I must have known this old man for three years and more, yet I never learned his name. To me he was always simply the Scissors-man and he would smile agreeably whenever I addressed him so.

Not all the time I knew him did he dress differently; always the same faded red worsted cap with the little tail sticking up from the top tantalisingly, the old black silk muffler and the greasy waistcoat with the deep bulging pockets, the rough untanned hide leggings about his thin bowed legs. His eyes always watered freely, pools of tears within their pink rims, but his merry wizened little red smile belied this apparent sorrow.

The Scissors-man would trundle his grinding-wheel through our green gates and up the path, to prop it against the pigsty wall. Then he would walk up to the kitchen, where the carving-knives and scissors would be laid out ready for him in a cloth on the window-sill.

I would wait until his wheel was spinning round well, then I would stroll down the path and sit on the wall beside him. After a while he would say, without even glancing at me, “Did I ever tell you about the fight I had off Cape Horn?”, or, “Did ye ever hear about the wild horse I rode through the River Trent?”

Then, without waiting for my yea or nay, he would begin. I truly believe that this old man made up these tales especially for my benefit; and what is more I do not think that he had the ghost of an idea what he would say next—until he had said it! Yet such was my childish thirst for adventure and information that I never once doubted his veracity, nor did I ever stop to consider the plausibility or otherwise of the incredible yarns he spun to me!

One of the most exciting and certainly the last tale I ever heard from his lips was about an old barn he had once slept in.

"Aye," he said, his damp eyes set along a sparking scissors blade, "and a rare old barn it were, set down in the bottom of a deep old dell. A lonely old barn and a draughty old barn, but a barn full of hay, so a barn full o' sleep. An' I'd go to that barn when I passed that way and I'd open the door and I'd lie me down. Oh, many a night did I sleep in that barn, and the wee mice knew me and the grey rats knew me and the wobbling bats that fly in the night squeaked when they heard my hand opening the door!"

When he had got so far, he half-turned and glanced at me to make sure that this preamble had indeed caught my interest. Perhaps he smiled in his crafty old poet's heart at my wide-open eyes and my sagging mouth! At any rate, anxious not to let the atmosphere, which he had been at such pains to create, evaporate, he went on at an excited gallop:

"But there was one night, lassie, a dark unfriendly bluster of a night, with the black clouds hanging over the dell as though they'd smother all in it, and a thin bleak wind coming on from the faraway Wall of China. I hurried to the barn and pushed my precious wheel inside. Then I ate my bit of snap, my bread-and-cheese, you understand, in the thick furry dark, and then snuggled my old bones a-down in the middle of the hay. And then the wind blew loud and the wet rain splashed down, beating like the rat-tat-tat of Satan's skeleton on the thin rattling roof—but devil a bit did I care in that hay!

"Then at last from my first sleep I awoke and I listened, for another strange sound came from close by my side. Now, it wasn't a groan and it wasn't a snore; it was summat o' both, in that dark, dark place. I lay still and listened and it came back again—and again, and again, and some more then again . . . So I thought, 'That's a man just like me, come in,' I thought, 'to keep his poor bones from the wind and the rain.'

"And I turned on my side for this stranger man smelled, not a smell that I knew, or a smell that I liked. So I turned on my side to get out o' the smell

and I went off to sleep, but a troubled old sleep. Then . . . God have mercy on me!"

And I nearly fell over the pigsty wall with fright at this sudden change in his voice!

"Do you know, the dawn broke in and I turned in my waking and stretched out my hand . . . But this man had no jacket. He hadn't a shirt. And the hair on his face grew right over his ears! And he gave a great snuffle and then gave a snort and rolled up against me and stroked my cold chest. But he hadn't any hands, and he hadn't any thumbs, and he hadn't any fingers—He'd got great long claws!

"Then he sat up in bed and he looked down at me, and the dawn came through and I looked up at him! Then I got up and ran and I left my wheel, and I ran and I ran to the top of the dell!

"Till a little dark man, with a red sash on, came out of the barn and he called me back! For 'twas only a bear, and a dancing-bear, that was bedded in hay of this old barn with me! A great Russian bear, the man said it was, that'd not hurt a fly, let alone a poor man! But I didn't go back, I was shaking too much, so I pushed out my wheel and away I went!"

Then he looked up at me smiling and patted my arm, for my eyes must have been starting out of my head with anxiety and terror. And that night I screamed out in my sleep that the bear was chasing me and the old Scissors-man trying to trip me up so that the bear could catch me!

The next morning Phyllis, whose room was below mine, told mother all about it and I was forbidden to talk to the old man when he came again. Instead I had to sit in the garden when I heard his wheel come trundling up the path. He never seemed to understand why I left him alone like this, for he would often call out that he had new tales for me and although I was dying to hear them, I never heard another one after that tale of the bear in the barn. He must have thought I was rude, for I had to ignore him completely, Phyllis said, or I should not even be allowed to remain in the garden when he came but would have to go inside, into the gloomy house.

IV

THE garden was a greater joy to me than the house, though it too brings back a sort of sadness to me when I think about it now. Its high wall started immediately behind the house and continued in a great square or rectangle, cutting us off from the road at its farther end and from our neighbours on either side. All round the wall tall trees were growing, laburnum, lilac, and at the front where the big green gates led on to the road, a thick cluster of red may and white may, which hung over the cobblestones of the street and gave shelter to the lovers who congregated there before returning to their own homes at night.

When I was small, I would often sit below that wall, in our garden, just to hear these folk talking to each other, to wonder at the strange sounds of tenderness that came from mouths coarsened by daytime into the snarl of beasts. Yet how sweet these voices made themselves by the time evening had come! I did not then know that I was perhaps doing wrong in listening to strange people's voices. I was a child and I was curious. But once our Phyllis caught me—I think that she had been out there that night—and boxed my ears and told Tom about me; and for a few days I felt so guilty that I could not look my brother or my sister in the eye; though I did not know why I felt so guilty. Perhaps it was because their expressions had been those of hatred for a moment as they stormed at me and that made me feel unclean.

The lower end of the garden near the road contained a stable in which our plump chestnut horse, Bonny, lived among the straw and the harness-pegs. And beside her stable there was a wooden structure which we always referred to as the coach-house, but which only housed our big black-painted wagonette. This was the family vehicle which transported us to Sutton Park or Pelsall, or when Bonny was feeling extra-strong to Tettenhall or even to Kinver. Below the wagonette was a rack on which we carried our broad flat wicker luncheon-basket. Oh, they were delirious days of sun and the clopping of Bonny's hooves, and home-made ginger-beer in stone bottles, that we bought from old ladies in linen sunbonnets who sat outside their whitewashed cottages and smiled and called to passers-by. It was nectar! You cut the strings of the bottle and the cork shot up into the air and out of sight behind the wagonette as we bowled along the tree-lined roads and over the shallow water-splashes into Paradise . . . Glorious lion-coloured days

that never seemed to end—until they *did*, so suddenly, leaving us all sad and deadened and a different family.

But though they were such happy days and though as I sit here below the sheltering wall with my knitting I recall them with a great and tearful pleasure, yet I can remember very little about them in detail, apart from the general impression of sunshine and blue skies and tall grasses and the sound of Bonny's feet on the hard roads. It is as though it all happened during one long afternoon called childhood, and that the season was always summer . . .

Yet I do remember one incident clearly, perhaps because it was not the happiest of occasions, perhaps because it was a new step forward in my understanding of my family. We were sitting on the grass below a church tower and the rooks were calling above our heads. It was late afternoon and the smoke was already rising from the chimneys of the farmhouse to our right, and the shadows were long across the little meadow where we rested. Tom and Phyllis were sitting together, apart from the others, while Elijah had roamed off to search among the outlying farm-buildings to see if he could find a hen-nest that the farmer's wife had overlooked. Enoch was sitting on mother's lap, playing with her Whitby jet beads and singing to himself. I can still recall his light golden head, like that of an angel, set against the stiff black of mother's bodice . . .

I was nearer my father than I was to anyone else, trying to make a daisy-chain and finding that I could not split the stems for I bit my finger-nails in those days, despite constant slappings from mother and Phyllis, and that awful Bitter Aloes which they painted on my fingers every night when I went to bed!

Then suddenly the ganders came, stretching their long necks and hissing, running towards us in hate. Tom and Phyllis got up and began to flap their serviettes and to laugh at the stupid anger of the birds. I do not think I should have been frightened at all but I saw mother look round in alarm, clasp Enoch to her and begin to run towards the gate.

Then the ganders left her and seemed to come for me in a body and I tried to get up and run away too; but my ankle failed me when I had almost risen and sent me sprawling about in the long grass like a shot partridge. I whirled round before I fell and saw that Tom and Phyllis were still laughing and waving their napkins. And then I was suddenly very frightened for the creatures clustered about me and began to drive at me with their wicked beaks.

I think I must have screamed out in my terror for I saw my father beating away at the birds with his yachting cap and kicking at them in a way that I had never seen him behave before. Even his face was different, so changed that it looked almost cruel as he slashed at the outstretched irate necks. I thought my father was fine then, like a conquering hero, for the birds scattered on either side of him, coming back to attack him from a new angle but each time being harshly repulsed by foot or by hand.

Then suddenly he bent over me and the next I knew I was swung up in his arms, out of their reach; and as he carried me to the fence he kicked out again and again, knocking the feathers from the brave brutes and actually sending some of them limping away with hurt legs or damaged wings, which they trailed behind them so piteously that for a moment I could have wept for them too!

But I had something else to think about. The hand which was nearest my face had been deeply gashed by a beak, so that the blood ran on to my white pinafore; and I bent my head so that I could kiss it. And the salt of my tears and of his blood mixed on my lips and I said, “Father, I love you; I love you; I love you!”

He smiled at me and I saw then that he had bitten his lips in his anxiety till they bled too. “Lass, I’d do anything for you,” he said almost in a whisper, and then he turned his head away as though he were ashamed of having declared his feelings so openly.

Safe by the fence Tom said, “Father, it looks as though you have hurt one of those birds. He can scarcely hobble. What if the farmer objects?”

My father glared at my elder brother as though he might strike him, and then with his customary tolerance towards his first born he said, “Tom, my boy, and if he objects I will do the same to him!”

After that we fell silent for it did not seem like our father to speak in this lawless way. Even I who had suddenly realised the strength of my love for my father felt ashamed, embarrassed that he should talk like an ordinary common man of the forges and rolling-mills. But all the same, on the way home I sat at his feet as he drove the wagonette, although the floorboards were hard and uncomfortable, and rested my head on his hard knee. And from time to time he would put his hand down and smooth my hair and smile at me. Then I almost thanked God for giving me such an ankle as would let me know my father’s love for me.

But Tom and Phyllis sat at the far end of the vehicle and talked in whispers to one another, sometimes fixing me with their eyes as though they were jealous—which was a silly thing, if they were, for they were the great ones of the family and not I. I knew that only too well and thought it foolish that they did not remember it too. But even great ones, powerful ones, are sometimes very childlike and simple, and I think that for the first time in my life on that late afternoon I sensed that Tom and Phyllis were after all flesh and blood like me, with the same childish weaknesses and fears. Yet they had no need to fear me; I was harmless enough at that time.

V

EVERY SATURDAY morning my father observed a routine peculiar to himself and fascinating to me. At nine-thirty on the dot he would call out,

"Children! Children! Tobacco-mixing time!"

and we would stop whatever it was we were doing, to run to him as he stood pale-faced and handsome, with his bushy eyebrows and his square-trimmed beard that somehow reminds me to this day of a schooner sailing the China Seas . . .

Indeed, he was a square man altogether; only of medium height but very wide in the shoulder, his square-cut alpaca jacket of a light fawn colour made him look even squarer. I see his image in my mind now—the black yachting-cap with its shiny patent-leather peak and the two brass buttons, one on either side of the cord, his stiff white collar and broad black tie; and below the fawn jacket, his narrow sharply-pressed blue-serge trousers. His dress seldom seemed to vary. At least that is the picture of him which is most firmly printed in my mind.

"Children! Children! Tobacco-mixing time!"

Then, holding hands, with little Enoch on one side, me on the other and Elijah kicking stones somewhere behind us, we would set off, the party taking its time from me because of my ankle, to the only shop I seem to have known during this period of my childhood.

It seemed a spacious place then, though doubtless as is the way of things it would turn out to be only a small establishment if I were ever to see it again. Its two black-painted, bottle-glass, bow-framed windows jutted out into the tiny cobblestoned and grassgrown cul-de-sac, overshadowed by dusty plane trees. It was a small backwater of peace and delight where a young mind might grow and flower undisturbed.

These windows were filled with an assortment of pipes—briars, cherrywoods, clays, and even aristocratic meerschaums, arranged decoratively on layers of black velvet or plush; and, but dimly discerned through the thick and uneven glass of the panes, row upon row of painted tin

or porcelain jars, some of them covered with pictures of a blue and white willow-pattern type, all of them carrying little yellow-varnished labels to show the brand or style of tobacco which they contained.

When we arrived at the safety of this little court, father would let go our hands and we would rush excitedly up the three worn steps into the shop where old Mr. Ackroyd would be waiting, smiling and rubbing his yellow hands in welcome. He seemed old, incredibly old, even then, with his tasselled black skull-cap, white side-whiskers and his round-shouldered stoop that bowed him half-way over his broad and polished redwood counter.

"Well, William, well!" he would say. "I see the brood still flourishes! And, if I might make so bold, how is Mistress Fisher's back this week? Is the sciatica a wee pinch better, would you say?"

Then father would nod or smile and shake his head as though there are some ills of this world from which one must never hope for a release and would settle himself on one of the two high walnut chairs that stood before the counter, while we children would stand, our damp noses hardly able to reach the brass binding of that splendid counter, or we would sit outside on the steps until the men had finished their grown-up conversation on the various sicknesses that the flesh is heir to, but which made dreary listening to lively young things.

But once, Elijah, feeling his age—I think he must have been ten at the time—made to seat himself on the other high chair instead of coming to the step like us. But father waved him away from it, as one might a naughty puppy, with a stern gesture. "That's for customers, my boy," he said, "not for little lads. The step's your rightful place!"

So, from the open doorway, we would watch the delicate hands of old Mr. Ackroyd as he selected, frayed, rubbed and mixed the varied-coloured tropical leaf ("A shade more latakia this week, do you think, William?") on to a square of cream silk that he had laid carefully on the counter, so as not to waste a crumb. Then gently like a wise old woman with her delicate baby he would tip the precious mixture into one pan of the shining brass scales, and cluck if he had mixed too little or too much, and beam with self-congratulation if he had put together just the right amount.

Invariably he would leave the sensitive balance swinging while he adjusted his short step-ladder against the decorated drawers that lined the back of the shop, and climbed up and down it laboriously three or four

times, to replace on an upper shelf the special and rotund China jars from which my father's selection had been made.

Only then did he wrap up that sweet-smelling mixture; and only then did father take out his dark green sharkskin purse, with his initials set on it in silver, to hand a new half-sovereign over the counter with grave ceremony.

When this was done, our part in the play began, for the passing of the shining coin was our weekly cue. Then we would troop into the heavily odorous room like crafty cherubs, expectant in the highest degree, but nevertheless simulating a nonchalance far beyond our years. Mr. Ackroyd would then look at us with a surprise which reproduced itself impeccably each Saturday, as though he had never even clapped eyes on us before.

"Ah, William," he would say. "Look at all these children who have just come in? There must be a Circus somewhere, that I declare! Who are they, William? Why, gracious me, they are *your* children! Yes, as large as life! Why, you've brought your children, William, to be sure! 'Lijah, Susan, and young what's-is-name . . . Er, what's your name again, me lad?" And he would cluck and smile and rub his wizened old hands while young Enoch, in a purgatory of childish embarrassment, mumbled out his name, his flaxen head almost on his chest.

But the old man would never let him get away with his Christian name alone.

"Don't you mean Master Enoch William John Fisher, my boy?" he'd say. "Yes, ah yes, that's exactly what you mean to say, isn't it now? Well, and now I look at you a bit closer I think I do know you after all! Yes, I think I do—Master Enoch William John Fisher, that's who it is . . . and would you credit it, I have something for you here, yes, that I have . . ."

And then he would fumble below the counter at a little secret drawer—at least, that is how it seemed to us then, a secret drawer, no ordinary one—and at length, with much shaking of the head and clicking of the tongue, he would place carefully on the counter three identically-wrapped packages. First Elijah's, then mine, then Enoch's, in our order of age. But once he pretended that there were only two. The instantaneous, flowing anguish of our little brother dissuaded him for evermore from this experiment with juvenile emotions!

"I do declare," he said, "another minute and he'd have roared my walls down! Aye, that he would!"

Then when we had said our thankyous and had carried away our prizes to the step, he would say, “And what is it this week, then? *They* didn’t tell me, when *they* brought them! Very secretive, *they* are. Funny folk, altogether! Is it treacle toffee like last week, or striped humbugs, or just plain Spanish?”

So we would run in again and show him, excitedly, and the old man would pretend to as much amazement at the current delicacy as we genuinely showed, especially if the treat happened to be one of which we were in favour that particular week.

Poor old Ackroyd! He must have died many years ago now, forgotten very soon, for he had no relatives and very few customers, I should say, for the new cigarette fashion was steadily killing his trade which was founded on the more solid and masculine pipe, and he refused obstinately to have any truck with these new-fangled women’s things, as he called them many times in our hearing.

I have often wondered about those sweet-packets; did he in reality make us a weekly present out of his small earnings? Or had father a private financial arrangement with him? Did the sweets too come from that regular golden coin?

However the sweets came, whatever they cost, they were worth it. When other more important memories have faded and great occasions died, I shall still recall those heavenly delights of sugar in its several forms, wrapped in their cones of stiff brown paper; and in whatever place of anguish I may come to find myself, that little grassgrown court will remain a haven in my heart.

Surely, adults scarcely know the full power of what they do on such trivial homely occasions! For us small ones of the family the Queen at Windsor was in truth a great person; but Old Ackroyd with his tasselled cap and his scales was an even greater!

VI

How is it possible for one to love and to hate someone at the same time? Yet I think that is how I felt about my brother Elijah in those golden days. Two years older than I, he was vastly bigger and more courageous. Indeed, never once did I see the occasion when his will was broken by another man, or woman for that matter, though he was never much for women, when I think about it.

It was as though, being different from anyone else in our family, he had set himself to fight us all from the start. His lank wiry frame, his black hair, so unkempt despite my mother's constant cajolings and threats, his long pointed nose and square jaw, all spoke defiance. I can only see him like that in my memory—yet I came to learn that there was a strange tenderness beneath this appearance. I even think that in a crooked masculine way he liked to be tender rather than truculent and aggressive, though of course he would never admit such a weakness.

I think I hated him most when he was domineering and wanting to fight someone, no matter whom, which he often did; and I think I came to love him, and to love him dearly, the moment that I realised this was not the real Elijah; that the real Elijah was tender but afraid of tenderness, at heart a poet but afraid to lay bare the softness of his heart.

I first glimpsed this side of his nature when he was about twelve and I was ten. I have said that the front of the house was enshrouded in thick ivy, and it was among these leaves that I discovered Elijah one evening when I looked out of the house to see the stars before I went up to bed. He was groping about among the heavy leaves as though looking for something and when he turned and saw me his face flushed a little in embarrassment. But then he dropped his head a little and pretended not to notice me.

"What are you looking for Elijah?" I asked saucily.

After a while he turned and came to me as I stood on the lowest step. He looked into my face earnestly and his lock of uncontrollable black hair fell over his eyes. I leaned down and tried to brush it away for him but he gave a fling of his head which left his face uncovered again, for he hated to be touched, even by me.

“Susan, I can trust you?” he asked and I nodded. He took me suddenly by the hand. “Feel in here,” he said, pulling me towards the ivy.

I did as he said and at last my fingers encountered something hard and cold. “What is it?” I asked, puzzled.

He looked about him for a moment to make sure that no one else was spying on us, then he whispered, “It is a sword. A real sword that has killed men.”

I gasped. “Oh Elijah,” I said, “where did you get it? Does father know? What is it for?”

He said, “Dick Belcher got it for me. It was used in the Crimea and it killed Russians, I think. I hide it here every night so that father will not know about it. You must not tell a soul about it, our Susan! Promise?”

I nodded my head violently. “What do you do with it?” I said.

“Nothing yet,” he answered. “But one day I may be such a soldier as the man who killed those Russians in the Crimea and then I shall need my sword. I take it out with me each day and practise using it.”

I said, “I have never seen you with it.”

“No,” he answered, “nor has anyone else save Dick, and he is the best friend I have in the world. I slip it down my trouser-leg and then push the hilt under my jacket.”

I laughed then, picturing him doing this. “I thought you sometimes walked as though you had hurt your leg! That must be why.”

He nodded solemnly. Then he smiled at me and led me back to the house. “Susan, a sword is a lovely thing to have. It is not that I want to harm any man with it, but rather because a sword is so beautifully shaped. It is so light in the hand and makes one feel so gallant, so proud, so powerful. Sometimes when you are asleep in the house, all of you snoring peacefully, I have come down in the moonlight and walked about the lawn under the trees with my sword in my hand. I have seen the moon shining on its blade and have cut the blossom from the peartree with it so lightly, so gently, that the petals fell to the grass like great white snowflakes. Then I have put it back in the ivy and have crept back to bed.”

I stared at him in alarm for as he spoke his face looked like that of another person. His eyes gazed beyond me and his forehead was shining with a strange unaccustomed light.

“One night,” he whispered, “I even walked through the streets with my sword in my hand. All the doors were shut and the windows dark and the lamps were weak and dying. I met no one but an old tramp down by the canal. He called me brother and crossed himself and went quickly among the shadows under the bridge. I stood by the bridge for a long while then, listening, and I heard him breathing hard and praying. I almost went under the arch to him, silently, without speaking, to see what he would do. Then I knew that the sword made me a different person. With it in my hand, I was free to walk through the town like a king and all men afraid of me, calling me brother so that I should not pass the sword through them and take their lives away.”

I looked at him fearfully now and saw the light shining in his eyes as he turned his face up to the new moon. I could not understand my brother but I felt that somehow he was a fine person and strange, almost like a prince. Then I felt thrilled to be his sister and for a moment I think that I was even in love with him in a funny sort of way. But even so, because I was a girl, and because I was a practical child in many ways, I felt a doubt rising unbidden in my mind.

“Elijah,” I whispered, “I do love to hear you say such wonderful things, but will your sword always please you so much? Will it be enough for you when you grow older? Will it bring money into the house and will it get you your bread?”

My brother came out of his trance and looked down at me smiling. He said, “I know what is in your mind Susan. You are comparing me with Tom. Tom has never thought of swords. Tom is a beast of burden, fit for nothing but an iron works. Tom will wear a white collar and a tie and have a fat family, and then one day he will stop eating his roast beef on Sundays to die of boredom and then he will be buried in a grave.”

I looked up at my brother as though he had uttered a black blasphemy. “But brother,” I said, “we shall all be buried in a grave, surely. That is what the Parson is for, to bury us decently like good Christian folk. Only the animals are not buried in graves.”

And as I spoke I remembered Billy our old goat, who was killed without warning when the wagonette backed into him and crushed him against the stable wall one Spring day when Bonny felt too frisky. Poor Billy was cut up for dog’s meat by our butcher but his skin was left at home, hanging on a fence to dry, for father said that he would like a hearth-rug made of old Billy. I remembered the skin getting very stiff, as hard as a board, and the

flies coming to it hungrily, and a sharp smell wafting about the fence under the sycamore tree until mother could stand it no longer and had the skin burnt.

But human creatures had to be buried, surely, or they would not go to Heaven!

Elijah smiled shrewdly and said, “That is all you know, my dear little sister! But I can tell you that heroes are not buried. Their bones lie out on faraway battlefields, or on mountains, or beneath the trees of great forests; and the hawks circle over them, and the rain washes them clean, and the mighty winds blow over them in tribute. They are not buried like common folk!”

I looked at him in grave astonishment. Now I knew what was different, Elijah was born to be a hero. That was it! That was why he was so different from other boys I had seen and spoken to . . .

Alas, for my dreams, he was nothing of the sort! He was a dreamer, only I didn’t know that then. I thought that people always meant what they said.

Yet I am not belittling my brother, for he made me aware of something which no one else ever taught me; he introduced me to the strange unaccountable world of poetry, not words in a book but the poetry of men and of things. This must have been when he was turned fifteen and when father had given him up for lost. Tom was already on his way to the completion of his apprenticeship at the foundry and was already thinking of life from the point of view of an under-manager at the firm of John Griffith. Little Enoch was doing well at school and was soon to be transferred to Lawyer Foster’s office, to see whether he might later become articled and so come to earn his livelihood at the Law.

But Elijah was steadily refusing to be educated, and just as steadily standing out against entering any profession. His days were full enough without work, it seemed, for he was away from breakfast time to evening most days, wandering about Bentley Common or as far afield as Kinver Edge, learning the ways of the animals, or mixing with the rough-and-tumble Brummagem boys who strayed as far out of their territory as West Bromwich, looking for fights and raiding shops when they could.

Elijah taught me poetry, though I did not know this until many years later, and perhaps it is little enough to thank him for, the way things turned out . . . It happened one morning early in Summer when there was a holiday from the local schools for a church festival. It was also the time of Darlaston

Wakes or Walsall Fair, I forget which. I was sitting on a bench under the garden wall when Elijah came out of the house with his lunch wrapped in a red handkerchief and slung over his shoulder like Dick Whittington's, on the end of a stick. I called out to him as he passed and he came back to me.

"Where are you going, our 'Lijah?" I asked. I felt lonely and hoped that I might persuade him to stay and talk to me a while.

He searched my face keenly. "I'm going to my secret hiding-place," he said. "A place where I can be alone and not be troubled by those in there." He pointed with his thumb back towards the house derisively.

I must have looked very wishful when he said this for he suddenly said, "You don't know much about what goes on in the world, do you, lass? Why, there are many places much better than this, where you can be free and be out of the reach of other folk . . ." He stopped and seemed to consider for a moment, then on a sudden impulse he said, "And I've half a mind to take thee with me! Would you like to come?"

I jumped so quickly from the seat that I fell down across a flower-border and I saw that even Elijah looked a little impatient with my weakness; but he smiled at last and even helped me up.

"Come on," he said. "We shall be hours, with you walking so badly, but I'll take you!"

I asked him to wait a moment while I went back to the house for my bonnet and shawl but he began to walk away from me, "We shall be caught if you go back for that clobber! I'd better go alone, after all, I can see!"

Then I hobbled after him, daring to go into the town without my proper clothes rather than miss this wonderful chance of glimpsing another, better world, beyond our great green gates.

And so we went together along back streets so that no friends of my mother or father should see us, and at last we reached a deserted stretch of the canal where once an old iron-works had stood many years before, perhaps two hundred years before. The buildings had already rusted and fallen down and had been left lying there in all their ruin. What had once been the ironmaster's house was now a mere shell, though a very dignified one, built in the manner of an earlier age, with a great portico to its door and long noble windows that still looked proud, although the glass had been gone from them for many years and their wooden frames had rotted and fallen to dust.

Elijah led me to the back of this house where the alder bushes grew thick and damp and shut out the place from the eyes of the passers-by along the towpath of the canal.

And there, joined to the house by a narrow arcade, was a long low building of one storey, with high round-topped windows set along the wall at regular and close intervals, some of these even carrying their original green glass. We pushed beneath an overhanging bramble-briar and entered this long room. It was warm and the air within it seemed thick and almost living, from the sun which shone in through the many windows along the wall. I gazed about me in wonder, for flowers of all sorts, both wild and cultivated, seemed to grow everywhere, from crevices in the plaster, through the cracked flagstones of the floor, even hanging from the roof. The place was a sheltered sun-trap, a natural asylum for all plants that required warmth and protection and the air was heavy with their many odours.

Down the centre of the room to knee-height ran a brick platform, its top covered with dull lead; and at either end of the room there was a false door in a classical style, pilastered and noble, though now ravaged by the destructive tendrils of various creepers which drew their succour from the plaster of the columns.

Elijah turned to me with a possessive smile and said proudly, “This is the place. No one comes here. Why, you could be here for days without anybody knowing.”

The sun struck warmly through the panes and the heavy air seemed to shimmer with sheltered life. The place was more like a luxuriant conservatory than the testing-house of an iron-works; for that is what it was, the room where the old chemists of the foundry examined samples of iron and decided how successful or otherwise the slaves of the furnace had been in their working.

And as I breathed in the scented air and gazed at the architecture and design of an earlier age, I suddenly knew what Elijah found beautiful and comforting about this place. It was indeed a forgotten world, with its thick ferns that grew up through the floor and the tiny carved heads of the satyrs that grinned, despite their broken noses and ears, from the corners of the window-sills. It was a world of neglect and lushness and colour and ruin; friendly, warm, welcoming, and a little sinister; a strange decaying poem in itself.

“This is a lovely place,” I gasped. “I did not even know that it existed.”

Elijah smiled grimly. “Few folk do,” he said, “and those that do seldom come near it. They are too frightened.”

“Frightened?” I asked in my puzzlement. “Why, it is such a lovely quiet place.”

Elijah half-turned from me and seemed to speak to himself. “That is what Jim White thought, no doubt!” he said.

I waited a moment but he said no more and I was too afraid of putting him out of his good humour to ask any questions.

Just then I heard the quick sound of footsteps approaching and the high peep of a boy’s whistle. “Who is that?” I whispered in some alarm.

But my brother only looked at me in scorn, as though I was a lesser being, for this holiday allowed to commune with the Gods. “Why, Dick, of course,” he said.

“Dick?” I said, unwisely. “Who is Dick?”

Elijah ignored me in his great contempt and went to the window where he let out a sudden piercing whistle, two fingers of either hand stuck into his mouth. He said without turning, “Why, Dick Belcher, of course. He lives here.”

“Lives here?” I echoed, amazed that this exotic paradise should harbour another living creature.

“Yes, lives here,” said my brother, with some boyish contempt. “He has no people, for which he must often be thankful! This is his home. *He lives here!*” He gave me a sharp doubtful glance, as though he regretted bringing me to the place, and then went out and lifted up the bramble briar so that his friend might enter.

And that was my first meeting with Dick Belcher, among the hanging ferns and the purple foxgloves of that old testing-house. How well it was named; a testing house. I was myself tested there in later years and the metal of which I was made found wanting in strength.

Dick Belcher was a lad of about Elijah’s age but bigger, bulkier and less talkative. At least, I think he often had the desire to express himself but found the right words hard to come by and so mumbled and stuttered without exposing his true feelings or desires. His lack of family and his loneliness made him shy in any other company but my brother’s. Yet he was not physically weak. On the contrary, his neck and shoulders were thick and powerful and his long arms hung down low, protruding from the sleeves of

his pathetically short and ragged jacket. I saw that his wrists were red and his finger-nails broken and bitten. His hair grew down in the nape of his neck, badly needing the barber's shears; and he pulled his heavy lower-lip as he stood there smiling vacantly and gazing straight ahead out of his wide pale blue eyes.

Anyone unkindly inclined might well have taken him for a simpleton, yet I had reason later to know that he was anything but that.

Then very casually my brother said, "This is my sister, Dick. She wanted to come today to see your place."

Dick did not look at me, but poked his finger in his ear and turned it a time or two, then bowed his head and mumbled and at last turned and looked out of the window, smiling. "I'm hungry 'Lijah," he said. Then he put his red hands together before him and rocked on his feet like a dog waiting. I noticed how broken his shoes were and how chafed his ankles.

Elijah flung the red-handkerchief bundle towards him. "I've brought something for you today," he said. "But you'll have to find your own tomorrow for we are going out to Sutton in the wagonette. It can't be helped, father says we have to go."

Dick turned reproachful eyes on Elijah. "But *shall* you go, 'Lijah?" he said and for a moment I thought that he would burst into tears.

Elijah kicked at the stone table. "I've got to," he said. "Father will make me go this time. If I stayed away he would track me here and then perhaps he would have this place pulled down."

Dick seemed to shudder. "You must go," he said. "I shall be all right. I shall see you the next day."

I dared to speak then. "Where will you get your dinner tomorrow?" I said. He turned towards me but stared over my head, smiling again and pulling at his lip. Elijah nudged me angrily. "Don't ask silly questions," he said as though he was sorry he had brought me with him. "He knows how to look after himself."

Then Dick went into the far corner of the long room to eat from the red handkerchief. He seemed shy of eating before us. I noticed that he left half the food Elijah had packed and placed it carefully on the broad stone shelf that ran along beside the windows.

We returned home late that afternoon to find that mother was waiting angrily for me since I had not told her I was going out. She had prepared

lunch for both of us, she said, and although she was used to my brother failing to come home for his, she did not intend that I should cultivate his bad habits. The result was that I was sent to bed there and then without my meal and tossed and turned half the night in great hunger, for we had given Dick all the food which Elijah had packed and had not taken any of it for ourselves.

The next morning father came in to breakfast and spoke to me very gravely about my wickedness yesterday. He said that he had been so worried that he had actually been to the police, for he thought that I might have fallen into the canal or been taken away by the gipsies from Bentley. He then asked me where I had been, but I realised that I must not give away Elijah's secret, so I merely said, "Out walking."

Father looked at me for a long time, sensing that I was hiding something and knowing that I would never tell him what it was. I could feel that he was very angry with me, below his calm, and looking back I realise that he had good reason to be so, though I did not understand that then. He gave me time to make my confession and perhaps to ask his forgiveness, for like most fathers of that time there was something of the patriarch about him; but I just stared down at the red and blue kitchen tiles and would not speak.

At last he said quite gently but with all his firmness, "Very well Susan, if that is the way you wish it to be, I shall not question you further. In the past I have always been lenient towards you because of your ankle but if you are able to go out walking for a whole day with your reprobate brother, causing us all great anxiety by your absence, then you are obviously strong enough to do a good day's work. So in future I shall ask your mother and Phyllis to see that you are kept well occupied about the house and garden. Then you will learn what work and obedience are, I hope."

He left me then, feeling very miserable, and went to his sitting-room to read from his many books of voyages, for he always had a great yearning to travel and, being imprisoned by his house and family, sought the compensation of books written by such men as had had the courage to leave their homes and dependents.

We did not make the trip to Sutton that day. But he did not make any further reference to my misdoing, nor did my mother. Nevertheless, from that time on I was allowed little leisure in which I might have visited Dick's strange house of ferns. Though at last there did come an occasion and with that occasion an event which has marked my mind for life.

VII

I do not say that my life began to be sad or oppressive from this time, although I know that children often take an extreme view of these matters, and I think that I was made as sensitively as most, perhaps because of my lameness if for no other reason; but always at the back of my mind I had the picture of my father swinging me up, away from the ganders, and I hung on to this picture of him and so did not see him as a hard disciplinarian. Besides, in a way, I felt that I had deserved the close supervision to which I now became subjected. I felt in my heart that I had somehow sinned in going out without my bonnet and shawl to spend the day with two boys! So each night I asked God to forgive me for troubling my kind parents by my thoughtlessness, until that special guilt faded away from my mind to make way for others!

Only once did I come near to mentioning the incident and that was one evening when an aunt came over to visit us from Leicester. I was sitting by the fireside, hem-stitching a handkerchief, while the grown-ups sipped tea from the best china as they reclined on the black horse-hair sofa near the cabinet. I was not listening very closely to what they were saying; indeed, I think I was more interested in the tall cast-iron effigy of Llewellyn and his dog Gelert, which graced the fireside, black-leaded and shining in the firelight, for the sad tale of that gallant dog's untimely death never failed to move me whenever it was retailed, as it often was, after we had finished our hymn-singing to the harmonium on Sunday nights.

But then quite suddenly out of the smothering cotton-wool of the adult conversation from the sofa, the name 'Jim White' broke through to my hearing. That was the name Elijah had spoken in the testing-house when I had said that the place was quiet. So now I listened as the grown-ups talked, my hem-stitching forgotten.

"Poor devil," said my mother. "His end is a lasting memorial to all us that we should not covet another man's goods and chattels."

My acidulated old aunt from Leicester said, "Nonsense, Sarah Ann, the man was a blackguardly thief and deserved his end. So perish all evil-doers in the sight of the Lord. He would have hanged in any case!"

And she bobbed her head so vehemently over her teacup that the black ostrich-feathers in her bonnet nodded down into her beverage and then flicked back over her face, wetting it and making her give a little gasp of surprise. Enoch, who was pretending to stick pictures into his scrap-book, saw this happen and gave a chuckle of pleasure, to be reproved immediately by a stern look from father—who himself was suddenly overcome by a sneeze that came from nowhere and made him take out his red handkerchief to smother his face!

But I did not laugh at my aunt. I stared at her, open-mouthed and expectant, hoping that some further clue to Jim White's mysterious end might fall from her lips before that conversation finished. Indeed, I had almost asked directly what this man's secret was, had almost admitted that I had heard of him before and even said that I had been somewhere where he too had been, in the place which he thought was quiet.

But Tom saved me from making this admission for he put on his sternest face and said, "Come on now, our Susan; up the wooden hill with you, me girl! Time and tide wait for no man, nor for no little girl either! Put your stitching away and be off with you!"

I should have protested had it been Phyllis, or even mother; but one did not argue when Tom gave an order. I looked round for sympathy from the adults but their faces were set and turned towards each other. They were not concerned with a little girl's problems and I hadn't the courage to appeal to my aunt from Leicester that I be permitted to stay up a little longer on this special occasion!

And so I went to bed with the name 'Jim White' singing in my ears, echoing and re-echoing for most of the night, as though I were a slave in some grim treadmill of words . . . 'Jim White . . . Jim White . . . Jim White . . .' until the pale dawn came and I fell into a tumbled sickly sleep.

And in the morning Phyllis came into my room and sat on my bed. Her face was grave as she took my hand and held it.

"Susan," she said, "what were you dreaming of in the night?"

I said, "Nothing Phyllis, why?"

She pursed her lips and began to look severe. "Do not try to deceive me Susan," she said. "You were crying out in your sleep so often and sometimes so loud that I heard you through the floor, down in my room."

I felt that my face must have turned scarlet. "What was I saying, Phyllis?" I asked, though in all honesty I knew what her answer must be

even before I spoke.

She said, “You were calling out the name of a dead man. A man who was murdered in a little ruined workshop not so very far from here.”

I stammered, “So Jim White was murdered, was he?”

She said coldly, “So you know very well whom you were dreaming about last night, Susan?”

I lowered my head in shame at my self-exposure. “I was not dreaming,” I said. “I heard them mention that name last night and it made me curious. I was wondering who he was all night. That was all.”

Phyllis looked searchingly into my eyes. “You did not know who he was?” she said at last.

I shook my head. “I swear I did not, sister,” I said.

She did not speak for a moment but looked away in thought. “I should not have told you,” she said at last. “But I felt sure that you knew.”

I clasped her hand now. “Phyllis,” I said, “what happened? Do tell me what it was all about. Please do!”

She was silent again and then, as though she had made an important decision, she said, “Well, since I have told you so much, I may as well tell you the rest; though if you ever let Tom or mother know that I told you, I shall never forgive you. Do you understand that and see what it would mean? No more of my frocks, no more sweetmeats from the parties I go to? Do you understand?”

I nodded urgently. I would have foregone almost anything, much less frocks and sweetmeats, for the information I craved at that moment. “Do tell me, Phyllis dear,” I said.

She took such a time about it that at first I thought that she had changed her mind and had decided not to tell me after all, but then she seemed to relent and said, “It happened a long time ago. I had only just been born when it happened. It was an awful scandal. That is why we never talk about it.”

She stopped and looked down at me as though relishing the anxiety which she must have found in my eyes.

“Yes, yes, do go on,” I said breathlessly.

“You know, I don’t think I ought to,” she said, smiling at me like a cat, though in a way quite kindly. Phyllis was a great torment and I believe that she did this to the young men she met at parties too. Indeed I have sometimes fancied that she practised on me to make herself perfect at the game. Suddenly she patted me on the cheek, “I don’t think I ought to,” she said, “but I will.”

I pressed her cold hand to my face in thankfulness.

“Jim White was an evil man,” she said, “a drinker and a gambler whose hand was turned against all other men for the sake of gain. At last he became a common thief, a barefaced robber, who would stop old women or even children on the roads at night and take away all they had. The police tried to catch him and even the other thieves lay in wait for him, for he was a solitary wolf who hunted alone, but no man knew where he lived or where he hid the valuables which he had stolen. Then one night a man followed him, a man from whom White had stolen once; and when he discovered where this rogue hid his gains, he went there and waited for him and murdered him.”

Then she waited, expecting more horror than I showed, for somehow her manner of telling the story lacked warmth and reality. Then as though to force fear out of me she went on, “They fought in the candle-light silently, with the rotting shafts of old picks; and in the end Jim White fell among the ferns and greenery in the testing-house, with his wicked skull beaten in, trying to remember his prayers.”

Now she got what she was working for. I sat up in bed and clasped my hands across my breast. “In the testing-house!” I gasped. “Gracious, not the testing-house!”

She looked at me curiously. “Yes dear, the testing-house,” she said. “That is what I said! Do you know the place then?” She said it so sweetly that I almost fell into the trap, for I fear now that it was a trap, consciously and carefully laid, and I am glad that I withstood that test.

“No,” I said as innocently as I could, “where is it, Phyllis? It must be a horrid place! I would love to go there!”

She rose from the edge of my narrow bed and went towards the door. “Remember what I told you,” she said. “Never breathe a word of this to Tom or he would be cross with you as well as with me.” Then she stopped and turned back for a moment. “And what is more,” she said, as though delivering a final shaft, “if you tell anyone that you know the secret, Jack

Belcher's ghost will stand at the foot of your bed every night until you go stark mad!"

I stared back at her now with true horror.

"Did Jack Belcher kill him?" I said. "What happened to Jack Belcher? Did they hang him?"

My sister smiled in contempt, less for me than for Jack Belcher, I think. "No," she said. "He was found Not Guilty of Murder. They said that it was Manslaughter. But he died just the same in Stafford Gaol. You see, God must have found him guilty whatever the stupid old judge said. He died of fever when he had been there five years and serve him right, for he was little better than the man he put an end to."

She went through the door and left me propped up in bed, my head swimming, my heart full of a new fear, a new doubt. The Dick Belcher I had met so recently, my brother's dearest friend, was the son of a man who had battered in the head of another. He was an outcast, surely! A homeless felon himself, almost! Worse than that, he was a ghoul who had made his home in the very ruin where his own father had shed human blood!

I went down to breakfast white-faced and was too sick to eat the meal that mother had prepared for me. Now the very thought of that sword in the ivy made me shudder. It had belonged once to Dick Belcher and surely about its blade now hung some essence of evil, some eternal spell which might one day work its evil way with my feckless romantic brother; might even bring him to Stafford Gaol, to moulder within a narrow cell until such time as the fever would release him from its power . . .

Which one of us was the silly one, the romantic one, I wonder? Not Elijah, I fear. No, not by a very long way!

VIII

This new idea of mine took strong root and flourished as the months passed. I became convinced that Belcher was an evil influence on my brother, that Elijah must somehow throw off the friendship which carried within it the disaster that should surely come from association with the son of a murderer, for that is how I thought of Jack Belcher.

I do not think that I was a prying child then, at least not more so than most lonely little girls might be; but I suddenly became hypersensitively interested in my brother's affairs even to the extent of trying to change him, to alter his ways, his goings out and his comings in, his very love for another. Perhaps I was genuinely concerned about the lad's future; or perhaps I was beginning to become a woman. Perhaps I needed to mother someone and Elijah was the only one in that house who might let me do so, even in the smallest degree.

What amazes me, now that I know him so much better, is that he did not send me packing when I asked him where he was going, or why he was home so late, or when I even hid one of his boots so that he should not go out one day to see Dick Belcher. Yet he took it all very casually and when he could not find his boot he just pulled off the other and went without any covering on his feet! I cried out in frustrated anger then and spent the greater part of the morning digging furiously among the gardenbeds, putting in the new bulbs with a savagery that seemed to augur badly for their later growth . . . Yet they grew, even though I had not planted them with love, as all things of whatever sort should be planted. They grew as did my strange love for my brother, and I think his unaccountable love for me. For without warning we had suddenly realised that we were the lonely ones of the family —I because of my lameness, he because of his dreams that prevented him from being like either of his brothers.

Perhaps that was why my efforts to wean Elijah away from Dick Belcher began to seem successful, to such an extent that Elijah would at last stay away from the testing-house for days at a stretch and sit with me beside the fire as the days got colder just staring into the glowing coals, telling tales or reading 'Chatterbox.'

Shall we who knew it ever forget the appearance of that most comforting, most informative of periodicals? As I shut my eyes now I can

see again that delicate salmon-pink paper cover with its amazing mass of detail. I see its tangle of flowers and fruits, mallow, honeysuckles, lilies-of-the-valley, acorns, blackberries, oats and barley—and the whole foliating luxuriance of that growth enclosing three pictures: a young girl bearing on her head a sheaf of corn, borne up by an arm plumper than mine ever was, while a group of expectant birds hover over her; a boy, wearing a hat with a floppy brim, climbing a tree in the moonlight—I never knew quite what he was supposed to be doing, though from the upward searching interest in his eye, he might have been bird-nesting. Yet the main picture was one which left me with no doubts; it showed a benign and bespectacled elderly lady in a mob-cap, pressing her hands to her ears as she smiled and tried to shut out the clamour of voices from eight small children, boys and girls, who thrust their books towards her and seemed more than properly anxious to ask her some questions or to give her some answer! When I looked at that picture, as I did every month when our 'bound' copy of this paper came to the house from the newsagent, I knew what it was supposed to represent, for my own memory of such a situation was still fresh in my mind. It was a Dame School, an establishment for the children of those parents who did not wish their younger offspring to mix with girls who had nits in their hair and boys whose shirt-tails hung from the holes in the back of their ragged breeches. Nevertheless, I remember that my own black hair, so thick and presumably hospitable, still collected its small store of such visitors—until Phyllis routed them out of their stronghold with liberal shampoos of paraffin! And Elijah's flannel shirt still persisted in wriggling its way through the tweed fabric of his breeches, despite threats from mother and patches from Phyllis! And our only advantage from our Dame School was that it allowed him to play truant more frequently than the Board School Inspector would have permitted, and perhaps shielded me from many of the jibes which my lameness might otherwise have brought me, had I attended a school which also housed the children of the men who had worked for my father when he owned the foundry. . . .

But often we did not read to each other or even talk. Yet, although we sat silent, making scenes and faces out of the shapes of the burning embers and the suspicion came into my mind that my brother had withdrawn from me again and was living a private life which I could not share, yet I was willing to tolerate it without complaining, for I had rather have him like that than not have him at all. And I would knit socks for him or make him cups of cocoa with extra sugar from a small store which I kept hidden in my room—for Tom had requested mother to be strict with him and to let him understand that each member of the family should work in some way or

another and that those who refused to work did not deserve to eat either! So Elijah was nearly always hungry and always appreciated my secret offerings of cocoa or of the cheese-cake that I had cut surreptitiously and hidden in my pinafore until the occasion came when I could give it to him unobserved.

But even though I felt in a way triumphant at taking my brother away from Dick Belcher, yet at times and especially in the small hours, when I woke from my first sleep and considered my sins and many failings, I reproached myself for causing pain to that poor ragged orphan who scraped a bare living along the dank canal-side. And then I would feel so sorry for my cruelty that at times I was within a short step of leaving my bed, to run through the cold streets and console poor Dick. At those times the love came so strongly into my body that I could hardly breathe for it and the warm tears would roll down my cheeks without shame. But always in the morning I had become resolute and sensible again and had decided finally that what I was doing was for the good of them both.

I do not think that Dick gave in without a fight, however, for sometimes Elijah would come in with a face like thunder and would glare at me every bit as harshly as Tom did when he was in a temper over something that Mr. Griffith had said to him at work. I would make myself smile back at him but it was never any good. He would stamp outside again and if it was dark I would hear the scrape of the sword along the bricks outside as he withdrew it from the shelter of the ivy.

Dick did not come right up to the house for him but I do know that he came as far as the big gate on a number of occasions. Once he came just before Guy Fawkes' Night, when the weather was getting to be very chilly. Elijah and I sat alone in the kitchen; Phyllis was in her room upstairs, refashioning a dress for a dance at Dudley. We were sitting by the fire making toast and talking about the sort of fireworks we should buy from Cartwright's shop when the great day came, when suddenly I heard a high-pitched whistle, a call like that of the screech-owl. I stopped toasting the bread and listened, when the whistle came again louder than before. It was impossible for one not to hear it now. I smiled across at Elijah, who went on reading a book, and said, "Someone is whistling down at the gate."

He did not answer me although I could see that his face was working and his fingers picking at the edge of the pages. Then the call came again. "There! Did you hear it?" I asked.

My brother turned over a leaf and said, "I don't know what you are talking about. I can hear nothing."

But even as he spoke the whistle sounded once more, high and imploring now, with all the despairing passion of a young boy who waits hopelessly for his friend.

Elijah looked up at me. “Isn’t that blasted toast ready yet?” he said. “How long does it take you to do a little job like that?”

In my astonishment at his change of tone I let the toasting-fork slip and the piece of bread tumbled into the ashes.

My brother stared at me as though I had gone mad. “Have you got a crippled hand as well as a crippled foot!” he said.

Then, ashamed of his outburst, he dropped his head and pretended to concentrate on his book again. I felt the hot tears running down my cheeks and heard them dropping on to the metal ash-pan. I began hurriedly to toast another piece of bread but before I could finish it my brother flung down his book and went up to bed without saying another word. The next morning he went out and did not come in until after midnight. And when he did, his clothes were wet through, as though he had been out in the rain all day, and he was shivering and gasping so strangely that I asked him whether I should wake mother or go for the doctor straightway myself. But he only shook me off roughly and went up to his room without a bite to eat or anything to drink.

It had rained heavily for most of the day and I imagined that Elijah must have spent most of his time with Dick, making himself suffer for his cruelty of the previous night. But I did not ask him; the occasion never came when I dared; and after that night, anyway, there was no asking him any questions for a while, for the next morning Elijah was fighting for his life with as bad a pneumonia as old Doctor Maguire had ever seen, he said.

Phyllis had found him as she went down to make the fires, lying on the floor of his bedroom, still fully clothed, his breath rattling frighteningly and his thin chest heaving almost out of his jacket. He was unconscious and without an ounce of strength with which to combat his new enemy, the doctor informed father.

There was no Guy Fawkes’ Night for us that year. We sat round his narrow bed, listening to the hiss of the steam kettles and changing the hot compresses on his legs and feet constantly. We did not speak to each other, for there was nothing to say. We each knew him so differently that we had no common language in which we might have discussed him. So we just sat

and watched him going away from us as one might watch a dumb animal, unable to communicate with him or to say anything of worth to him.

Only when I sat alone, on watch with him through the night, with the fluttering candle at my elbow and his harsh hard breathing filling my ears, did I attempt to say anything, and then I spoke to God, begging His pardon for having brought this on my brother. I even promised that should Elijah wish it, I would restore him to his friend, Dick Belcher, if only he might recover. I even implored God to take me instead, since I was a useless thing with a foot that would never let me serve Him as I ought. But nothing happened. Elijah had his sixteenth birthday in bed without knowing it, and soon Christmas began to draw near, yet we faced it with no feeling of welcome or of joy. There could be no festivity for us that year.

Soon I began to notice the change that had come over the rest of our family, even over Tom. They began to speak lovingly of Elijah, to recall the good things he had done when he was a little boy; and father brought tears to my eyes one evening by saying, quite simply as he sat by the bed with his face buried in his hands, "Oh son, I had faith thy twig would grow straight and handsome one day . . . I did have faith, lad." Then when he realised that I had heard his words, my father got up and went out of the room shamefacedly.

Then one night close to Christmas, when the Waits were already going from door to door along the street, Elijah began to stir. I went to him without delay and bent over him to hear what he was trying to say. "Our Susan," he whispered, and he tried to smile as he spoke. "What is it, 'Lijah?" I said. "What can I get you?"

He shook his head. "Has Dick been?" he asked. I shook my head, almost weeping to do so. Elijah paused for a while, then he said, "If he comes, see that they let him come up to me, our lass."

I knelt by his bed, the tears in my eyes now, and swore that I would bring Dick to him whatever *they* said to the contrary. When he had heard me say this a time or two, he smiled and went off to sleep. His breathing began to be easier and the colour crept back slightly into his white cheeks.

Later on, before she went up to her own room to bed, Phyllis looked in. "He seems much easier," she said, and I nodded. "I was afraid I might have disturbed him, shouting," she said, smiling.

"What have you been shouting for, Phyllis?" I said.

She looked me angrily in the eye. “Why, that Dick Belcher has been,” she said. “He had the cheek to come right to the door and to knock on it a number of times. I saw who it was as he came up the path, from mother’s room, so I made him wait. I didn’t answer the door at first.” She nodded, her arms akimbo, as though she had done something very important and great.

“Did you let him in?” I said anxiously.

“What, let him in!” she exclaimed, almost in anger. “No, certainly not! The very idea! Though he did ask if he could see Elijah. But no, I told him to be thankful we hadn’t put the police on him, bringing this trouble on our dear brother with his tramp’s ways. Nay, I told him to be off to the Workhouse where he belonged, or I’d get Tom to lay a stick about his back and no mistake!”

“Oh, our Phyllis,” I said, the tears coming afresh to my eyes. “I didn’t think you could be so cruel!”

“What!” she said. “Are you crying for that scum! Is that how you feel about a riff-raff who most probably has killed your own brother? Susan, my girl, I might tell you that I think less of you for this night’s tears!”

I ran to her, trying to explain, as she began to flounce out of the room, and clasped her by the wrist.

“Phyllis dear,” I sobbed, “I beg you, do not tell Tom or mother that I have behaved so badly.”

She smiled at me, a cat’s smile, and said, “All right, Susan. I can see that you are sorry for what you said. Perhaps you did not mean it after all.”

I cried a little more on her slight bosom until she pushed me away for fear that I might spoil her bodice with my tears. Then I dared to say, “Phyllis, never let Elijah know that Dick has been here. It would trouble him so. Please do not let him know that his friend was turned away from our house, and at Christmas time. Promise me, dear, please do!”

Yet she would not promise. She only said, “Perhaps, perhaps. We shall see what happens.” Then she went on upstairs in her stocking feet and I went back to sit with my brother, who was now in a deep and peaceful sleep.

That night I made a vow, in my childish way, to bring Elijah and Dick together again if my brother might be allowed to recover from his illness. I pledged what I thought was my immortal soul to do this, even though Tom and Phyllis should turn me out into the street for it.

The next morning Elijah woke refreshed and even smiling and said that much of the pain had gone. When Doctor Maguire came round just after breakfast he said that the boy had made a most remarkable recovery and complimented me on my nursing; after which I came in for much teasing from mother and Phyllis, who were perhaps a trifle piqued that the doctor had given me their due praise. And in truth I did not deserve such praise for I only sat up during the nights. My mother and Phyllis did all the hard sort of work, preparing meals for the invalid and heating oven-bricks for his feet. All I did was to sit through the night in my chair and pray for him, and I even think that I derived a certain sort of pleasure from doing it, too.

That day, just before lunch, Elijah said to me in a new voice, “Susan, I have been thinking. You and I are close friends. You are closer to me than anyone else in the world, even father. You have sat with me in these last weeks, no one else . . . Yet the one who said that he was my truest friend for life has betrayed me. He has not even been to see me. He has forgotten me already. That is what his friendship is worth. I can see now that he wanted me only for what I would give him, Susan. Well, I have finished with Dick Belcher. Let us forget his name even, sister! From now on it is you and me!”

And I sat by his bed, laughing and crying as he spoke, hating myself for my treachery to poor Dick, yet exulting in my heart that at last my brother accepted me as his best, his most trusted friend. Now all my vows and prayers were forgotten, now I think I sinned mortally, perhaps for the first time, but without knowing it and without caring a brass farthing even had I known it! Elijah was mine and I was truly happy for the first time in my life.

So I sang about my work all that day, until Phyllis noticed it and asked mother to shut me up lest I disturb our invalid . . . But now the world was a gayer place for me and the snow that lay thick outside was paradise! I shook out the heavy damask tablecloth so that the hungry birds might be fed and I whistled to the robins as they squabbled over morsels of caraway-seed cake and thin-sliced bread and butter. For at last God had given me something in return for my crippled ankle, I believed. Someone I could love, and someone who loved me!

Oh God, I sang till my heart nearly burst, and at last I went up to bed to lie in an ecstatic sleeplessness, until the dawn broke again and the thick-laid snow threw a strangely brilliant white light through my window-pane, lighting up my little room more brightly than a thousand candles.

IX

THAT winter turned out to be a very hard one and soup kitchens were organised at many places, including Cradley Heath, Sedgley and Cannock, for the alleviation of distress among the less-fortunate of the workers and their families. Three Irish labourers who spent their wages on drink and always slept beside the furnaces at Old Park were found frozen on Boxing Day, despite the glow from the roaring ovens. And as far inland as Birmingham the sea-gulls came flocking in, scrabbling for scraps from the hawkers' carts as they trundled along the cobbled streets from the markets.

But we were happy. Elijah grew steadily stronger until at last, after a particularly hard frost, old Doctor Maguire came to the house and took us all out in his dog-cart one evening, to skate on a broad shallow pool at the back of the new railway station near The Pleck. At least the others skated, all except mother and Elijah and me. We sat huddled close together in the gig, wrapped round heavily with tartan rugs, close to the edge of the pool, as we watched the others.

All round the water's side, coach-lamps and tallow-dips had been set, for it was a windless iron-hard night and the flames hardly flickered, that is, unless a too-brave skater flapped near them, with coat-tails or wide skirt swinging. And the long crazy shapes swirled and curvetted across the ice-mirror, casting swift shadows across the frozen grass, right to the wheels of the dog-cart. All was gay and frenzied and warm-hearted and the cries of the many young men and women made the harsh and pitted landscape a fairyland for a little while. Even the glow of the furnaces, which usually seemed so angry and even sinister to me, was tonight a friendly, rosy effulgence which added to, rather than detracted from my feeling of merriment.

It was a glorious winter and I clasped Elijah's thin hand below the coverlet and knew joy when he returned the pressure of my fingers.

At last father came from the ice, blowing a little and dragging off his skates.

"I've had enough, Sarah Ann," he said to mother, laughing like a boy. "This is a young fellow's sport, not for me!"

And mother said, “Get away with you, William! Why, you could beat any of them if you tried!”

“Nay, lass,” he said, “you’re flattering me again! Ah, but I don’t know what I’d do without you, all the same!”

Then my mother clambered out of the dog-cart in her thick petticoats. “Here,” she said, “Fasten my skates on, William! I’ll show ’em what we old ’uns can do, if you won’t!”

And laughing, she waddled out on to the ice on my father’s arm and was soon cutting as many capers as the rest. Elijah looked on at all this a little wistfully but I said, “Wait, brother! There are wonderful times coming for you. You will skate with the best of them next year, perhaps even this year, if you hurry up and get quite well and if this frost lasts!” He pressed my arm and said, “No, Susan, I shall not skate with them again. Not till you can skate too, and that will be a long time, love!”

I smiled back at him for such words did not trouble me any longer. “Never,” I said. “But thank God there are other things in life than skating! Why, ’Lijah, it would be a poor sort of life if skating were the best thing in it, good as skating is!”

And he smiled back at me and bent over and kissed me on the cheek. Then I burst out crying, for it was the first time he had kissed me since we were tiny children together.

And there were other lovely times yet to come! Quite early in the New Year, father harnessed Bonny and we trundled off one bright day to Brummagem. It was late afternoon when we got there and our first call was to a big Dining Room near New Street Station, where we were all put at one long table, sheltered from draughts by tall oak screens and given great plates of roast pork and crackling and mounds of snowy potatoes . . . Even as I say those words I can still smell the thick scent of the meat and can feel again the succulent crackling in my mouth. And all the time the sounds of horse-buses and of feet crunching the snow came from outside, increasing in volume each time a traveller came in from the street and left the big door swinging.

Then we drank hot coffee and finally wrapped each other up warmly with scarves and mufflers and made our way down to the Market Hall. There, among masses of chrysanthemums and potted ferns, we wandered about, the sawdust thick beneath our feet, causing us to move silently like merry ghosts! And there we poked our fingers into the cages where little

puppies shivered, or at rabbits that nestled close against each other in the corners of their hutches, their little breaths rising like a faint smoke in the chill air. And from time to time we stopped to see that Elijah and young Enoch were warm, standing for a while beside the great glowing braziers of coals that were set here and there for the comfort of the customers. And once father went away and came back with tumblers of warm rum for us all, which we enjoyed enormously as a special treat. But Tom and Phyllis refused theirs and said that they preferred coffee; so father sent them away with a florin each to amuse themselves, for he was not going to wait on them like a lackey-boy, he said, with a kind smile nevertheless. Then, at last, the big clock in the Hall chimed seven. I forget what that clock looked like now, after all those years, but I do recall that it was coloured and that many parts of it were painted with a thick gilt. I think that a warrior dressed in a bearskin came out from somewhere in the clock and struck a gong with his great club! I know that Enoch was in a state of intense excitement at each stroke and kept on asking mother if it was real!

At any rate, that was the signal for our homeward journey. We found Tom and Phyllis and then fetched Bonny from a livery stables just behind the cathedral in the Bull Ring and harnessed her up. And on the way back we drank more warm coffee that had been put up for us at the market, out of thick stone bottles wrapped round with flannel to keep in the heat. Then mother produced a batch of hot cakes that she had been nursing secretly under her shawl and even Tom brought out a bag of baked potatoes, which he had bought with what was left of his florin.

"And what did you buy, sister?" Enoch asked our Phyllis. She showed him a tiny rolled gold brooch. "It will go well with a new dress I saw in Darlaston," she said, looking craftily at father. But he said nothing just then.

"What else did you buy?" asked Enoch, for he was a sharp lad by now and already knew something of the value of money.

Phyllis reddened, but Tom, making one of his few jokes, said, "Come on, our lass, tell them about your husband!"

"Her husband!" I said, scarcely believing my ears. Phyllis turned on me sharply. "And what is so unlikely about that, Miss Pert?" she snapped. I blushed and lowered my head, whereupon mother gave Phyllis a nudge to let me alone.

"Well," she said, "it was only a fortune-teller. I spent sixpence to have my fortune told, if you must know!"

“Then the more fool you,” said father softly, pulling on the reins as we clattered down Handsworth Hill. “And what did she tell you?”

Phyllis was secretly pleased that father was taking this notice of her. “She said that I was to marry a tall handsome farmer and become the mistress of a fine house,” she said.

“Go on, tell them the rest,” said Tom, mercilessly.

“All right then; she said I should be the proud mother of a big and clever family,” said Phyllis, looking at mother under her heavy lids.

Father grunted. “Well,” he said, “you’d better ask that tall handsome farmer of yours to buy you that dress you saw in Darlaston! It’ll save me a bit of money, no doubt!”

And we all laughed except Phyllis, who sat silent thereafter until we reached the first houses in West Bromwich and plunged downhill into the tawny sulphurous haze that eddied about the ever-glowing landscape from that point on.

When we got home, mother said, “Why, I do declare, our Elijah, you look better than you have done for years! Pneumonia seems to agree with you, my young buck!”

And Tom said, “Yes, he does look well and no mistake. And now, if he’s come to his senses at last, I would like to make a suggestion. I can get him a job at the foundry as soon as he is well enough to start. What do you say, father?”

Father stopped unlacing his high boots. “What sort of job do you mean, son?” he asked.

Tom’s voice was almost defiant in reply. “Oh, only a labouring job, of course; but that’s all he *could* do, after all, father.”

Father smiled in a queer way and sat upright in his chair. “Tom, my lad,” he said, “no Fisher has ever been a labourer yet. They have been many things but never labourers. And we shan’t start with Elijah. I’d rather keep him in idleness first!” Then he bent again to his boots and Tom shrugged his shoulders and then went out, followed soon by Phyllis, who carried a sulky look on her face still because of our teasing in the wagonette.

But when they had gone, mother said, “Elijah, think on what our Tom said. I don’t think he meant it, about you taking a labouring job. Mayhap he has something a bit better in mind but doesn’t want to raise your hopes yet. But think on it, lad, and let Tom know when you have decided. Anyway, it

mightn't hurt you, maybe, to pick up a bit of experience, even labouring, before our Tom can put you in the office, alongside him."

Father looked sternly at our mother and for the first time in our lives spoke to her harshly in our hearing.

"Sarah Ann," he said, and we trembled at the change in his tones, "if you raise your voice to meddle in men's affairs in this house again, you can say goodbye to me. And if you want to see me after that, you'll have to sail to Africa to do it!"

Mother smiled back at him tolerantly, as though she was prepared for this outburst, this exposure of my father's dream of travel and freedom, and then she whisked us off to bed before we might hear anything else. We heard them talking in serious tones long into the night. Not that it mattered to Elijah, for he was getting well rapidly it seemed and was beginning to be a little of his old defiant self again. Nor did it matter to me, for I did not care what job Elijah took as long as I never lost him to anyone again.

X

The question of Elijah starting to work did not come up again, for his convalescence seemed to become slower and father insisted that the lad was not to be worried with such things yet awhile. It was sufficient to him that Elijah had turned from his old ways and was becoming more amenable. Work could wait; let the boy get back his strength first, there would be time enough to talk of work then! And although Tom began to get a little restive under this flouting of his wishes, secretly we all agreed with father and even dared to say so on occasions, such as those when Tom would make sly and slighting remarks to Elijah as he sat in the most comfortable chair at the fireside, during the months when the winter was wearing itself out and the sun began to strike with more and more power across the awakening garden.

For me, this was the happiest period of my life, I think. In some strange way I seemed to have become middle-aged without passing fully through childhood! And as I sat with our invalid, reading to him, or confiding my opinions about this and that, both of us wrapped in travelling-rugs if we were enjoying the early morning sun in the garden, or with cashmere wraps about our shoulders if we crouched over the kitchen fire of an evening, when all the others were in the sitting-room, I felt very staid and knowledgeable and comfortable! I no longer envied Phyllis or Tom and I even came to address young Enoch, who after all was a little over eighteen months younger than I, as though I was his mother or his aunt, a form of approach which he naturally resented, for he was growing into a headstrong boy, though always obedient to his parents and respectful to Tom.

However, I got neither obedience nor respect from him! And sometimes, if I had been unduly overbearing towards him, he would come behind me and tip up my chair without warning, threatening to drop it to the floor unless I said I was sorry! At other times he would take me by the skirt and whirl me round and round, both of us breathless with laughter, until I repeated after him some such thing as, “I am a great donkey!” or, “All the family knows I am a fool!” And Elijah would laugh and would even encourage him to further efforts towards my destruction!

Winter had prevented us from going out very often in the wagonette but as Elijah got stronger on his feet mother relented towards me and allowed me to accompany him on short walks; to take care of him, as she said,

though indeed he was now already so able that it was I who needed the care, not he!

Then one morning as we sat beneath the sycamore tree on the rustic wooden seat, I noticed a strange careworn look about my brother's face and asked him what was troubling him. At first he refused to answer me, but I persisted and at last he said, "Susan, I have passed through a dark tunnel of fear while I have been ill. I do not think I shall ever be afraid again. I am a different person now."

"I am sure you are, dear," I said, trying to soothe him.

He looked back at me with some annoyance. "Don't act the fool!" he said. "I am serious, more serious than I have ever been before, I think. You see, I now realise what a fool I have been. I can see at last what is expected of me and although I do not entirely agree with them, I shall do what they want me to do. There was something I heard father say when I was very poorly, something I heard as though in a dream, about a twig growing. It has been in my mind ever since. You know, Susan, I did not know that he loved me before; I thought he only loved the others. But when he said that, I knew that if I got well I must do what I could to please him, to repay him for his love."

I told him that I thought he was quite right in this and that father might well come to learn that of all his sons Elijah was the best! But he would not listen to this.

"Nay lass," he said, "you cannot deceive me. I come third. He loves Tom because the eldest, the first-born, is closest to him, and Tom will one day be an honoured man in this town. And he loves little Enoch because he is a bright thing, fresh and young and without evil. He is still the new baby as far as father is concerned, and will be to the end of his days! But I am the inbetween one, the one who is neither old and responsible nor young and guileless. I couldn't expect him to love me as much as he loves the others—and I do not. I am content if he loves me at all."

I smiled and said that Elijah had been doing too much thinking while he was ill and that thought was a bad thing when God's new warm Spring sun was shining on us and asking us to enjoy it without thought. "Consider the lilies of the field," I began, pretentiously, but once again Elijah waved me aside. "Look, Susan," he said, "my mind is made up about the way I am to go now. But there is still one thing that stands in the way of the new person I want to be. It is such a silly thing that you will laugh at me when I tell you, though I can say it to no one else."

“What is it, brother?” I said, anxious for him to trust me to the hilt, as the saying goes. ‘To the hilt!’ How prophetic that phrase was, as things turned out!

“It is a sort of dream that visits me,” he said. “A nightmare that stays with me even in the daytime.” He paused for a while and seemed to be screwing his resolution up to let him expose this secret to me. At last he said, “Dick Belcher has been no true friend to me, Susan. Although they say I lay at death’s door for a week, he did not come near me. His words count for nothing now. I have severed myself from him in my mind. But there is still something that seems to bind our spirits together, even though weakly. There is still a last link, which I must break before I can be entirely free of him.”

My heart began to beat wildly as he said these words, for I knew that it was now I should tell Elijah that his friend was as faithful as he had ever been, that Dick still loved him, that he had come to the house through the snow in his broken boots and had been turned from our door like a dog by Phyllis.

But I held my peace. I did not defend Dick or tell the truth about him even. I let Elijah continue in this new hatred of his friend. That was my sin, my first great sin. Perhaps I lacked simple courage; it is more likely that I was afraid Dick would take Elijah away from me again and leave me as I had been before, a lonely ignored cripple. I do not know; but now for the first time in my life I had a friend, a blood-brother, one who seemed destined to be mine and none other’s. So I was silent and waited in fear for Elijah’s next words.

“Dick gave me that sword,” he said, “and we swore that our friendship should last as long as that sword lasted. I could break it now and that would end our friendship—but then he would not know the bitterness of it. So I have thought what I must do. I must put it back in the hand that gave it to me; then the bond between us will be cut forever.”

I was too miserable to speak for a while, but at last I said, “I will take the sword back to him, ’Lijah. You are still too poorly.” For I was mortally afraid that if the two boys came together again the old bonds would be forged even stronger and my plight would be as bad as before. But he shook his head.

“No,” he said. “This is something which only I can do, if I am to have peace of mind. Our lass, will you come with me this afternoon, to end my friendship with him?”

There was nothing I could do now. He had set his heart on this and mother would insist that I went with him, wherever he might go. She would not allow him to go alone yet awhile. So I just nodded and swallowed back my misery and already began to picture the future stretching before me, bleak and flat and featureless.

After we had eaten lunch, the sun grew in warmth and mother agreed that it would do Elijah good to walk for a short while in the fresh air. It would give him an appetite for tea, she said, and she had baked a tray of the little sugar-fingers flavoured with cinnamon that he liked so much. She even hurried me on with my bonnet and shawl, so that Elijah should not be kept waiting!

Outside, I thrust the sword down the inside of my skirt and so no one noticed that I limped a little more than I usually did. They were all watching Elijah and complimenting him on his remarkable recovery; for the lad was well-known about the district and, in spite of his rough and ready ways, liked for his roguishness.

This time we walked openly to the canal side, for we had mother's permission to be out and need not hide away from prying eyes. As we drew near to the old testing-house, Elijah asked for the sword and then fell silent, though he had been chattering away volubly enough along the streets before. He was obviously choosing the words of farewell which he must soon speak to Belcher. But when we passed the ruins of the manager's house and Elijah whistled the old screech-owl call, there came no answer. And we went on into the testing house without waiting any longer. It was now a sad sight. Half of the roof had fallen in since I had first seen it and the bad weather had turned the floor into a muddy shambles. The ferns and the other plants had withered and died and now everything seemed different. Dick was not there.

We stayed there, waiting for a while, but at last Elijah got up and went out on to the canal towpath, only a short distance away. A little lad was sitting there, his head bent, making a pretence to fish. He knew my brother and said, "Lookin' for Dick? He's left yon place now, yer know. Lives over wi' gippoes, alongside New Invention. Never seem 'im there myself, but everybody says that's where he do live."

I had heard tell of New Invention before but had never seen it. I knew that it was a small cluster of shacks that had sprung up to accommodate the navvies, most of them Irish, when a branch-line of the railway was cut through Bentley Common towards Walsall. But that had been at least twenty years before and now the place was a blot on the earth, a minor cess-pool of

political and social dissension, where no stranger would care to walk unarmed by night and where the only visitors were other lawless men, spoiling for a fight, or the gippoes, the gipsies, who often set up their encampment near the place when they travelled back along this way from the south.

"How can we get there?" I asked, but Elijah was already striding away down the towpath towards the high iron bridge that crossed both canal and a single narrow-gauge line that led between mounds of grey shale and derelict sheet-iron warehouses, to some invisible foundry yard.

He waited for me at the foot of this bridge as though he had suddenly remembered that I was with him. Then he helped me up the steps. When we paused for breath at the top, he seemed to be sunk in some dream, involved in some silent discussion with himself. I did not break his silence but looked around me, waiting until he should decide to go on or to turn back—and I fervently hoped it might be the latter, for I was losing the new Elijah with every step we took.

The horizon everywhere was fringed with spoil-heaps, pit headstocks and chimneys, most of which sent up their dark fumes slowly and relentlessly into the fresh Spring air, as though carrying out some silent vow to smother the countryside in soot before Summer should arrive. Beyond them all were the vague outlines of misty hills, either hills or a further range of spoil-heaps; one could never be sure. Few trees grew, and those that did were twisted and stunted and even their newest leaves were already discoloured and shrivelled by the sulphurous fumes that flowed from the ovens of the many brick-works that dotted the broad clay-lands about us.

There was only one splash of colour in the whole grey landscape. In a wide flat field away to our left, a detachment of soldiers in bright red coats were marching and countermarching while someone beat a drum insistently by the fence. Elijah followed my gaze and when I looked at him to frame my question said, "The Volunteers, poor devils! The Earl is taking them to Africa next week. I'd go with them myself if they'd let me, though!"

I did not dare ask what was happening in Africa that these men should go there and be called poor devils. I thought the Earl might be the Earl of Dudley, but I didn't even ask that. I held tight to my brother's arm as the drum stuttered below us and the close-jacketed toy soldiers strutted proudly across the rutted clay of their improvised parade ground.

Later, as we passed by them at ground level, Elijah stopped and gazed at their Lieutenant on his horse. "He has a sword," he said. "That's what I told

you before, Susan. It's a hero's weapon!" And he smiled ruefully down at the rusting parody of a sabre that he carried openly in his hand.

Then we went on, cutting over the tussocky fields till we came to the rough white road that zig-zagged towards Bentley Common.

We passed a few low-lying smallholdings, their farmhouses cracked and blistered and in ruinous condition, hens scratching forlornly before their kitchen-doors and always a scruffy mongrel cur tied by the neck somewhere near the gate. Even the children who stared at us over the fences or from behind thin hedges had the gipsy look about them, with their raven hair and dirty brown skin and their big dark eyes. This was not a place I would willingly have come to, but of necessity.

And at last we crossed the main road to Walsall and were soon on the Common. Once it must have been a beautiful undulating place; but now it was a wilderness of bracken and shale and half-covered clay-heaps that had been torn from below the grass covering and then left to lie, carelessly excavated when speculators had tested for a seam on which to build their brick-kilns. Here and there, small boys crouched like conspirators in fern-hung pits, groping bare-armed into the clay-coloured water for newts or frogs and shouting wildly at each discovery of a tiny victim while the older boys leaned over crumbling pitshafts, flinging down stones and brickbats into the black depths and yelling harshly when the distant splash of water came back to their ears.

I felt that this was a place of foreboding, a small purgatory where many desolate human creatures had wound out yet another painful thread of their destiny.

Beyond this ruinous parkland, circled by starved and melancholy-looking pines, overgrown with hawthorn and desecrated by willow-herb and dock, stood the shell of Bentley Hall, a warm yellow-ochre of mellowed stone, whose eyeless windows gazed across the waste land of refuse tips and rusting iron; the place where King Charles had stayed on his travels after the Battle of Worcester. And I could have stayed too, to moralise in my dreamy way over the fall of Kings and the sad passage of time and pride and honour —for such was the state of my mind that day!

But Elijah dragged me on, holding my hand tightly, along a sunken lane and so to New Invention.

This was an appalling shamble of sheds, tin-roofed or boarded with rotting wood that still bore the name of some packing-firm in America or

France. A collection of big stinking hutches, damp and indescribably dreary; its main road nothing but a wandering cart-track, deeply rutted and swimming with water; its gardens, if such they could be called, choked with hawthorn and stunted bushes without a name. Its sole water-supply was the tarred butt that stood outside each swinging door. Its privies were the nettle-grown paddocks that stretched irregularly behind each shack.

I glanced through one open door and saw three small children, half-clothed and filthy, sprawling on an earthen floor, scrabbling at a tin bowl of mash, a flea-bitten collie dog thrusting between them to gain its share of the meal. A gap-toothed old woman smirked and jeered at my astonishment, making gestures which I did not fully understand, so that I had to turn my eyes away for shame at having been discovered looking where I should not have looked.

So at last we left New Invention and came out on the edge of the gipsy encampment. It was if anything a more desirable place of residence than the one we had just seen, for at least the tents of rag and sacking let through the clean air of heaven and there was no pretence at any other hygiene than nature had made available to any four-footed beast of field or wood. Here and there fires burned below tall tripods of sticks and outside every tent hung a brace of rabbit or pheasant, surrounded by the early flies of the new sun. As we passed the first tent, a tall gaunt man looked out and called, “Want to buy a rabbit, young gent?” Then he seemed to recognise Elijah and altered his tone, familiarly shouting out something about me, I gathered; but I did not understand the words he used and Elijah’s face had reddened, so I dare not ask him what the man had meant.

We stopped at last where a group of old men and women sat hunched about the biggest and densest of the fires, smoking short clay pipes and plaiting hazel-twigs into the semblance of baskets. Elijah touched his cap, which courtesy was returned dispassionately by all the men about the fire, and asked whether Dick Belcher was with them. The old men looked from one to the other but did not speak. Then an elderly woman, who wore bright gold ear-rings and smoked a cherry pipe, indicated a tent at the end of the line with her thumb. Elijah touched his cap again and we went on, followed by the bright dark eyes of the gipsies.

The tent we made for was the smallest and raggedest of them all. Indeed, it seemed little more than a shiftless windbreak, slung up without care or love, to fend off a ha’porth of the bitter winds that habitually raved across this desert of scrub and clay puddles, coming almost direct from the Urals.

Outside this tent we saw a hunched figure sitting cross-legged and hacking at a pile of sticks with a clasp-knife, shaping them roughly and flinging the finished ones to his side, into a deep washing-basket.

It was Dick Belcher. Surely no one else in the world carried the burden of such great humped shoulders! No one else in the world, outside the Ghettoes of Poland, showed his depression so markedly in the set of his head, the fall of his eyes, the beaten hunch of his back!

I stood back so that I might watch both the boys. Elijah stood stiffly, the sword held slightly forward, his chin high. Dick Belcher looked up slowly and half-smiled. Then seeing that Elijah did not return the smile, his own face set again into its lines of hopelessness. He rose and came forward with his red hand outstretched. I saw that one of his feet was bound with sacking and that there was a rip in his trousers-leg that reached almost from hip to calf. His hair hung down on to the greasy collar of his jacket.

Elijah did not take his hand. Instead he looked away from him for a moment, and said, “I’ve brought this back. Take it. I shall not be wanting it any more.”

Dick did not take the sword. He said quietly and almost apologetically, as though acknowledging that he was in the wrong, “I thought you would come one day, ’Lijah. That’s why I waited.”

Elijah said, “Be that as it may. You didn’t come when I lay on my bed. But all that is over now and so is our friendship. Take your sword.”

Dick’s eyes shifted from side to side, as though his numb brain sought some words which it could not find, but he did not move. Then Elijah flung the rusty old weapon into the mud at his feet.

“It’s there when you want it,” he said.

For a while Dick stood without speaking but I could see that his fingers were moving nervously and that his throat was working, as though he was swallowing constantly and with some pain.

Then Elijah took my arm and said, “We shall go. Goodbye, Belcher.” We turned then, though to tell truth my own eyes were so full of tears that I did not see in what direction we had turned; nor, I think, did Elijah.

We had made three steps or so from the tent when Dick stood beside us again. He forced himself to speak this time but did not meet our eyes when we looked at him. His eyes were fixed on the blade of the old sword, which

he now held in his hand. “Look, ’Lijah,” he said, “I have taken the sword. Come you with me and see the end of it.”

Elijah ignored him at first but Dick spoke again, “ ’Lijah, for old time’s sake, see the end of it.”

So we followed him and as I turned to take my last look at the place where he lived, a girl’s dark head drew back from the doorflap of the tent, a head which bore long plaits that half-covered the ears from which dangled bright ear-rings, made I fancy from half-sovereigns. I turned away again, ashamed once more that I had glimpsed beyond the externalities of a scene. With a flushed face I went on after that hunched back.

At last when we were out of sight of the tents Dick stopped behind a spinney of twisted hawthorn bushes. A little to our right lay the well of an old pit-shaft, its bricks darkened by age and crumbling here and there. Before us was a hole in the ground, the floor of which I could just see perhaps ten feet down. It seemed a horizontal gallery to the shaft on our right, the top of which had subsided, leaving it open to the sky. And here Dick stood and pointed. “I shall thrown it down there,” he said. “It will rust to pieces there, and that will be the end of it. That will be its graveyard, the end of it all. I can do no more. I could not bring myself to break it.”

And as he finished he shook a tear from his eye and then pitched the sword into the hole. It could not have been very deep for I heard it strike the soft ground almost immediately. It was a thick damp sound, as though the winter’s rains had drenched the soil, had filled the gallery with water that had not drained away.

I stood wondering what we should do next when suddenly my brother let go of my arm and gave a small sobbing cry. Then he ran forward and before we could stop him had jumped down into the hole after the sword.

I ran to the edge and saw that he had landed on hands and knees. Dick stood above the hole. “Come back, ’Lijah!” he called. “My friend, come back! It isn’t safe down there.”

I looked at Dick and saw something like terror in his eyes. Then I too became afraid and began to untie my shawl, hoping that it would serve as a rope for Elijah to climb up by.

But as we watched, my brother rose to his feet, leaving the sword in the mud and as he stared up at us his face was marked with white horror.

“Good God!” he said hoarsely. “There’s a baby down here. A dead baby wrapped in a black shawl!”

I think I screamed at his words but he did not seem to hear me. Then I heard a gasp at my side and saw Dick Belcher stagger back from the hole. The next moment he was running with a strange almost comic shambling of the legs, his red hands held over his head, back towards the encampment.

"What shall we do?" I cried. "Oh what shall we do!"

Elijah began to scramble back out of the hole, his eyes staring. I let down my shawl and he almost dragged me down into the blackness of the hole in his haste to get out of it. When he stood by me, his legs were trembling and his jaws were working like those of a marionette.

"Pull yourself together," he screamed at me. "It's a dead baby I tell you!"

Then I began to sob, pulling up my skirt to dry my eyes. He struck me on the side of the head, then as suddenly kissed me again, not knowing what he was doing.

"Susan, for God's sake, what shall we do?" he gasped.

I became a little clearer in my mind then. I knew that it would be useless to tell anyone at the gipsy encampment, yet I also knew that someone must be told. If we went away and told no one we should have that lonely little creature on our minds for evermore. I was terrified at the prospect of this secret, to be carried about with us in silence to the end of our days. Yet I was suddenly afraid of the police. I did not know what to say to my brother's question.

Then Elijah spoke. "I know—the Volunteers!" he said. "Let us tell them and it will be off our minds. That Lieutenant looked all right. Let us go back before they leave and tell them!"

I nodded frantically and we began to run across the rough Common, falling now and then, and gasping with breathlessness. I tumbled into the rough grass so many times that in the end I began to cry again from self-pity . . .

Yet at last we reached the iron bridge and saw the soldiers just about to file off, back to their homes. Elijah ran forward towards the man on the horse. "Stop! Stop!" he yelled. "We have found a dead body in a pit!" And the young officer suddenly lost his colour and turned round in his saddle towards us with fear in his blue eyes.

XI

WHAT followed then is now a confused dream to me, or to speak more accurately, a nightmare in which there were both dark and terrifying gaps and also garishly clear pictures, some of them too clear, whose every detail comes to me now as brutally as they did when I first experienced them.

I see the red-necked soldiers clustered about the hole, some of them men I knew, men who had brought their sweethearts under our flowering wall on summer nights. They must often have seen me peeping at them shyly from among the boughs, yet now they looked at me as though I were an utter stranger, almost an enemy. I wondered whether they were accusing me silently of killing the little baby; I did not know enough about soldiers then to realise that their sullen resentment might have been due to some other cause, a much simpler one—that after a hard and tiring afternoon's drill, because of our discovery they were now called upon to find and carry back a most unwholesome burden when all they wanted to do was to take off their polished boots, that tight red tunic, and sit down in the rocking-chair to a warm cup of tea with the wife they must soon leave behind.

So they stared at us, hostile and without sympathy, while their young officer did his best to reassume authority. But this was not so easy; while they obeyed him without question on the parade ground, in face of this new and most unmilitary situation he was only Young Peake, Alderman Peake's lad, dressed up as a warrior like themselves. Their faces were set hard against him.

"Nay, let 'im what fahnd it goo dahn an' fatch it!" muttered one moustached veteran, a man who at one time had done odd jobs in our garden.

"Men! Men!" shouted the officer.

" 'Lijah Fisher's a rough'un," said another red-cheeked youth. "He'll not mind, Mr. Peake!"

The officer looked at my brother in desperation, almost at the point of ordering him back into the place; but Elijah was pale-faced and trembling and I could tell that no power on earth would compel him to go into that ghastly hole again.

“He’s been very ill, sir,” I told the officer. “He had double pneumonia just before Guy Fawkes’ Night and was in bed poorly till well after Christmas.”

The young lieutenant looked round helplessly, becoming more of a boy and less of a soldier every moment. Suddenly he dismounted.

“By God,” he swore without conviction, “but I’ll go down and get it myself!”

No one stirred as he poised for a moment and then dropped into the hole. Only one voice spoke,

“That’ll muck ’is pipe-clay up!”

But no one even smiled. We waited while the rooks and curlews cried out above our heads and the dying sun was slowly covered by a grey rain cloud. Then the young officer’s voice came up to us, thick and almost hysterical, “Good God! There is a baby! It’s been run through with a sword!”

The men gasped and I heard Elijah take a quick breath. Then the lieutenant’s head appeared and he handed up his awful white burden to a man who took it with averted face and much blowing through the nostrils.

I saw it and closed my eyes, shuddering and retching and groping out for Elijah’s hand.

The Lieutenant said, “Wrap it up in a thick tarpaulin. And don’t disturb the sword. It’s all evidence.” His voice had now regained its command though he was very pale. Now the men obeyed him, for he had just done what none of them had dared to do.

He stood before us. “Tell me just how you found this baby,” he said, his voice suddenly becoming cold and official.

Elijah began to tell the story but the soldier who had once been our gardener stepped forward and said, “Wasn’t you carrying that there weapon when you passed our drilling-ground this afternoon? I saw you with it, so you can’t deny it!” he said. “What can’t speak can’t lie!” And they all nodded their heads at this, in agreement.

Elijah tried to speak but the officer stopped him.

“This is more serious than I thought,” he said. “I shall have to take you to the police station in Darlaston, both of you.”

Then he made the soldiers form a sort of guard round my brother, but noting that I was lame he helped me up on to his saddle so that I should ride before him.

Yet before we began that strange frightening march back to Darlaston, I had one chance to look round, weeping, in the direction that Dick Belcher had taken. Already the black tents were down and the vans had begun to roll slowly away, followed by lead-ponies and a string of dogs whose harsh cracked barking floated across to us intermittently on that damp foreboding air.

Elijah walked between the red-coated soldiers, pale and defiant, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, as though he did not intend to march smartly as they had to do. He even dragged his feet so that he could put them out of step.

The officer noticed this too and ordered the sergeant to quicken the pace of the Company. But this command had soon to be countermanded, for the one who carried the tarpaulin bundle could not keep the step.

And then the heavy Spring rain came down on us suddenly, beating on our heads and wetting us through before ever we reached James Bridge Station.

XII

By that evening my brother was in his bed again with a high temperature, moaning and crying out over and over again the things he had told the Inspector of Police in his formal evidence.

Mother and father were in their sitting-room with Lawyer Foster, who had been hurriedly summoned to give his advice. Tom was not there. Earlier in the day he had been to the police station with father to fetch us back, but on hearing the general drift of the evidence, he had said that he washed his hands of the whole affair. His new position of under-manager at the foundry was too important a one to risk by his becoming involved at all with this unsavoury thing. So this night he had gone back to the works to inspect a new set of drawings for extensions to the rolling-mills, for the foundry was now flourishing and developing beyond all imagining.

The question in all our minds now was: how far can the law implicate Elijah in this tragedy, should things go wrong?

I left Enoch to sit with Elijah and for the tenth time that evening crept down the steep stairs to find Phyllis and beg consolation from her. Yet she was as dumbfounded as the rest of us by it all.

As I passed the narrow cream door of the sitting-room, with its sombrely coloured glass panes, I heard my father say in a loud voice, “But good lord, Foster, they can’t charge the lad with Murder! The court doctor said definitely that the child had been dead for at least three days.”

Lawyer Foster’s voice was quiet but all the more compelling because of that.

“It’s not quite as simple as that, William,” he said. “I grant you that a charge of Murder is quite out of the question, but this case might well be complicated by two other possible charges. For instance, they might consider Elijah as an accessory after the fact, or at least they might suspect that he has some knowledge of the crime, of the person or persons who committed it. Don’t forget, according to his own testimony, he made his own way to the hole, stopping nowhere save to talk to certain gipsies.”

Father said, “But he did not go alone. He doesn’t seem to have made that clear in his evidence. He was taken there by another youth, Dick Belcher,

who knew where the place was and who ran away when our boy found that child."

The solicitor replied, "Yes, the police are already searching for Dick Belcher. They have taken the dogs to the Common to see if he is hiding anywhere there. He cannot have got far and I am sure that, considering his parentage, they are working on the right lines. But even when it is proven satisfactorily that another person is responsible for the actual death of the child and that Elijah was without previous knowledge of the death, or of its perpetrator, there is still the possibility that your son might not come away from the court as clear as we should wish."

My mother spoke very sharply and I could tell that she was considerably exercised in her mind.

"How can they attach anything to my son, Mr. Foster?" she said. "What is there he could be charged with? Why, the lad has not moved from this house for two months and more now; nor has he had the slightest contact with this young reprobate, Belcher. The whole thing is quite ridiculous, man!"

This time Lawyer Foster's voice was a little more comforting, out of deference, no doubt, to my mother's anxiety.

"Mrs. Fisher," he said. "I am not saying that they could charge him with anything very tangible. But recollect—and I know you will forgive me on this occasion for bringing up the matter—Elijah is a very headstrong, even strange, boy, whose peculiar temperament is well-known in the neighbourhood. He would dare, Mrs. Fisher—in the eyes of the court, that is to say, not mine—he would dare to do many things which another lad of his station might shrink from, if I may put it like that. Now he admits that the sword was his; he admits that he cast it into the hole . . . Well, we have the testimony of the young officer who retrieved the baby that its little body was quite visible from above; and that he actually saw it even as he leapt in the hole . . ."

"Damn it!" said my father. "That young fellow was so scared, he couldn't have known what he did see!"

"Nevertheless William," said the lawyer, "that is his sworn testimony and since he is one of Her Majesty's officers and shortly to see active service against Her Majesty's enemies, his words will carry weight with any local jury."

"What can they prove?" asked my mother, now truly anxious.

“They might well say,” went on the smooth legal voice, “that your son deliberately and with intent used the body of that child as a target for his marksmanship.”

My blood curdled as I heard those unspeakable words and I hated Lawyer Foster for daring to utter them.

Then my father roared, “Good God, Foster, have you taken leave of your senses, man? What do you think my boy’s mind is like?”

But Lawyer Foster said calmly, “Don’t upset yourself, William. I know Elijah to be a good-hearted Christian young fellow, with the right stuff in him. If only it can be brought out, that is. Why I’d take him into my office on trial any day, that I would. But now I am not considering what you know and what I believe. I am trying to see this case from the point of view of some old woman of a judge who does not know this lad personally but has only heard of his harum-scarum ways from other canting old women.”

There was a pause in the conversation then. At last my mother said in a shaking voice, “Suppose they decided our boy had done what you say. What could they do to him then?”

The solicitor said gravely, “They could send him to a Training Ship, Madam, or to a Home for the Correction of Juvenile Law-breakers.”

Then there was a long silence and the lawyer said, “But do not distress yourself unduly, Mistress Fisher. They have not yet gone so far, nor shall they, if I have the power to prevent them.”

I heard him rise from his chair as though he might be taking his leave and coming towards the door. I fled in terror through the conservatory.

Phyllis sat in the kitchen, by a lamp, embroidering a cushion-cover for her bottom-drawer. She smiled at me through the lamplight and did not wait for me to tell her what I had just heard.

“Aren’t you a lucky girl, Susan dear,” she said. “They are all so upset about this affair that no one has thought of saying you are really to blame for taking Elijah out across the Common like that, when he was not really fit to go.”

She waited for her frightening words to sink in. Then she smiled again at my confusion and said, “You really have a very kind father and mother, dear. Indeed, if you ask me, all your family is more than generous towards you. In some families, you know, you would be held morally responsible for the whole occurrence. Think of that, Susan, won’t you, before you act in such a

manner again? And poor Elijah lying up there in his bed again, more than likely to take pneumonia once more. And this time it would be fatal, you know. His constitution could not stand such another shock so soon upon the last bout."

When I look back on this scene, I feel sure that Phyllis did not intend to sound as utterly cruel as she did then. I think that in some queer way she was trying to establish some power over me, a power which she had felt slipping during the weeks when Elijah and I had been so close to each other. However, I did not stop to think of such things just then but fell on my knees, resting my head in her lap, trying through my sobs to ask her forgiveness. And at last she stroked my head and said, "Let us try to forget it, sister. Please God the worst will not happen after all."

Then her tone changed completely and she said, almost in a whisper, "Susan, as I have been sitting here, I have been thinking about it all. I did not hear the evidence and I know only a little of it at all—but you actually saw the baby, didn't you?"

I nodded miserably, trying to shut out that pathetic little memory. "Yes, Phyllis," I said. She smiled very curiously as she looked down at me. "What was it like?" she asked without any shame. "Can you recall clearly just how it looked when the soldier brought it up?"

My sister's questions fell on me like a sudden shock of cold water. I rose to my feet and drew away from her in horror and disgust, staring at her smiling face as though I could scarcely credit that she, the pretty one of our family, the comely one, the one for whom many a young fellow had eaten out his heart, could think, much less frame such a question—such a hateful question!

Yet I have lived to thank my sister for her morbid inquiry that night, for its impact on my mind jolted me out of a world which I had inhabited too long, the world of fear and respect and servitude, a world in which I had for too long taken everything at its face value without daring to look beneath the beauty of its surface, without daring to suspect wickedness and corruption beneath the shell of gentleness. Her question brought me out of bondage and I stood facing her with a new courage I had never known before.

"You demon!" I heard my own voice say. "You unspeakable thing! How dare you, you hateful creature!"

I heard her give a quick gasp and I saw her hands drop to her lap. She was speechless before this sudden rebellion and while her pretty lips

quivered, I forced myself to press home the advantage I had won.

"Do you realise," I said, "that a child has died, that your own brother lies upstairs under suspicion of knowing of its death? Do you realise that death is no matter for idle curiosity, but that it is terrible and frightening? Do you sit here with your embroidery, warm and comfortable, expecting others to observe the degradation, the decay, the horror of death, and then to come obediently at your beck and call to report every detail faithfully to you? For your whim, your satisfaction of the moment? For your amusement, nothing less!"

She too stood now and came towards me, her face working. But I am sure that a spirit had entered into my frail body for I not only stood up to meet her, I actually went forward; and she stopped.

I think that she began to say something hurtful, something that would put me back in my place, but now I had determined never again to go back to that place, not for Phyllis, at the least! And I smiled, yes, an awful smile, for I knew now that I had found a weak spot in her armour of superiority. I knew as I smiled that I had resented her overbearing ways all my life; and she knew that I had toppled her from a pedestal and that she should never reinstate herself, lived she to be a hundred! And she backed before me, beginning to sob, at last leaning on the table, unable to go any further away from me. And I stopped close by her, my eyes looking into hers, and I said, "I know you now, Phyllis. I know what sort of heart lives in that fine body of yours. Shall I expose it to the house? Shall I tell my mother what you have said? Shall I? Or shall I tell Tom and ask him what he thinks of his favourite, eh?"

Then she lowered her head and I saw the tears falling on to her brocade bodice. I reached up and took her by the shoulders and found the great strength to shake her, shake her, shake her!

Until without warning she gave a sob and broke away from me and ran out of the house.

And then I think my courage left me for a moment, my lovely new courage! And I began to weep myself from the strain of that awful interview. Yet as I dried my eyes some of my strength came back to me and at last I got up and went back to Elijah's bedroom.

Mother and father were sitting at the bedside, mother holding Elijah's hand as he slept. She smiled at me as I entered and said, "He has been asking for you, our Susan."

I went forward and said, “Is he very ill, mother?”

But she said, “No, dear, I don’t think so this time. Doctor Maguire thinks it is just strain, that and a chill, but he must stay in bed for a few days till we can be sure. He gave him a sleeping draught and it worked very quickly. That is why he sleeps so soundly now.”

I do not know what had been said before I entered that room, or whether it was because I still carried my triumph over Phyllis in my eyes and my bearing, but father put his hand on my shoulder as I passed him and said, “Susan, I want to speak to you.”

I said, “Yes, father. What do you want to tell me? I know I did wrong today . . .”

He would not let me say any more but shook his head and the tears were near to falling from his eyes.

“I do not wish to criticise you, my dear. What’s done is done and I do not see how you could have acted differently. It is myself I want to talk about, not you. I want to say that this tragedy has shown me something that I might never have known had it not happened. I think I knew how much you meant to me when we met the ganders that day, long ago; and I think I knew the value of your brother when he lay sick but a few weeks ago. But they were both selfish realisations. I seemed to love you because it gave me a pleasure to do so. I did not consider either of you in loving you. I was conferring a favour, in a way, by loving you. I was headstrong and proud, Susan. But this day, when you have suddenly found yourselves face to face with a more powerful thing than my love, I see how weak, how inadequate, I have been. I have not guided as much as tolerated you; I have not helped you as much as ignored you. I have performed few of the services of a father to either of you . . .”

I could not bear to hear my father talk like this, for I knew that he was punishing himself deliberately and his self-humiliation was more than I could stand.

I put my arms about him and said then, “Father, please do not say these things. You have been the best parent a child could want.”

But he held my head close to his side and would not let me go on. “That is the gentle heart of you speaking, Susan,” he said, “and not the true honest mind. What have I ever done for you? Have I educated you? Have I bought you fine clothes? Have I talked with you, laughed with you, played with you? Have I paid a surgeon to mend your ankle?”

Now I began to sob myself and to draw away from his arm.

He went on, “I have failed you both, up to now. I have failed you because I am a dissatisfied proud man myself. I have withdrawn myself from my family because, like a sulking child, I did not get my own way in life. Good God but I have been a blind man and now at last I can see again; now that my little daughter has glimpsed the horror of the world and my son’s future is in jeopardy.”

My mother came forward and placed her hand on his bowed shoulder. He shook her off, but very gently, and said, “I have finished now. But know, Susan, that I have seen the light and that this family will live to thank you for the day you led Elijah to that Common, whatever pains we all have to endure before this thing is over.”

He rose then and went to the window and my mother put her arm round me and hugged me to her. “God bless you, Susan,” she said. “We have never really appreciated either of you until now.”

She said no more but bent and kissed me so gently that I began to weep far more than I had done for father’s words. I looked round the room, but young Enoch had gone out silently long before, being unable to stand such scenes!

I do not know how long I could have borne this new situation either but a sudden knock at the door below saved me. My father looked down from the half-open window and said, “Someone with a bull’s-eye lantern. It’s the constable!”

Then he called quietly so as not to waken Elijah that he would be down in a moment and left the bedroom to put on his boots, for he had been wearing carpet-slippers.

Mother sat down on a chair and her face was very white. She took her handkerchief from her sleeve and began to wipe her forehead. I could see that she was extremely distressed, though she was never a woman to sigh and moan and give way to the vapours as did so many of the matrons of her time. I went to the window and looked down. Father was standing just outside the door with the policeman and their words came clearly up to me as I listened.

“So set your mind at rest, Mr. Fisher,” he said. “Your lad will not be called. They found the girl, a black-haired young gipsy lass, not quite right i’ the head, from what I can gather. She done her baby in, without a doubt. Someone out o’ the same camp informed on her and they turned her adrift.

We caught her without any trouble at all. She was hiding in a barn just outside Willenhall, crying like a mad thing. It was pitiful to hear her. I tell you, I could hardly bring myself to lock the handcuffs on her but it had to be done. No, your lad won't be troubled unless I'm very much mistaken. And if the lawyers want him at all, it'll only be to repeat how he came to find the body."

I saw my father slip something into the man's hand and heard his self-conscious thanks. Then the light from the lantern began to move away down our path. Father stood in the doorway for a minute and then I heard him call out quietly as though in an afterthought, "Have they taken the other, the young lad Belcher, yet?"

The light stopped and the policeman turned. "No," he said. "Nor will they, in my opinion. Belcher'll be off to 'list for a soldier, and good riddance to bad rubbish! Not that it would do much good to anybody if they did find him. He's a bit soft i' the head, too, by all accounts, or he wouldn't have lived the way he did, when he could have gone a-navvying down Pershore way for a goodish wage. They canna get men there, I hear. If it weren't for my family I'd have a go at it mesen!"

Father bade him goodnight and once more the lantern light bobbed on down the pathway to our gate. And soon afterwards father came back into the room and he kissed both mother and me. Then he turned back Elijah's bedclothes gently and kissed him too.

Mother said, "Careful, William, you'll wake the lad!"

Without turning his head, father said, "Sar'Ann, I wish he would wake, in all truth, to share the good news with the rest of us!"

Mother fell on to her knees there and then, aware of the good fortune that had smiled on us, and began to pray silently. My father wiped his nose with his red handkerchief and stiffly got down to join her. I watched them and wondered whether I should do the same; but then the new strength, the self-sufficiency I had lately found flooded back through me and I just smiled at them both and closed the door softly as I went downstairs to look for the fashion-book that Phyllis kept in her bureau.

Part Two

I

I LOOK round the quiet garden of the Institution where I am sitting, sheltered by the mellow red-brick colonnade. It is a place of peace, of rest after storm. The gentle pale-faced figures who walk among the roses, smiling vacantly at each other from time to time or stopping to touch a bloom or a new bud with simple fingers, are creatures of peace like me. Soon the bell will sound to call us to our duties or our bed. And we shall go without question or demur, for now after sickness and tempest we know that the quiet mind, the unmoved heart, may only come to those who learn to shut their eyes and ears to other calls of the frantic world. Peace only comes by strict obedience.

Yet before the bell sounds and while I may still look across the garden to watch the shadows striking over the cropped grass, long shadows from the sheltering wall, I think of those two years of my life that followed Bentley Common, and those years are like this garden to me now, a space of peace after storm, of sheltering love where the bell sometimes called me to obedience, but very gently; two years of sunlit patches across a green garden, the tawny lion-coloured days; but two years towards the end of which the long shadows had begun to creep relentlessly across the smooth love-tended lawns.

To be sure, there was little peace at first, though even the dullest of days held promise of a bright tomorrow. Elijah lay sick for a longer period than the old doctor had forecast, for he took a pleurisy and caused us grave concern before he was on his feet and strong again.

Then there was that poor devil of a gipsy girl, accused of killing her baby. True, we did not even know her but by now the strands of her wretched life had become tangled with ours and her fate was in some measure our concern too. Tom was naturally disinterested in the affair and Phyllis now pretended a new aloofness towards everything that had the faintest bearing on it. But my parents, and Elijah and I, we were all irresistibly drawn towards her situation, that strong thread in our own lives, for if nothing else it had shown us to each other as nothing ever had done before. That miserable girl who now lay in Stafford Gaol awaiting her trial at the Assizes had brought us together, had made something of a family of us, had let us declare our affection for each other, had taught me a new

strength. So out of her evil came our good, at least that is how it seemed then, though I am not quite so sure now, when I consider the pattern of our lives more closely.

When the time for her case came up, Elijah said that he wished to attend the Assize Court and speak up for her but father showed him that such a course could not help her, since in fact my brother knew nothing of the affair as it implicated her. It might well prejudice my brother's own future, said father, if he appeared in court, even were he permitted to do so. I too wished to help the girl but well understood the truth of father's argument. Yet we could not let her fade from our world like that, without taking any effort to help her, if only because she had been our benefactress in her way. It was a curious trick of the mind or of the heart, perhaps, that made us see this wretched girl in such a manner. Yet rightly or wrongly that is what we all felt.

Father saw Lawyer Foster about it and obtained his promise that he would help should it be in any way possible for him to do so, and at least we had that satisfaction that during the preliminary hearings, should any legal opportunity occur, our lawyer would do his best to brief a suitable Defending Counsel for the girl. But this was not to be, for the girl's mind was not one that any man might defend with hope of success.

My father journeyed to Stafford and spent three days in the court before returning to tell us what he had seen and heard. He said that she had cut a pathetic figure in the Box, for she had almost starved herself to death before ever the trial came up, and was assisted into the court at last like a pale ghost, already beyond man's censure or punishment, dressed in the long grey habit of the cell, only her big gold ear-rings still remaining to her of her former life, and they could not be taken from her since they were attached to the lobes by a gold ring that was now as much part of her body as the ears themselves.

It was these ear-rings that captured my attention more than anything else my father had said, for now I remembered a gipsy girl with such ear-rings. I recalled the long black hair and the dark sullen face of the girl who had glared at me from the flap of Dick Belcher's tent.

"What were the ear-rings like, father?" I said. "Were they in the form of gold pieces, dangling low from the ear?"

Mother looked at me in a smiling, tolerant surprise. "Child," she said, "fancy thinking of such a trivial thing when that poor girl is on trial for her very life!"

Father nodded. “Yes, they were as you describe,” he said.

After that I spoke no more, though Elijah looked at me in such a way that I knew he was aware of what was in my mind.

So my father went on to tell us what a sorry figure the girl had cut in the great dark oaken room, which was full of powerful men in all the trappings of man-made law, measuring out justice with a stern eye and a sword that waited, poised to exact its accurate and unstayable penalty. Although there had, automatically, been a plea of ‘Not Guilty’, at a certain point in the proceedings on the second day the wretched woman had screamed out so pitifully and uncontrollably that she was indeed a murderess that the court had to be adjourned, for no threat would silence her and the Public Galleries were in a great uproar of sympathy. On the third day all wayfaring-men were excluded from the building as the Judge felt that this gipsy woman had so aroused their feelings on the previous day that an attempt might even be made to prevent the court from performing its legal duty. Father said that indeed the rumour had gone round Stafford that a Company of Yeomanry had been attached secretly to the court and that they waited all ready in the yard for the signal to enter the courtroom with loaded carbines. But this may well have been nothing more than a tap-room tale, since the town was already full of soldiers who were making their last preparations before voyaging overseas to stations in Africa or Ireland.

But so it was that late on the third day the Judge put on his square black cap and sentenced Rose Palmer to be hanged by the neck until she was dead. Yet he made it clear that this sentence was one of mere form, since the girl was so clearly insane that Stafford might expect no hanging to take place, despite his words.

My father says that on that evening the taverns were full of dark-skinned lawless men who swore that they would burn down the Gaol and take Rose Palmer with them out of her cell. Others vowed to set free all the felons who lay at that time in the prison, and there was one man, said my father, who paraded from place to place in the town showing a razor and declaring that before the night was out the Judge who had sentenced the gipsy girl would be discovered with his throat cut. But by the morning all was quiet again and these bold and talkative wanderers went their ways along the lanes, having forgotten what they had so strongly planned under the influence of strong ale, leaving their gipsy heroine to wait what future God and Her Majesty’s Home Secretary should decree.

So there was nothing left for us to do but to pray for her and at last to let her sad story fade from our minds; and this, I am sorry to say, happened quickly for there were many other things we enjoyed thinking about more.

Yet there was one thing that father told us which stayed in my dreams for many a long year and which still comes to my mind in the little ghostly hours when I am not well . . . Just when the Judge was bringing the black square up to place it on his head before he delivered the sentence of death, the dark-eyed gipsy girl stood straight up with a shriek and glared wildly about the courtroom so that all eyes quailed before that terrible searching gaze. Then she whispered hoarsely, "Gentle sirs, where is my baby? Where is my little Jonathan, please? I pray you, give him back to me, kind gentlemen!"

And then she sank back sobbing in a deathly silent room, when at last the Judge nerved himself to speak the dread words.

There was one other thing that happened to revive our memory of the tragedy before it sank below the waters of our consciousness.

Near Spring Head in Wednesbury, where the two roads divide, one leading to the canvas stalls of the market place and the other curving round to the Portway Road and so to Dudley, there was situated a small theatre, resplendent with great coloured posters and garishly bright with gaslamps. In polite conversation or when we were talking with our parents, we called this place by its advertised name, The Royal Theatre; but among ourselves it was the Flea-pit, or even more vulgarly, the Bughole! I don't know why, since the place seemed clean enough with its gilt and white ceiling, its plum-plush seats and its scrubbed and sanded floor. Perhaps our abuse was directed not against the theatre but against the actors who appeared in it. Perhaps in our minds still lurked that ancient distrust of the provincial for those who gain a living by any form of art and especially travelling art! And these actors were truly strolling players for they seldom stayed more than three nights at Wednesbury, after which they would journey on to Cradley Heath, or Bilston, or Wednesfield, or Sedgley, a loud-voiced, penurious, white-gloved, powdered, gay gang of magnificent paupers! How I laughed and sneered at them; yet how I envied them in my heart of hearts!

On this occasion the play to be presented was "*The Tragical Story of Maria Marten; Or, The Murder in the Red Barn!*" Father had often mentioned it in our hearing, sometimes almost unconsciously, as when he might say of a flighty young woman, "Why, she's as brazen as Maria Marten!" or of a young libertine, "He'd better mind his p's and q's! You

know what happened to William Corder!" Then he would chuckle as though in reality the whole thing were a joke and that Tragical Story of lust and its retribution little more to be taken seriously than any other ranting charade in a candle-lit shed . . .

It took me long enough to see my father's point of view in this; for at first I thought he was condoning loose behaviour. Though later I realised that his very laughter was a symptom of his exceptional innocence. The fact was that, truly in his heart, he never believed that real people did such things! He classed rumours of this girl's immorality, that young man's drunkenness, with the barnstorming plays he had watched in his youth. They did not really touch his world, that innocent world of a middle-aged man who had never moved from the town in which he had been born, who had led a simple life in a small community, a life bounded on the one side by his foundry, on the other by his obedient family, his garden and his books.

Thus it was that when the play, "Maria Marten" was advertised in our local news-sheet, father was enthusiastic that we should all visit the theatre and see a piece which had given him such pleasure years before. The response from the family, however, was mixed. Tom, by now a stern and serious man of twenty-four, with a firm mission in life, discovered that he had important work which must be done that night. Phyllis, who since our quarrel had avoided my company as much as she could, complained of a headache and could not stand the flickering gas footlights of the theatre. Whereupon mother withdrew from the party, saying that if our Phyllis was not well it was her place to be within call in case she was needed. At which, Phyllis was obviously put out, since it was apparent even to me that her excuse was a fictitious one and that there was something else which called to her more urgently that evening! But there it had to stay for mother insisted, albeit with a strange twinkle in her eye . . .

So father took Elijah, Enoch and me to the theatre. We sat in the luxury of the Dress Circle, listening to the shouts and the catcalls that came from the Gallery behind us. Enoch, who at fourteen was a fearless bright-spirited young devil with an angel's corn-blond hair, could not resist the temptation of turning round and shouting back at the men and women who leaned over the balcony, calling out their ribaldries at whoever sat before them. But father pulled the lad down and gave him a stern look.

"None of that, me lad," he said. "You put yourself in as dirty a sty as them!"

Enoch said, “They are higher than we are, father. They can throw orange peel at us but we can’t hit them!”

Elijah said laconically, “Throwing orange peel never did any good! When you fight, our kid, do it wi’ something that hurts, not orange peel!”

Then father quietened them both. “The folk behind you are not true Wedgebury folk,” he said. “They are Irishmen and their women, not householders; labourers who have no real homes like you. They come here to see a story because they can’t read. They come to sit in the warm for tuppence because they have no fires in their grates. Now you know why they scream and yell at those who sit here. They are merely envious of our good fortune.”

Enoch said, “Why should we have good fortune, father and not them? We didn’t work for what we have. It was grandfather who made the foundry, made the money, not us.”

Then father’s face became so flushed and stern that I was glad when the lights were turned down and a magic lantern threw slides of the Queen’s soldiers on to the white screen that hung before the stage curtain. These pictures showed the uniforms of the various regiments; but none obtained such silence or called out such applause as the groups of infantry and artillery who were at that time serving in Africa. It was barely a year since such great numbers of our men had been hacked and stabbed by the Zulus of the treacherous Cetewayo at the Hill of the Little Hand, and there were even men in that audience who had seen the dripping assegais coming down the slope before their British hearts had quailed and they had broke and fled. We heard more than one voice shout out from the dimness of the theatre, “Yo tell’m, Joe! Tell the Manager yo wur theer! ’e’ll gi’ thee a pint fur that, Joe! Show’m yer medals, Joe!” But the veteran Joe did not come forward at these shouts of sympathetic ribaldry and at last the Manager of the theatre called good-humouredly for silence. Then the magic lantern show was over and we settled down as the curtains swung aside to watch the drama which was already vaguely familiar to us through father’s recollections of his youth.

Against the cloying music of a fiddle and a ’cello the Marten family sat in the kitchen and joked in a rough sort of blank verse, in a safe world of red tiles, warming-pans and Windsor chairs. But the first curtain brought the surprise entrance of a black-cloaked stranger who seemed to come back from nowhere, the newly returned son of the Squire. This was William Corder who leered constantly at the Gallery and frequently chucked the sweet-faced Maria under the chin. We observed with a thrill that the

melodies played by the two-man orchestra were now sinister ones, as though presaging the tragedy that was to come. Now the Gallery stopped hooting and no one spoke a word. But on our row Enoch began to chuckle and to nudge a small girl who sat next to him, trying to get her to join him in sneering at this travesty of human emotion.

My own feelings were confused. I was naturally excited at being in the theatre, for up to that time I had been out but little, apart from our country picnics; yet through my excitement came the falseness of the actions, the music, the speech of the actors. They were not real people, I felt. They did not believe in what they were doing. They were less concerned with the words they spoke than with the audience to whom they displayed their art. And even I could discern that this art of theirs was of a crude order. Their voices cooed like honey dripping from an overturned tin, mounted to an impossible crescendo, took on inflections which no human voice could permit itself to employ on real occasions. I did not like it and found that I could not let myself be carried away as the rest of the audience seemed to be. Father and Enoch, however, sat smiling tolerantly; but Elijah's face was drawn and I could feel that he was clutching the arms of his seat as though he was about to spring to his feet. I could not understand why for there was nothing in this dreary play that moved me.

Then against the unearthly light from a purple slide which was being projected from the magic lantern behind us, the villain Corder, moved across the stage, mouthing:

> "So sunset dies, and night's dark clouds approach,
> Cover'ing from world's eye the deed I do!
> Sink, sun, forever! Let no creature see
> The depths of my dark villainy! This child
> Must safely lie tonight in some deep place;
> My father must not know where this brat lies—
> A spade will dig the hole that hides my shame!"

And as he spoke, grinning horribly, he held up for the audience to see the painted doll that represented the fruits of his shameful alliance with the rosy-cheeked Maria Marten. This incident did not affect me in the slightest—indeed, I was at the time thinking of the supper which mother would have prepared for us when we got home—but I heard a gasp from beside me and saw that Elijah was standing up.

"Good God!" he was saying, "It is the image of the one we found. It has a black shawl about it, too!"

His agitation was such that I touched father on the knee. He turned and saw Elijah. “Sit down, lad,” he said. “It’s only a play. It will be all right.”

Then the people in the rows behind us began to mutter, telling my brother to make up his mind whether he was going to stay or not. And at last this muttering spread to the Gallery, whose habitués, always anxious to score a point against those who sat in the better seats, began to call abuse at Elijah.

“Sit dahn, yer great saft babby!” shouted a woman. “Bist frightened on the play, then? Thee Dadda shouldn’t ’a brought thee! Tell ’im to tak thee ’ome, then!”

Elijah half-turned towards the voice, his fists clenched. Pieces of orange peel began to fly about us, some of them striking my brother on his back and bouncing on to us. I knew the strength of his temper and tried to restrain him, but he flung off my hand, still muttering.

Father rose from his seat abruptly. “Come on,” he said quietly, “We had better leave.”

We filed from our seats, Elijah stumbling like a drunken man. William Corder stood staring after us, unable to go on with his devilry for the moment, the painted doll dangling from his hand. The theatre was in an uproar, as though a pack of lions had been let loose suddenly!

At the door, the Manager shook his head at us. “I should get him home,” he said. “He seems to be suffering from a fever. There’s a lot of small-pox about, they tell me. Look at the way he’s shivering!” He stood well away from Elijah as he spoke and coughed and blew his nose violently as we walked away.

But it was no fever that shook my brother that night, unless one might call it a fever of the spirit.

When we were in the horse-bus, father said, “I don’t like any of you to be deceitful,” he said, “but I would prefer you not to tell your mother of this. I do not want her to be worried unnecessarily.” Then he turned to Elijah. “Don’t worry, lad,” he said, “it was not thy fault. I am to blame. I shouldn’t have brought thee there. I’m truly sorry, lad. I’d forgotten all about the baby in the play.”

Elijah smiled rather grimly and said no more; but I knew something of what that ridiculous melodrama had cost him, for as he stood up I had begun to see the horror of it all—not of the play-story itself but the fact that human creatures gathered in a public place to be entertained by a situation which was at its best a sordid one, a symptom of some disease of the human spirit.

Later that night I tried to say this to Elijah as we walked in the garden but he rounded on me and said, “You’ll end up in a nunnery, or an asylum, me lass! I wasn’t thinking of disease of the human spirit at all. . . I was seeing that baby again, and the one on the stage looked just like that one in the hole. Even the shawl was like the one the gipsy girl had wrapped round hers. That’s what upset me, not diseased spirits. They are for the Parson to think about, not me!”

Would I end up in a nunnery or an asylum? I asked myself as I went up the steep stairs to my room, my eyes a little moist because my dearest brother had spoken to me so harshly.

Yet by the next day I had forgotten his words for father was waiting for me at the table, his head suddenly full of a new idea that had come to him in the night, he said.

“Look Susan,” he said, “Your ankle gets no better. I noticed it last night. You could hardly get up into the bus.”

“No, father,” I said. “But then, I don’t expect it to. Doctor Maguire said it wouldn’t, didn’t he?”

Father’s short square beard jutted out in determination. “Maguire is a good man for setting a broken arm or dosing a constipated bairn,” he said, “but he doesn’t know much about anything he can’t see with his own eyes. He can’t see inside your foot, can he? He can only guess. Well, I’ve been guided by him so long; I’ve given him a chance, hoping you would grow out of your weakness; but last night, as I lay in bed and couldn’t sleep, I thought of what a risk I was taking with my children, one way and another. I was careless with our ’Lijah last night, you know; I never thought that play would upset him! But that’s a detail compared with you. I’ve been careless for years about you, my duckie!”

I was so embarrassed that I hardly knew how to get my porridge-spoon to my mouth.

“I’ve been thinking,” father went on, “we should get another opinion about that ankle of yours. Let’s go and find a specialist in Brummagem, someone who deals in ankles—not a horse-doctor, like old Maguire! What do you say? Wouldn’t you like to jump and dance like the others?”

Then the tears ran down my face, warm and salty, mingling with the milk on my porridge. I got up from my chair and hobbled out of the room into the conservatory, my head full of confusion. I loved father for that kindly thought and yet I hated him for his clumsy words. Of course I wanted

to dance and jump like the others—but, oh God, I knew that I never could. Doctor Maguire had said so; Tom had said so; Phyllis had said so. I had grown so used to my prison that the thought of freedom threw my mind into a strangely-mixed whirl of joy and sadness, all confused.

Later in the morning mother found me and put her hand on my shoulder gently. "Come on, our Susan," she said quietly, "If you are to go to Birmingham with your father you had better have a dress we shan't be ashamed of. We can take the train to Wolverhampton after lunch."

No train ran on wheels that day which could go half fast enough to get me to Wolverhampton! The slag-heaps and pit headgears floated past in a miasma of expectation, while my mother sat in the opposite corner from me, fine in her red-green Paisley shawl, smiling at my obvious delight, telling me to be patient, asking me whether I would choose a self-coloured dress or something gay like a Balmoral tartan! But I had no words for my dream-dress—it would be a dress, a wonderful one, of course, but one which was so idealised already in my mind that I could not come within miles of describing its colours or its style!

We took a cab from the station to the shop, which was situated in the middle of the town, near a wide open space where an equestrian statue dominated the horse-drawn traffic that rattled round it, for as yet we were blissfully ignorant of such motor-driven vehicles as pollute our streets today.

Outside the shop I stopped, enchanted. I was almost sixteen yet this was the first time I had ever been taken to choose myself a dress—not that I hadn't been quite satisfied with what Phyllis had given me before. But that was already another life now. The world of Phyllis' domination was gone for ever; gone since that unhappy night when I first saw something unpleasant peering out from beneath the mask of her elder splendour. Now I stood before the double-fronted display window of Hyam and Company —"Ladies', Gentlemen's and Children's Tailors, Livery and Habit-makers, Clothiers, Hatters, Boot and Shoe Manufacturers and General Outfitters."

"Stop a minute before we go in, mother!" I cried, anxious to prolong that moment of ecstasy.

"Come along, silly goose," she said, taking me by the hand and hurrying past the two beaming shopwalkers who bowed, their hands clasped unctiously, as we entered the hallway.

I do not remember how we got across the great square of marble that stretched between us and the long counters; but then two young women

were busying themselves on my behalf, bringing in dresses, reaching down boxes, carrying materials to the light so that I might better appraise their colours. But now a great dizziness came over me and I hardly heard what everyone was saying. I felt pressed down and suffocated by the richness, the unaccountable glories of the dresses that were laid on the broad mahogany counter for my choice!

I do recall, however, that during a little lull, when mother went to another part of the store to examine a model that caught her fancy, hearing one girl say to the other, "She don't look well, do she, Florrie? If she was mine I'd have the doctor to her. A thorough going-over, that's what she wants, in my opinion."

And they were both looking at me; but I was happy and didn't feel in the least poorly. Indeed, I had never felt better. Until mother came back, I busied myself by reading a long printed advertisement that hung above the counter:

> "HYAM & COMPANY would respectfully draw attention to their Department for Little Boys' and Girls' HATS & CAPS, in which are to be obtained all the Newest and Most Fashionable Novelties for the Present Season, comprising Felts, Satins, Velvets and Straws in every variety of trimming. Parents, Guardians and Children can with the utmost certainty be suited."

I had just noted that the children seemed to be the last to be considered by the respectful Management, when mother returned and said that the dress which stood in the window was lovely; much better than anything the girls had yet shown us. One of them made a little moue at this and mother spoke to her quietly but quite sternly, saying that she was a good customer and would ask to see Mr. Hyam unless the model concerned were taken from the window without delay. "Without delay," she repeated gently. The girl sprang to life. "Yes, Ma'am," she said, and hurried to do mother's bidding. Then mother turned and smiled at me, as though to impress upon me how important we really were. But I lowered my head for I could not bear to think of that underpaid creature in the white blouse and paper-cuffs, who had to obey the least whim of every person with money who cared to sit on that cane chair and raise her haughty voice.

But at last the dress came and I was deliriously happy, so happy that I forgot all social inequalities! Which says little for my conscience but much for my rapidly-growing pride in myself. Or should I say, my rapidly growing selfishness? For indeed, I believe it was that.

What was the dress like? Alas, that I should remember it, for by now I should have learned humility; yet it stays in my mind and shall do so for ever, I am sure; and when I come to the final count, though my other faults may slip past the Recorder unnoticed, the great pride of me will be graven eternally on my heart, I feel certain, in my memory of that lovely dress! I shall suffer many years of Purgatory for that dress!

It swept to the ground, completely hiding my feet, my crippled ankle; that was the first thing that drew me to it—but that was not all. It was of red velvet, coming in from a tight bodice to the waist, and was turned back all down the front, from neck to hemline, and edged with heavy white lace, to expose an underdress of rich, ruched green silk! And as though this splendour was not enough, its short train and elbow-length sleeves were decorated heavily with a similar lace, woven with all the craft of centuries, of Nottingham-skill and devotion to its art.

I moved self-consciously before the long cheval glass, thinking how splendid this dress would be for a Ball; yet how surprised the surgeon in Birmingham was going to be when I presented myself for treatment in it one day soon!

But mother had no such doubts. She clucked and nodded with immense satisfaction.

“Bring a hat to go with it,” she commanded, imperiously. “Not a bonnet, not a straw. Something, er, elegant, if you please, miss!”

Then she sat down again, her chin resting on the long handle of her parasol; and at last the girl came running back with a sweet little round fur hat in grey squirrel and having a broad, braided ribbon that tied the tiny thing on securely.

“Do you fancy it, my dear?” asked mother, turning it round and round on her fist almost disparagingly.

“Oh yes, mother,” I gasped. “Yes, indeed!”

“I hope there will be a suitable hat-box for it,” said my mother to the girl coolly, placing the hat on the counter without more ado.

And at last when I had been provided with a light cape, shoes and gloves, we left the store, to be bowed out by the shopwalkers and to be followed by a messenger-boy whose job it was to carry our purchases to a cab in the Square.

Yet I did not need a cab! I would most gladly have walked all the way to the station, light-footed as Ariel, despite the shooting-pains of my ankle. And my heart sang, sang, sang, with every rattle of the train-wheels along the iron road from Wolverhampton to James Bridge and again with the clopping hooves that carried me from James Bridge to our green gates and my father's expectant wonderment!

That night the boys teased me and Phyllis found that her headache had come on again when she had seen the dress; but I went to bed with only one anxiety—that the night should pass soon, so that I could try on my new things again and see the lovely image which the looking-glass flung back at me, unashamed, brazen, mortally proud.

If life might have stopped for us all then it might have been well, for I think we were happy—all but Phyllis perhaps, and she was soon to find for herself the happiness she wished from life.

I see our family in church on Sunday evenings, father and mother together in their own pew, with Tom on one side of them and Phyllis on the other; while we sat in the row behind them, Elijah, Enoch and myself; and there with the grey stone arches soaring above us and the heavy music of the organ rolling round the traceries of the roof, we were a family; yes, even Tom and Phyllis contributed to that solidity on these occasions. We prayed for Her Majesty, but she meant little to us, for she was far away at Windsor, attending to her own brood, riding about on her own State Occasions. I do not think that we of the Black Country were especially fond of her; indeed we seemed only too willing to take up the cudgel, literally, if her decrees and her officers seemed at all unreasonable. She had her own family, her own happinesses and sadnesses, and that was her affair, though we prayed for her every Sunday. We were a law unto ourselves . . . I can hear the strong voices of the two grown men and mother's clear contralto, for she was still in her middle-forties and had as yet a good musical ear. I felt then that we could sing as well as any family that attended All Saints' and was glad to belong to the Fisher brood! How the others must envy us, I thought then—and I would venture a glance down at my new shoes, or my gloves, and then look up again with a smile, consciously vain as any Princess at Balmoral!

Yet at times this change in my character began to trouble me none the less, and often at night I prayed to God not to hold it too hardly against me for I had never been like this before. Yet I confessed to Him that I secretly liked feeling proud and that I would try to injure no one by my pride. Then I would become appalled by this new sign of pride and would ask Him to forgive me for thinking that I was really powerful enough to injure His other

creatures . . . So, all told, I became conscious of a strange yet not wholly unpleasant conflict in my own mind. I was growing up.

But generally I was too busy to remain overmuch concerned with myself. Enoch was already under articles to Lawyer Foster, who had been as good as his word in taking Elijah into his office too, on trial as it were, to see whether one day he might make a general handy-man clerk of him. We all knew that Mr. Foster had only done this because of his promise to father and we all knew that Elijah had only taken up such an uncongenial employment because he too felt that he had an obligation to father. Nevertheless, we were all very satisfied about it for the moment and Enoch pretended to take it with the utmost seriousness. Seeing that Elijah made poor progress with his reading and writing, Enoch would give him lessons at night, jollying his elder brother into reading aloud to us all and making him copy out from various thick law tomes which he brought back from the office to study at night. And be it said in Elijah's favour that while pretending to take the whole thing as a joke he tried hard to get his tongue round the long legal phrases and to write them out again and again without making blots on his paper, or smudging it all over with his sleeve as he reached for the ink bottle. Yet at the end of such a session, I knew that he was more fatigued than if he had chased a hare through the fields all day with his catapult in his hand.

But Enoch took to it all as a duck takes to water. His was a quick wit and a lively brain. His imitations of old Jebb, the Senior Clerk, kept us all in tucks of mirth. He would imitate Jebb taking a pinch of snuff, Jebb blowing his red nose, Jebb bowing obsequiously to a wealthy client, Jebb rolling back his cuffs to make an entry in the ledger. And we all saw the man, as though he stood in the room beside us; we smelled the snuff, heard the scratch of the steel nib as it scurried over the thick vellum pages of the book, heard the hinges of the door squeak, as Enoch carried out his silent impersonations! Even Tom relented and laughed too. "I shall take care not to let you set foot in my office, young man," he said. "You and your brother are both rebels in your different ways!" But Elijah stopped laughing then and fixed Tom with his eye and Tom had already learned to give his younger brother best at that game.

Yet perhaps we were even more amused when young Enoch stood up in the lamplight and, with his hand thrust inside his waistcoat, as Napoleon was said to have stood, declaimed from some dusty old law book he had discovered from among the rubbish that had accumulated in Lawyer Foster's safe:

"*Anno Quarto Georgii IV Regis*," he would begin pompously, clearing his throat in a manner which we all recognised as being a true imitation of Lawyer Foster himself. . . . "Whereas an Act was passed in the Twentieth Year of the reign of His Majesty George the Second intituled An Act for the better adjusting and more easy recovery of Wages of certain Servants, and for the Better Regulation of such Servants, and of certain Apprentices . . . gobble, gobble, gobble, . . . Then and in every such case it shall and may be lawful for any Justice of the Peace of the County or Place where the Servant in Husbandry, Artificer, Calico Printer, Handicraftsman, Miner, Collier, Keelman, Pitman, Glassman, Potter, Labourer, or other Person, shall have so contracted, or be employed, or be found, upon Complaint thereof made upon Oath to him by the Person or Persons, of any of them with whom such Servant in Husbandry, Artificer, Calico Printer, Handicraftsman, gobble, gobble, gobble, Labourer, or other Person, shall have so contracted . . ."

By which time Elijah would have thrown a cushion at him or have taken him up by the ankles and suspended him upside down until father came to his rescue, so that in the end everything ended in good humour and mother went back to the kitchen to make us all a cup of van Houten's Cocoa before we went to bed.

But the Law was not the only thing that called out Enoch's destructive powers. By now I had got beyond "Alice in Wonderland" as a source of literary entertainment and was allowed to read "Thrilling Life Stories—For the Masses," each week, one penny. This series contained such titles as "Her Solemn Charge," "The Baronet's Bride," "Through a Girl's Influence," "Released!", "Lady Vernon's Heiress," and others very similar in tone. Enoch's great delight was to invent titles which he thought resembled these —such as "Burnt to a Cinder," or "The Viperous Vituperations of Victoria!" Though he almost got into severe trouble with mother over the latter since we children were not openly permitted to use that name lightly in our household, whatever our parents themselves might say of the Queen; especially as by this time there was talk of Her Majesty becoming Empress of India itself, and in our minds that country was a vast storehouse of rich and coloured gems, the possessor of which she would become. To have a Queen who was also the owner of the wealth of the Arabian Nights sent us breathless with an almost religious respect when we stopped to think about it —and so Enoch came in for a strict caution from mother and a grunted half-smiling one from father, who couldn't even have named the children of the Royal Family if he had tried!

But these things endeared me to young Enoch. He had moreover one faculty for which I had an immense respect and not a little envy—his phenomenal memory. I have never been very able in this respect and as a child I could hardly call to mind the dates of our family's various birthdays even! Yet nothing in this line seemed to daunt our youngest brother. After only the most cursory glance at the Almanac he would be able to roll off dates like this:

"January 15th, Bridgnorth Fair; January 29th, Tamworth Fair; January 30th, Stafford Fair; February 7th, Lichfield Fair; February 24th, Walsall Fair; February 26th, Shenstone Fair; and February 27th, Kinver Fair. . . ." all through the months of the Calendar, including those places, and it often happened, which had Fairs two and even three times a year.

Elijah was also impressed by Enoch's memory for such dates and often referred to him when he was at a loss to make out when the next holiday should fall, since Elijah was a poor reader of the Calendar or of any other printed matter, I must admit.

Yet the memory of my unscholastic brother was most tenacious on the topics that interested him. He knew the names and records of innumerable fighting-men, and could name the number of rounds each had needed to finish off his various opponents; and of them all his favourite was 'The Tipton Slasher', who by now was an old man and was indeed to die very shortly. Elijah knew all about racing-horses and their pedigrees, could name the points of a dozen breeds of dogs and on the subject of cock-fighting had no rival for his store of information in a radius of ten miles round Darlaston.

Although this brutal pastime had been prohibited by law thirty years exactly before the time of which I speak, it was still widely carried on throughout the Black Country, and as far as I know is practised in secret to this very day. Indeed, I have met people within these last five years who profess to having been taken to a cocking-main held below or at the back of premises which by day serve as Inns or Grocer's shops—and all within a long stone's throw of Wednesbury Police Station! It is hard to kill a brutal habit among men whose whole lives have been spent among such a brutish travesty of nature as that provided by slag-heaps and pitbanks and the scum of standing pools . . .

Yet, although I hated the very thought of these birds hacking each other to pieces with 'short heels,' which were spurs of an inch and a half in length, or their 'long heels', which sometimes reached a length of two and a half inches, yet there was something about their names, some strange savage sort

of poetry, which made me secretly wish to accompany my brother on the occasions when he went out to a Sunday morning gathering at the cock pit—names like "Irish Gilders," "Shawlnecks," "Gordons," "Eslin Red-Quills," or "Warhorses." These were names which could be heard passing about in the air wherever Blackcountrymen gathered to speak with each other. Just as, sooner or later, among colliers, the name of Joseph Gilliver would arise, he who relieved the Earl of Derby of eight thousand guineas at Lincoln, when his gamecocks soundly thrashed that nobleman's birds just before the game was declared illegal. It was common to hear a Blackcountryman swear that he'd rather part with his Missus than his favourite "Staffordshire Dun" or even his white bull-terrier, those ferocious deaf beasts who lived only for fighting and for the rough love of their brutish masters. And I declare that I believe most of these men meant what they said, for a woman's life was largely that of a slave in those back streets and tenements which had sprung up like ghastly fungoid growths in those years when the Black Country had begun to sense the depth of its resources in coal and iron.

But I am running away from my story . . . I wonder why? Is it because I am afraid to say what happened next in our lives together?

The fact is that after a week or so, father did take me to Brummagem to see a specialist and of course I was greatly excited—though at the heart of me, hopeless. Father sat in the train and smoked his meerschaum pipe for most of the way, hardly daring to speak, I think, lest he should raise his own hopes too high; then there came the heavy swirling smoke of Snow Hill Station and on out to the main road, where the horse-manure stood ankle-deep in the streets, deadening all sounds, like a fall of heavy snow . . . And so into a cab, found somewhere along Colmore Row and then at last the big double-fronted house on the select Bristol Road, where we were ushered into the sombre waiting-room by a quietly smiling servant. Father and I sat near each other, avoiding each other's eyes unless they happened to meet by accident and then smiling, half-afraid, but doing our best to look unconcerned.

At last father was called in to speak with the doctor as a preliminary, and I was left alone in the dark waiting-room. I remember that it was rather austere and quite chilly. But I clasped my fingers inside a new fur muff that mother had bought me for that day and read some of the thick and glossy periodicals, most of them on medical subjects, that lay profusely upon the round magohany table.

From these magazines I learned that Bunch's Sanitary Hair Lotion was warranted to kill all nits and to prevent uncleanness in children's heads, and

that, being non-poisonous to all but insect life, it was safe in the hands of even the youngest child. A sinister note entered, I thought, when I read that "Chemists, for the sake of extra gain, will try to push a useless preparation of their own. Insist on having the right one, Bunch's." This paragraph introduced a note of uncertainty into my mind. Surely all chemists were reputable men, hardly less inferior to doctors themselves? Did they set worldly gain above the healing of suffering humanity then? And again, how did Bunch's know that their preparation *was* the right one, positively the right one?

I turned away to other pages and found that Anaemia, or deficiency of Blood, was indicated by loss of colour, pale lips, wax-like hue of the skin, listlessness—and that Allen's Pink Iron Tonic Pills, for Pale People of Both Sexes, were one of the most rapid frame-building medicines of the Age, and would completely renovate the Whole System . . . I stood up and tried to look into the mirror that hung high on the dark-panelled wall, fearing that I should discover the symptoms of anaemia, could I but see myself!

And then the door opened and my father came back to me, smiling. "He is a very nice man," he said. "He thinks he may be able to do something at least, from what I have told him about you. Come on, dear, I shall be with you."

The doctor was an elderly sandy-haired man who smelled of strong tobacco and was named Ogilvie. At first I could hardly make out what he was saying to me for he was a Scotsman; but he repeated everything a time or two and gradually I was able to do what he wanted, although I was now shivering with apprehension. First I had to let him see my ankle without my stocking on; then he made me walk up and down the room.

"Lift up that damned long skirt o' yours," he said abruptly, referring to my red velvet train that I had been so proud of. I blushed and did so. "Now walk down again, and pray try not tae rock aboot like a ship at sea!"

His remark was intended to be jolly and I did my best not to cry. He must have seen that I was sensitive about my hobbling, for he said, "Aye, ye dinna walk sae badly, after all. I've known wurrse walkers amang the gentry themsel's." And that pleased me mightily!

But then he grew serious. "Come here," he said. "Now what I'm going to dae may hurrt ye a wee bit; but ye're tae be a brave lassie, an' I knaw ye will. It's a' for the best, ye ken."

He sat me down and told me to hold the arms of the chair tightly. Then he said that I was to watch the fingers of the big surgery clock going round and to count each tick as it happened; all of which I obediently did, until he really started to manipulate the bones of my ankle and then it was only by thinking of the tortures of the martyrs that I saved myself from yelling out loud, for Mr. Ogilvie had not exaggerated when he said that he might hurt a little. Indeed I think he hurt himself too, for once when I looked down I saw the sweat starting from his red forehead and felt the strong trembling of his knee against mine as he pressed hard against the bone of my ankle. Then at last he stopped. "Only once mair, lassie," he said. "Ye've been a brave 'un. Now be as brave again an' I'll be well satisfied wi' ye!" He smiled at me a little uncertainly and then bent again to his task. This time there was a little thud inside my foot and a click that sent a stabbing pain up through my leg to the knee.

He sat back in his chair and began to roll down the cuffs of his tail-coat. "That's all I can do, Master Fisher," he said. "And I may say that there's few would have dared to try quite as much." Then he turned to me, "How dae ye feel lassie?" he asked, kindly.

I said, "Splendid, Mr. Ogilvie!" And tried to smile back at him. Then the mists swirled round the room and the big clock stopped ticking and I fainted off in the chair.

When I came to, there was a bright light burning in the room and the fire was crackling away merrily. Mr. Ogilvie and father were sitting at either side of the fireplace, drinking out of wine-glasses, though I do not think they were drinking wine. Its pungent smell reminded me more of rum.

The doctor turned to me when he saw me move and said, "Stand up, lassie, and let's see how ye walk now."

I felt a strange heavy stiffness about my ankle and some pain yet. But I did as the doctor said. It hurt me now to walk as much as it had ever done before, but in a different place. Yet now I could walk without swaying from side to side. I could walk almost normally though I had to swing my leg a little as I went. But I walked, that was the main thing, and I didn't fall over when I turned suddenly. I looked round the room, almost in fright, but a glad, gay fright, and said, "Look, father! I can walk like other folk now! Look! Look!"

Then I was a little disappointed for father did not look. Instead he turned his head away from me and stared into the fire and then took a long drink

from his glass. Doctor Ogilvie came over to me and put his heavy arm about my shoulders.

"Good for ye, lassie," he said. "Aye, ye can walk! But that's partly because ye have a strong plaster on the ankle now to set it where I put it. Ye may not walk quite sae well when that plaster comes off."

Then seeing the look of disappointment coming into my eyes, he said, "Nay, nay, dinna cry, lass! I'll send ye an anklet to wear under the stocking, and that will help a lot. Aye, that will be almost as good as the plaster ye have on now."

I said, "Shall I be able to dance, Doctor?"

He said, "Lassie, and if ye canna dance when I send ye the anklet, then ye can send it back tae me, an' I swear I'll stand on the steps of the Town Hall and eat the damned thing to a roll o' drums!"

I laughed aloud and fluttered over to father and kissed him. "Did you hear that, father?" I said. "I shall dance! I shall dance!"

And for the second time in my life I saw my father crying but this time his tears were not of sorrow, for his mouth below the full eyes was wrinkled up with happiness and without even bothering to dry his eyes he rose from his chair and took me by the two hands and began to caper like a great bear.

"Damn it, Ogilvie," he shouted, "she shall dance now!"

And dance we did, with the red-faced Doctor prancing about at our side, his coat-tails in his hands, his head wagging, his deep bass voice keeping up the chant of some barbarous Scottish reel! The sweetest music I ever heard, I think!

And so I came to dance and a week later when the plaster was removed by Doctor Maguire and the new anklet put on in its place, I danced again, the length of our garden and back, just to show everyone what a splendid man Doctor Ogilvie was—and what a wonderful father I had now!

Then, as though to crown all, when Alderman Richards sent out the invitations to his Christmas Ball at Wood Green he included me! And as though to fill my cup to overflowing, mother said that my red velvet was now a little tired and sent me off with our Phyllis to Walsall to find something rather more suitable for the occasion. And though my new black silk with its maroon flounces and cravated neck was fine and rich, there was not the thrill about buying it that had attended the first dress of my life, bought so haughtily by my mother that afternoon in Wolverhampton.

Phyllis did not try to influence me in my choice, nor did she even relax her coolness towards me. Only on the way back in the horse-bus did she in any way show a sisterly connection with me when she said, “No doubt, with your new dress and your new foot, you’ll soon be following the way of all girls and getting yourself a husband!”

I looked at her a little startled for it was a new idea to me then. But her face was set and she was staring before her through the mud-splashed window of the bus just as though she had never even spoken at all. I did not make any reply; yet at that moment I began to wonder whether Phyllis herself had found her handsome farmer, as the fortune-teller had said she would.

Indeed, I think I had become suspicious, if that is not too strong a term to use, some weeks before when Phyllis introduced a new friend of hers to the house, one Hetty Simpson, a plump laughing girl with red-gold hair and an easy way of making conversation. This Hetty had become a frequent visitor, calling regularly to take Phyllis out with her to various functions, all of which perforce had to have the blessing of our parents; functions such as Young Women’s Endeavour Meetings, Sewing Circles and Dorcas Clubs, Church Aid Bazaars, and what not. And this Hetty knew many of the people known to and well liked by my mother. So there was no opposition to her visiting us—though I noticed that once she came to us with a trace of lip-rouge on and that on every occasion she called, Phyllis went to great pains to turn herself out as attractively as she could.

Then one evening, just as they were going out and did not see me as I watered some plant or other in the conservatory, Hetty said in a low voice, “Herbert is sure to be there tonight, dear.” And Phyllis answered in a voice I had never heard her use before, “Do you think so, really, Het dear? Do you, honest?”

Later Hetty told mother that a cousin of hers was farming prosperously near Penkridge and then I began to put two and two together . . . Though such was our relationship that I never mentioned my deductions to my sister.

Yet I am over-running my tale again, which is not supposed to be about Phyllis, but myself. Towards Christmas the night of the Ball came up and after a whole afternoon’s preparation, we set off, leaving Elijah and Enoch at their law books and Tom at his foundry, that had come to be like a brother, or even a father, to him. We went off in a hired landau and arrived at Wood Green in some style! Indeed, a small ruffian, seeing Phyllis alight, said audibly to the great amusement of the knot of bystanders, “And where is His

Late Consortship, the Prince, tonight? Staying at 'ome wiv 'is feet up?" My father pretended a great anger and made to strike at the lad with his cane but I have a secret belief that when we had passed through the gate, he flung the urchin sixpence, for Phyllis had been so amusingly annoyed and father liked nothing better than to see false pride taken down a notch.

I do not know anything much about that evening, except that the rooms were more spacious and luxurious than ours could ever be; that the curtains were of a heavy velvet or plush, and the ceiling ornamented in white and gold. I recall champagne which spurted all over the carpet when some young buck snatched a bottle from a waiter and tried to open it himself. Phyllis was permitted two glasses, I only one. And I can still hear the Lancers and Schottische, played by a perspiring string band in paper collars that became more and more waterlogged as the evening progressed . . . Then I remember a young man coming towards my mother deferentially, and asking, without a glance at me, whether he might be allowed to dance the Polka with me. I can still see her look of apprehension directed towards my father; I can still see the manly pleasure with which he nodded, puffing away at his meerschaum, despite the fact that mother had pointed out to him that all the other ironmasters were smoking cigars. And at that moment I truly tested Doctor Ogilvie!

What followed was a glad chaos of mingled pain and pleasure, for truly my ankle did hurt me; but yet I had never moved so freely before and at last I began to imagine that I was even gliding rather than dancing. This may have added to my gallant's confusion, for he remarked a number of times that he had never danced the Polka quite in that manner before and then added a rider that were it done this way in London, it would set a new fashion in the dance!

I did not see him again until much later in the evening, when supper had been served to us in a private room so that Alderman Richards could discuss some business proposition or other with father. I strayed away the very moment mother would allow me to and made my way towards the conservatory. There the young man I had danced with came to meet me and said, "Miss Fisher, I have waited for you with increasing anxiety since the commencement of supper." Just then something like Pampas Grass brushed across my face and I said, "Indeed!" For I could think of nothing else to say.

"Indeed," he repeated solemnly, with a new intonation, as though this were the loveliest of words, after which he made a curious shuffling movement towards me and took me by the arm. I wondered whether I might be about to fall in love and felt very foolish that I could now think of

absolutely nothing to say to this young man. But he relieved me of further agitation by saying, “Pray, do me the favour of walking with me to the end of the conservatory, where my mother’s orchids are in bloom and where we might be a little less crowded by the older people.”

I looked round but could not see any of these older people and at the same time I realised that this must be young Richards who was up at Cambridge, studying Medicine. It suddenly struck me that this would be a good opportunity of telling someone about my ankle so I went with him. And soon we sat together on a green-painted iron garden seat, such as had had an enormous rage after the Great Exhibition but had only recently arrived in outlandish places like Wednesbury. And there we sat with fuchsia leaves and indoor geraniums floating about our ears. And there I told him the story of my lame foot and of how Doctor Ogilvie had danced with us after he had set it right again.

The young man said, “Jove, the man must be a veritable Aesculapius, what!” Then slightly nonplussed by my stare of wonder went on hurriedly, “Will you permit me the privilege of examining the limb? Semi-professionally, of course!”

His request seemed so reasonable. I lifted the hem of my skirt and nodded with a smile. He was on his knees before me, holding my damaged ankle and murmuring words which I did not catch, when Phyllis appeared from the back of the dim conservatory with a strange smile on her face. “Indeed, sister,” she said. “One glass of champagne seems to serve you better than a whole bottle does some folk!”

I did not understand what she meant, but young Richards did and he jumped to his feet in confusion, gabbling like a fool. Phyllis gave him the iciest of stares, then beckoned behind her, and a young man wearing whiskers rose from another seat which I had not noticed before and followed her out. I had not seen that young man earlier in the evening and was puzzled. “Who is that?” I said to young Richards, who was busy mopping his brow with a large silk handkerchief.

“I don’t really know,” he stammered. “A Herbert Something-or-other, I understand. Farms at Penkridge. Father invited him because your Phyllis sent him word that she would greatly appreciate the favour.”

“Did she actually write to your father?” I asked, wondering how one dared to address a letter to an Alderman, much less write the words that would go inside it!

"Not exactly," he said. "She sent word through a maid of my mother's, Hetty Simpson."

And that was the end of my evening. I did not care that Phyllis had seen the young man looking at my ankle. But I could see that he was so embarrassed that I had better preserve the secret on my part; and I could see that Phyllis had discovered her character to me yet again, in assuming that now she had a Roland to match my Oliver, a secret to equal that one of mine —when she asked about the gipsy's dead child.

I think I got back into our landau feeling sick rather than happy. Yet it was my first dance and I have remembered it all my life when perhaps I have forgotten other incidents which brought me unalloyed pleasure.

That winter was again a hard one and once more Doctor Maguire came with his trap to take us skating. And this time I went with the party as an executant, not as a mere observer! And Elijah and I skated together in the bright light of the thirty gig-lamps, and he as solicitous as a mothering hen, I as unsure and wobbling as a new duckling first introduced to the village pool! But we got through the evening somehow and when we arrived home again, father turned to mother and said, "Sarah Ann, what with Ogilvie and that Wolverhampton dress shop, we've got ourselves a brand new daughter!"

And mother laughed and said, "Yes, William, and for that she shall have a treat! We'll broach a new keg of parsnip wine and she shall give us all a toast!"

I was triumphant, full of the new life that ran within my blood, proud, self-sufficient, almost, and I agreed without any nervousness. With the glass raised in my hand I looked across at Phyllis and said, "I give you this toast: To the Fortune-Teller's Prophecy!" And Phyllis blushed brick-red and father wrinkled his brows and mother looked at me in surprise.

"Whatever do you mean, our Sue?" she asked.

But I had shot the dart I wanted to and had seen it pierce the target. There was no point in explanations, so I just laughed and at last the others joined in, all except Phyllis! Thus I proposed my first toast, after I had skated for the first time in my life—but I don't think Phyllis ever forgave me.

Yet it was not all winter. Spring came and Enoch was commended for his work—while Elijah was threatened with instant dismissal if he burned any more letters to influential clients—a trick he had invented to save himself the bother of riding a penny-farthing bicycle half round the town; it was a

machine which he abominated, since it took away the use of a man's good feet, as he told me one evening when he was pouring out his professional sorrows to me in private. All the same Lawyer Foster prevailed, and at last Elijah became reconciled to delivering the message he hated so much. We felt that our young stallion was at last being broken in, and with a vengeance!

Then came the summer and father began to polish up Bonny's harness once more.

This was the Golden Summer of my life, my Golden Age in all truth, my Lion-coloured Days! Both mother and father had now grown into a sage and mellow time of their lives; I had come to my new senses, Elijah and Enoch were working, and Phyllis at least had the chance of making her dreams come true. Tom stood outside my reckoning, for he was always old before his time and even now inspired me with a greater dread than ever my father did, even at his angriest!

But I repeat, the Golden Summer, and all the more golden because of its close-following darkness. Dear Bonny trotted us to Bewdley and Kinver and Clent, with never a thought in her heart but to get the shiny black wagonette to a place of beauty—or was it a place of oats? I should not do her an injustice for after serving our family faithfully for so many years she died bravely at last, nearly forty years ago . . .

And it was at Stourport, at the height of this halcyon summer, that I learned something of our new family feeling, our solidity, and even more about myself. The first pleased me greatly, though the second taught me something which was less pleasant to know.

We had gone out there in the morning and after a picnic lunch, Elijah and I were loitering near the bridge across the broad River Severn, while young Enoch was on the opposite side of the road, straddling the balustrade of the bridge and spitting into the water below, to the amusement of the many passers-by, some of whom jocularly threatened to push the lad over the side. It was a care-free Saturday morning. Enoch smiled back at them and seemed in love with the whole wide world.

Then a collier turned out of the whitewashed tavern at our end of the bridge, snuffling and grumbling to himself, trying to make his fuddled way along the footpath, cursing everyone within reach and generally behaving more like a brute beast than a civilised man.

From his accent and tones I could tell that he was a Blackcountryman, one who had come into Stourport that day on an outing, perhaps, and who was determined to roll back to the wagon which would trundle him to his tenement at last, blind-drunk at the least. Yet now he was merely fighting-drunk and the local people, true country folk, recognised this and gave him a clear passage on the footpath.

But Enoch had no knowledge of such matters and had just leapt from the coping as the miner came up to him. The man swayed for a moment, waiting impatiently for the lad to move out of his way, and when Enoch smiled back at him, without malice, but treating him with as much friendship as he had shown to all others that morning, began to swear at the lad. I saw that Enoch's face changed, his lips were drawn into a line straight across his face, yet he had been laughing but a moment before. And he said, precisely, still imitating the lawyer's clerk, "Sir, I am not accustomed to being spoken to in that manner and if you persist in addressing me like that I just shan't get out of your way. So please yourself!"

Any person in his senses would either have made a joke of the whole thing, or have pushed the boy aside good-humouredly. But the collier seemed to bend over him, dwarfing him, his face growing red beneath its engrimed swarthiness, and then without warning he swung round suddenly to cuff the lad; but Enoch saw the blow coming and ducked his head so that the man's fist went glancing off the wall, grazing his knuckles against the stone balustrade. He swore loudly and thrust as much of his hand into his mouth as he could.

Enoch said, "I'm sorry but you must agree it was not entirely my fault. I shall not take the complete blame."

I glanced at Elijah, whose face was still smiling although his eyes now looked hard like flints, and he did not miss a single movement of what was going on. He was now well on in his seventeenth year but tall and wiry and as strong as a young hound on the leash.

Suddenly the tipsy collier lunged forward and took the lad by surprise, pinning him hard against the bridge and preparing to punch him as he trapped his body with his knee.

I started as Elijah left my side. In three or four strides he was beside this man, though for the moment he did not lay a finger on him.

"Leave that lad alone," he said quietly, yet still loud enough for me to hear. "You're in the wrong. Leave him be."

The man did not seem to hear, although Elijah spoke slowly; instead he drew back his clenched fist to strike the boy, who closed his eyes in fear at what he saw coming.

Then Elijah moved like a pent-up spring. He jabbed his hand flat against the man's shoulder, swinging him round slightly, and then without hesitation drove his fist into the swarthy face.

The collier loosed Enoch, lurched back and fell into the road, his mouth and nose already bloody from the blow. And as he lay Elijah said, "Get up, man, and go you home. We want no truck with you."

That blow seemed to have sobered the man. Even as he lay he smiled up and said, "I've been looking for the likes of you, me gamecock, all over the town, and I wunna let ye get away so easily."

Then he laughed aloud and his face was an awful sight for my brother had punched him very hard indeed with those great raw-boned knuckles of his. I'm sure I ought to have screamed, or to have run between them, or at least have run away and told father—but I didn't. I had often heard father talk of men fighting but had never even pictured what it might be like. Now that I was seeing it I felt no horror at the sight, or, if any horror, a tingling warm horror that held me suspended and waiting for more. Indeed, I stood as they say rooted to the spot and wished only to see my brother thrash this bully. It never occurred to me that the bully might have his own share of the victory!

Then the man rose and came towards Elijah, who turned to Enoch and said sharply, "You get out of this. Go to Susan." But Enoch would not budge and so Elijah backed a little down the path to give himself time to remove his best jacket. Then flinging it to his young brother, he called to the man, "Go home, you, I say. I want no trouble with you here."

But the man still came on and said, "Thee should'st talk! *Thee* can'st 'ave trouble we'er thee lik'st—but *ahm* fer 'avin' it 'ere and now!"

And he leapt forward and baffling Elijah by sweeping his left arm across his eyes, he punched him hard in the body with his other fist. I heard my brother gasp painfully and saw him stagger against the balustrade of the bridge. The man laughed and went on lunging forward, spitting blood upon the footpath.

For an instant I too began to move forward with some dim instinct yelling at me to help my brother; but in that instant I glimpsed Elijah's face and he was like none of our family. Something savage about him caused me

to stop, aware now that these men were moving in a world which I could not, must not, try to enter . . . Then my brother's narrow-hipped body swayed to one side as the collier came on, so that he blundered against the wall for a second, like a moth first encountering the glass chimney of a lamp. As he did so Elijah whipped round, faster than I had ever seen him move before, and poising himself for a moment he hit the other a terrible calculated blow on the jawbone. The miner's head suddenly seemed loose on his body and he fell against the wall then slowly slithered to the footpath and lay there, his calloused hands wide open and outspread before him, his yellow eyes rolled back.

A policeman walked across the road to my brother.

"That was a good blow, young chap," he said. "I didn't interfere before; I thought you'd have the mastery of him; but get out now. I'll drag him back into the tavern and see that he's cleaned up a bit, never fear. But now you go about your own business and keep clear of the bridge for the rest of the day."

Elijah nodded to him coolly and strolled across the road to me, Enoch still trailing behind him, carrying his coat. I saw how badly he had hurt his knuckles in striking the last awful blow but he was smiling and looking like his usual self again now. I gazed at him in pride. I had seen my brother beat a man twice his age, no doubt, in fair fight—and this I say with amazement—I had relished the sight! I put my arm through his and hugged it with pleasure.

Young Enoch said, "You canna write very well, oor 'Lijah, but you' c'n do summat I'd give all my readin' an' writin' to do!"

Then Elijah looked down at him solemnly, almost as though he was seeing him for the first time. "Never fear, oor kid," he said, "Yo'll be able ter dew both, one o' these days! I'd chernge plerces wi' yer, onny day, lad!"

And a smile passed between these two brothers which I cannot describe. I only knew that, love them dearly as I might, I could never enter fully into their world.

We had moved on a little from the bridge now and were making our way back to the picnic basket in the flat garden behind *The Tontine*; but when we reached the whitewashed tavern at the far end of the bridge another man came out, dark-faced and smelling of ale. He strode over to us and holding up a long gnarled finger, stood in our path. His wrinkled face was frightening.

“I know thee, ’Lijah Fisher,” he said. “An’ I seen what thee did’st to me butty on the bridge. No doubt thee Dad’s brought thee in the wagonette, eh? Well, there’ll be time enough before the day’s out, me cocko, I c’n tell thee that! We’ll find thee befoah thee go’st whum, niver fear!”

Elijah said, “Ah’m ready when thee bist, Jack Fletcher. An’ oor wagonette’s a-waitin’ be’ind *The Tontine*. There’s a nice quiet gardin theer. I’ll be theer when thee lik’st ter coom!”

The older man smiled at him scornfully. “We’sh’ll coom when we’re riddy, thee ’a no fear!”

Then he turned and stalked back to the tavern. I looked fearfully at my brother but he was smiling so grimly after the man that for a moment I thought he was going to follow him into the place and continue the fight there, without more delay . . .

The terror of that man’s threat hung over me the rest of the day, and I think young Enoch felt it too for he was unnaturally serious and hung about Elijah as though he wished to protect him somehow or other. But Elijah never mentioned it. He laughed and joked as much as ever and ate the largest dinner I’d ever seen him eat, winking at me as he asked for more of the pork-pie, until mother said, “Why, our ’Lijah, you’ll burst your waistcoat buttons if you have another single bite, that you will!”

“Ey, it might be me last bite, muther!” he said, using the common speech of Darlaston, as he often did when we were alone but this time to tease her.

“Don’t talk like a labourer’s foundling, ’Lijah!” said my father. “And don’t take life and death so lightly, either, my lad!” Yet I think he was secretly amused at the young man’s gusto for life.

Well, by the time twilight approached I was in a twitter of apprehension for each footfall behind that high garden-wall seemed to me the forerunner of Elijah’s doom. Yet when father had harnessed Bonny and was calling for us all to be in our proper places, my brother still leaned against the gateway of the inn-yard and would not come aboard and be seated.

At last father got down and went to him and they spoke together for a while. I saw Elijah point down the street in the direction of the bridge and then there was more talking. At last father said, “Why, you young fool, why didn’t you tell me earlier? We’d have gone out to find them instead of waiting like cowards for them to come to us! That’s what a Fisher does, ’Lijah, goes out and looks for *them*!”

As I heard these words I felt the blood creep through all my limbs and up my back, until even the little hairs on the nape of my neck were prickling. Thank God for such a father, such a brother, I thought! And I gripped young Enoch's hand so tight that he winced—but he understood and did not try to draw away.

And so nothing happened in the end—if you call that pride of mine nothing. Against mother's mystified and growing impatience we waited another half hour; but still they did not come. And so at last we had to set forth.

But all along the road out of Stourport father and Elijah sat in the front and sang at the tops of their voices as though advertising their presence, until at last mother ordered them to be quiet with the sage observation that it was as bad as travelling in a horse-bus full of drunken Wedgebury colliers!

Enoch smiled gaily, looking at his brother from time to time in admiration, then glancing back at me to make sure that I too still appreciated what a fine fellow we had in our Elijah, and I would nod, so that he should see that I understood the emotion that filled him. Yet at the core, the still centre of my heart, I did not smile for I had learned something about myself that day which troubled me, filled me with doubt. Today I had recognised in myself a sort of savagery which I had not known to exist before.

Consider; I had stood and watched one man beat and bloody another and I had rejoiced. I had watched with no fear, no repugnance, no distaste. Indeed I confessed to myself in the wagonette as we bowled along the road to Tettenhall that I had enjoyed seeing men in physical combat; it had stirred something inside me, made me want to see the thing happen again, made me proud to be associated with a man who could do that!

And because I was proud I was now ashamed of that pride—whence came my doubts—for a truly good woman should not feel like that, I was sure. There must be something lacking in my moral fibre, I thought. There must be something unclean, primitive, unworthy. How can I say it? It crossed my mind as I stared out into the passing darkness of trees and hedges that this day I had for the first time glimpsed my true self. I was not meek and gentle and subservient at all, as I had thought so long. All that had changed since I had first dared to insult Phyllis, since I had worn my red velvet finery, since my ankle had been healed—since I had seen a man's teeth knocked out on a bridge in the sun . . .

And then I knew the answer—or at least the answer which served me for long enough to come—and it was a simple one: our family was composed of

two strains, on the one side mother, Tom and Phyllis, who looked at life carefully, with seriousness, even with ambition; and on the other side father, Elijah and myself, at the heart of whom lay the Black Country, with all its roughness, its callousness to suffering, its grim and smouldering poetry. Yes, it was there even in father, and I had sensed it for the first time that evening as he stood with his son at the inn gateway, aching to fight, to show Elijah that he too was a man of blood! Tom would never have done that. Tom would not fight. His was the sort of life which would never come face to face with the ultimate reality of physical combat and blood. No, he would have called out the police and had the men taken up, neatly, legally, in a social manner, with all reasons and evidence given. So although he had hidden it from us for so long, I now was sure that father was like us and with a thrill I recognised that I was like Elijah at heart, in my strange new hankering after violence . . .

Now too I realised that I had never known mother before. She was a shadow; I could not recall her in detail; she only seemed to flit through my life, always somewhere in the background. I did not really know her any more than I knew Tom or Phyllis . . .

Yet, did I know Enoch? And to which side of the family did he belong? There was something almost elfin about him, some brightness that seemed not of the common pattern; he lacked the ambition and self-seeking of Tom and Phyllis; yet he lacked the earthiness and emotion of Elijah and myself. Or did he, completely? Was he not perhaps the keystone of the family arch, the point at which the characteristics of both sides met and fused and became transcendental?

At our Church Social Endeavour Meeting the vicar’s wife once read us a poem about a great musician, a composer, whose hands strayed over the keyboard of his instrument. I forget the words now and they do not really matter, but the poet seemed to say that this composer, this creator, played one note, then another, and another, and as the lovely sounds mingled there came forth not a chord but a star!

And I think that Enoch was that star; and in his laughing way, a guiding star to us all, yes, even to Tom. A star which had made merry the two golden years of my life, of our family life, and a star which was to set so soon, so brutally, so irrevocably.

II

Two years of happiness and then great sorrow and the destruction of a pattern of life; that is what happened, and I shrink from bringing my mind to dwell on it now, yet I must, for the story cannot be complete without it. I must be as callous with myself as I fear I have been with others, with too many others.

The late summer of that year was splendid with warmth and fruit. It was as though God had intended Summer to last for ever and happiness to be carelessly eternal. It seemed that none of us desired any more from life than what it was now giving us. It seemed that this phase of our life would never pass. Yet it did, and so suddenly.

September 15th was as fine a day as any we had had that summer; the garden hummed with life and even the plants in the conservatory seemed to sigh from the heat. After lunch I lay on the long garden-seat beneath the overhanging trees and dozed drowsily while father sat back with a book on the lawn, looking across at me from time to time and remarking that in our garden we seemed cut off from the world outside, or commenting on the various flowers and how well they had done that year, despite his doubts for them earlier.

We saw Elijah and Enoch start off for Lawyer Foster's office, their caps on the back of their heads and their jackets slung over their shoulders, for it was too hot to wear them that afternoon. The boys called to us as they went down the path, telling us we were sluggards and advising us to go to the ant for instruction. Then Enoch said to Elijah, "which ant do we mean, our 'Lijah? Ant Christine? Or Ant Agnes?" At which they both laughed and I shouted out, "Be off with you about your business, you stupid pair!"

That was the last time we were to hear Enoch's voice; and they were the last words I ever spoke to him, at least so that he could hear them with his earthly ear.

Later that afternoon father threw his book aside and said, "Come on, our Sue, let's give that new ankle of yours a bit of exercise. Let us go for a stroll along the towpath towards Willenhall."

And so it was that we left the sheltered garden, to walk by the water's side and see the red and blue barges pushing their lazy way along the canals.

And so it was that at last we came to a hump-backed bridge, on which we stood to look round at the countryside about us. And so it was that, far over from us, past Simmond's Wharf and Bilston Reach, where the canal broadens out and becomes a river almost, where grass replaces the hard gravel towpath and the sad willows droop down into the water, we saw a merry gang of boys. Naked as the day they were born, they swung from the trees and dropped into the canal or chased each other along the bank until one leapt, laughing, for safety into the friendly stream. Their shouts came back to us on the faintest of afternoon breezes. To us, it seemed that these lads had not a care in the world; indeed, to me they seemed to represent the youth of the world itself, a world without hate and sin and suffering, a world that spun for ever in the mellow sunlight of a summer afternoon . . .

Father smiled and said, "That's the sort of party where I should expect to find our 'Lijah—if I didn't know he was with Enoch, scribbling away in that old office!"

I said how wonderful it was that Elijah had taken so well to the law. Father smiled and said, "Enoch can make that big brother of yours do anything. He can twist our 'Lijah round his little finger, Sue! I'd back Enoch against Lawyer Foster for making him stick to his books any day. The office means nothing to our 'Lijah, I think; but Enoch's good opinion does. And that's what's keeping Elijah straight now, lass."

We watched the lads from the distance for a short while and then we turned back and made our way to the garden again just in time for tea, which mother served on the long garden-seat since it was too stuffy in the house, she said.

We were smiling at each other and passing the bramble jelly and praising the thin bread that Phyllis had cut with the new knife, when the constable walked up the path towards the house. At first when he noticed the man, father began to smile as though he might invite him to step into the garden and share our teatime dainties. Yet a shadow suddenly passed across my father's face and the smile faded from his mouth, for across the beds of herbs and flowering shrubs he sensed that the policeman had come for some unhappy reason. He stood gazing at us, his helmet in his hands, looking uncertainly from one to the other and then always back to father.

"Can I have a word with you, Master Fisher?"

Father set down his teacup with a shaking hand and rose from the garden chair to go to him. As he walked along the narrow path, his foot caught against a flowerpot containing a scarlet geranium and I thought that he

would fall. I had never seen him unsure on his feet like that before and I am one who notices a thing like that, since all my life I have had to watch out for the obstacles at my feet.

And when they had spoken quietly for a while, father excused himself and sat down on a little bench which was built into the thick trunk of our sycamore tree and drew out his red handkerchief and wiped his face with it slowly. And mother saw him do this and went to him, and the constable spoke quietly to her also. Then she put her hand on father's shoulder and said, "We will go and see him, William."

Then she came back to us as we stared up at her from the grass and said, "Phyllis, Susan, bear the news bravely, dears. We shall not see our Enoch alive any more. He was drowned in the canal this afternoon. Elijah tried to save him, but he was drowned."

We rose aghast, and I held my mother's shaking hand. Phyllis looked at her, mute, and then suddenly burst into loud sobs, sinking back on the garden seat. Mother lowered her face a little and the tears ran unchecked, falling on to her print bodice.

I could not weep. I could only gaze hard at mother, at the flowers and the green grass, with eyes as dry as stones. And my mouth was dry, and my heart was dry, and my brain behind my eyes was a flat desert of dry salt sand. No words mattered; any word would have been foolish. Words may only be said years afterwards when the sharpest of the agony has faded away, when it does not matter whether one chooses the right word or not. I could not speak. I only held mother's hand hard, while my body shook like hers, uncontrollably.

And just then a thrush in the boughs of our pear tree began his full-throated song, suddenly, richly, without feeling. And it seemed to me that his voice would be heard all over the world, it was so loud. I had never heard a bird sing so loud.

Then father shuffled across the grass and spoke to Phyllis gently, and after a while he led us all into the house, stumbling against things he knew well, immovable familiar things, gentle things, that were now his enemies.

Then at last he and mother went with the constable to the mortuary in King Street, and the constable said he would go straightway to the foundry to let our Tom know.

While they were away Phyllis and I sat at either side of the table, silent, and the clock ticked the minutes away slowly, each one an hour in passing.

After that it was just emptiness and no comfort to be got from anyone, for my body and soul were but a husk, empty and useless. The germ of life had gone away for a while, perhaps for ever; I did not know nor did I care.

And at nightfall father and mother came back with poor Elijah. By now a great calm had settled on them and for a time they talked as though death had not come into our house—but shallowly, as though great anguish lay just below the surface of their words, waiting for a chance remark or gesture to break through the film and let sorrow out. And gently in the gentle lamplight Elijah told us all how he had decided to play truant from the office that afternoon and how Enoch had insisted on going with him. We heard how Enoch had been venturesome and had dived from a bridge, striking his head on the stone foundation which lay just below the level of the water. Elijah jumped in after him but had difficulty in getting him up. And when he got him to the bank at last the others had run away frightened and Elijah did not know how to bring the breath back to his brother's body. He said he sat by him, trying to work his arms and legs, and talking to him, though he could not remember what he said. Then he too became afraid and began to shout for someone to come and help them; but there was no one within a mile to hear him. And at last he clothed his brother's body as well as he could and carried him in his arms, the quickest way back to the streets, talking to him until he met a constable who told him that his brother was dead and beyond revival.

He had then stayed beside the body in the mortuary until father and mother came; and now that he had finished his story he said that he wanted to go away. We sat looking at him without speaking. "It was all my fault," he said. "I am no good to any of you. There is no place for me here."

Father didn't speak then though I am sure that Elijah hoped he would. Instead he just stared down at the table-top. Mother put her hand on Elijah's sleeve but she said nothing either. Then Phyllis got up and went from the room, sobbing, and at last Elijah rose and said he would go up to his bed. No one made any comment on this, but only wished him a quiet goodnight. I went with him through the conservatory, holding his arm.

"It wasn't your fault entirely, 'Lijah," I said, to comfort him. "Enoch wanted to go with you. You didn't make him go."

"I shouldn't have gone," he said. "It was my fault for wanting to go."

Outside his bedroom door he stopped and drew me to him for a little while, as though he was anxious to express his thanks but lacked the words. Then he went inside and when I got up the next morning, father said that he

had gone. There was nothing he could do, he said, to dissuade him. Mother had spoken kindly to him and had told him there was always a home here for him, but he had just shaken his head. “If I am ever fit to come back here, I will come,” he had said, “if you will have me. But not now.”

Father asked him then what he would do and he replied that he could get a job labouring for he was a big strong youth and labouring-men were scarce just then. He said he would find lodgings somewhere round about and let us know where he was. He would call at the police station and tell them, so that they could find him when he was wanted for the Coroner’s Inquiry.

And so came about the end of my two golden years and the end of our family, if the truth be told.

III

From now on father's powers began to decline. Although only in his middle fifties, he had the walk and appearance of an old man and now his mind began to wander. He would sit for an hour at a stretch just staring at a book, never turning over the pages or even noticing if one went and sat beside him.

One day he came in from the town with a shell that he had had carved in memory of Enoch. It was a big pink shell, rather like a cowrie, and the carver had worked on it so that the letters stood up white against the shiny pinkness of the shell somewhat in the manner of a cameo. The words on the shell were:

> "ENOCH FISHER, born March 12th, 1867. Taken to God on September 15th, 1881. Believe in Me and I will stretch out My hand to succour ye, though fire should burn and the floods roar. Suffer little children to come unto Me."

The shell rested on a bureau top for a while and then was put into one of the drawers and no one ever looked at it again. I think that father himself forgot all about it.

Mother had felt the shock deeply, but had settled down to a grey sort of calm. Some days she looked very drawn and ill, though she did not complain of anything then. Nevertheless, she still retained her will, her dominance over my father, though she now seemed to exercise it more gently, less obtrusively than before.

One day during the following Spring, a carter arrived at the gate with a big sea-chest, stained a dark brown, with the words "William Fisher, Port Elizabeth" painted on it in white.

It was set down in the conservatory and father called us out to look at it. "I've always wanted to travel," he said, "and now it seems that it would be a good time for us all to go. Tom can stay here and see to his own career. He has a fixed future before him. We can start again in Cape Colony while I am still a young man. The climate is a good one, they say. We should have a chance of forgetting some things that are past."

He walked away from us and went into mother's sitting-room. Mother looked round at us. "Do you want to go?" she said.

We were silent for a while. Phyllis was the first to speak. She said, "No mother. I shall not go. One day I shall want to be married and settle down in this country. If father says that we have to go, I shall get married very soon. He cannot make us go against our wills."

Mother looked at me, "What about you, Susan?" she said.

I answered, "I will go or stay, whichever you all wish me to do. But if we go, I want Elijah to be told, so that he could come with us if he wished."

But mother shook her head. "I shall not go," she said. "I cannot be uprooted now at my time of life. I cannot leave my memories like that. I shall stay here where my children were born. Your father must decide for himself."

Then she went to the sitting-room and we heard them talking quietly for a long while. And that evening the sea-chest was put away in the attic, like the shell, never to be mentioned again. Yet I know that father's spirit did not rest from that time forward.

At the time of which I speak our part of the Black Country was a wild place, as I have said, and full of hard men to whom life had not been kind and who therefore meant to wrench what pleasure, what gain, they could from everyone about them. Those labourers who were herded into stinking and crowded tenements were naturally the enemies of all who seemed to them to be living a more comfortable life. Yet these desolate men were often true Blackcountrymen who had allowed themselves to be brutalised by their ironmaster employers and at heart they were sound enough, though as fierce-looking as they were fierce-speaking. It is not those men I am speaking of but the in-comers, Irishmen and sometimes Scots, who came to work on the railways and canals or at the lowest-paid forms of labouring in foundry and the pit. These men were wanderers, almost like gipsies, but even less stable; they feared no one and owed no allegiance to local magnates or to local tradition and custom. Their one desire was to amass enough money to let them embark on an orgy of drunkenness, and to get this money they would resort to robbery with violence and at times even to murder.

Among themselves they would often fight with belt-buckles or hold kicking-matches, when with their iron-shod clogs they would face each other like gamecocks and hack away until one fell, and sometimes even after

he fell. Men were blinded by the one and killed by the other pastime. For such men cock-fighting was a delicate affair more suited to the ladies' boudoir than a man's virile entertainment.

Little wonder was it that the lonely roads round Darlaston and Wednesbury were shunned by law-abiding folk of the towns, for along these unlit and rutted tracks, gangs of such wandering men often lay in wait to take what advantage they could of passers-by. The police were powerless to relieve the situation; they were few in number and unarmed. Their only hope was that these gangs would one day exterminate each other or move on to other industrial areas where they stood a greater chance of gain. Yes, even in my very recent memory I have known strong young policemen who dared not patrol the Portway Road in Wednesbury. Little wonder is it then that parties of such men as I have mentioned played their games of Pitch and Toss on the pitbanks, or Find the Lady along canal towpaths; little wonder that they held fights between their deaf white bull-terriers on waste plots, or fought themselves with bottle-glass down noisome back alley-ways . . .

Winter was on us and my father was restless. He now took to walking out at nights alone, never saying where he was going and sometimes being away as long as three or four hours at a stretch. I think that this was Nature's way of trying to relieve the great tensions that were locked up inside his mind, but for mother and us it was a great anxiety. Yet he would not listen to us, even though we told him outright how dangerous was this new practice of his. Indeed I became so worried about him that I sent a note to Elijah, who lodged about a mile away from us at a little tavern called *The Railway*, kept by a blowsy but good-hearted widow, "Blue-eyed Annie," as she was known. The tavern was situated in a small hollow and was almost unseen from the road, though it was well-known to the roughest of the honest workmen of the district, some of whom lodged there like my brother. When I wrote to him I told him of father's habit of walking far abroad at night and alone, and I asked him what we should do; but Elijah never answered my letter.

One night father did not come in until well past eleven. We had waited for him with growing fear and when at last we heard his steps on the path we ran to the door with great thankfulness. He seemed amused at our anxiety and said that he had had a most diverting experience. He had been walking along a narrow road behind Sparrow's Forge, a road bordered on either side by a high cinder wall, where only a week before an old working-woman had been violently used and robbed. Suddenly, he said, he had become conscious of footsteps behind him and had quickened his pace. The steps quickened

also. Then, curious, he had slowed down and the footsteps slowed too. My father then called back, telling his follower to come forward and say what he had to say, but there was no reply. So father went on whistling. As he told us this, his eyes gazed through us back into the dark he had just left . . .

"Then I heard something I hadn't noticed before," he went on. "There was a whispering on the other side of the cinder wall from me and sly movements, as though somebody had been keeping pace with me all the while. At last I could stand it no longer so I stopped and called out, 'Come on over that wall and let's have the trying of you!' But there was only a laugh and a voice called back, 'Pass on, William Fisher. We've got no word for you tonight. We'll talk to you when your son's at home!' "

Father stopped when he had told us that and looked across at us smiling. "That's just what he said . . . 'When your son's at home.' I wondered what they meant but I could not make anything of it. I called out again and said I would pass on when it pleased me, not when they gave me the order. And I told them to come over that wall to talk like men, not skulk like cowards behind the cinders. But they only laughed and then I heard them going away."

Suddenly I understood. "What of the footsteps that had been following you, father?" I said.

He turned to me in surprise. "I don't know," he said. "I expect one of the gang was following me to take me by surprise and went away when the others did."

But I was not sure. I began to think that this was Elijah's answer to my letter for he was never much of a hand with the pen.

Nevertheless, we were all greatly concerned for father though by now he had grown very stubborn and would not be advised, even for the best.

Nothing further happened for a while and then one afternoon a small urchin boy knocked at our door and asked for me.

"What do you want, my lad?" I asked him.

He said, "There's a gaffer at gate wants to talk to thee. He telled me to fatch thee. He towd me to say it's abaht yower 'Lijah, Missus."

I gave the boy a penny, which was a great amount in those days, and sent him away. Then I slipped out to the gate. A short dark-faced foundryman stood in the street under the boughs of our may tree, waiting. He took his

cap in his hand when I approached, though his tone was surly, by nature rather than by intent, I believe.

"I'n coom ter tell thee yower 'Lijah's gone an' 'urt isself at th' works. A pig of iron fell on 'is leg an' 'e's laid oop! 'e conna git abaht fer a while, thee see'st."

I said, "Is he badly hurt?" But the fellow laughed at my anxiety. "Nah! Nah!" he said. "O'ny broke 'is ankle-boon or summat. 'e says there's nowt ter werrit abaht, on'y 'e cor get abaht fer a wik or tew, tha's all. 'e says thee mussn't tell onybody, or 'e's finished wi' thee!"

I was puzzled for a moment. "What does he want me to do?" I asked.

The man looked mazed. "Dew?" he said. "Why, nowt! He dunna want annythin' from thee. He on'y wants thee ter keep yower owd mon in o' nights, 'e says he conna look after 'im fer a week or tew, so keep owd lad in, tha's all."

Confused, I thanked him hastily and felt in my apron pocket for a shilling so that the man could get himself a drink for his trouble. But here I made a mistake through my lack of knowledge. This man despite his ignorance and his appearance was a furnaceman who earned a very high wage and considered himself a cut or two above the ordinary run of working men. He saw what I meant to do and put his cap on, looking me squarely in the eyes. Then he spat on the pavement and turned his back on me, to walk away without another word.

I followed him for a pace or two—"Thank you for coming," I said. "I am indeed grateful."

Without turning he said, "Tha's all right, 'e towd me to." Then he spat again and crossing the road walked away from me.

That night father put on his greatcoat to go out. I said to him, "Don't go out tonight, father. It's bitter cold."

But he shrugged his shoulders into the big Melton coat.

"I shall be warm enough, lass," he said.

I followed him to the door. "Father," I said, "the new patterns have come for our winter dresses, Phyllis and me. We wondered if you'd stay in tonight and help us to choose from them? Would you? Just this once?"

He half-turned from the door and my heart beat with thankfulness. But then he turned back again and said, "Nay, I'll come back early and we'll

pick them before we go to bed tonight. You and Phyllis have the first pick, and then we'll see if I pick the same ones. That's the best; if I pick first you'll only disagree in the end!"

I was helpless. To say more would be to betray Elijah's secret; though I would to God I had done so. I should have averted a tragedy.

That night, and only a little later than father had said he would be back, a man helped him to our door but would not stay even for our thanks. He almost ran down the path into the street. Father seemed dazed though unmarked as far as we could see, but his speech was thick and uncontrolled as though he was very drunk. We got him to bed and sent for old Doctor Maguire, who ordered us all out of the room while he made his examination.

Later when he came into the kitchen to us he said, "Your father is not well at all. No, not well at all. It seems he was walking out behind Sparrow's Forge and was set on by somebody or other. He says there were about half a dozen of them. They roughed him a bit and punched him in the body, but he's a hard man and they didn't do much harm as far as I can discover. Though one of them laid his leg open almost to the bone with a clog. Damn these Irish! They ought to be deported, every one of them."

Maguire had now lived so long in England that he regarded his native Erin as a foreign country and was more vicious towards his compatriots than any Englishman, which seems to be a common characteristic among the Celts.

Mother said with some relief, "So he's not badly hurt after all?"

But the Doctor shook his head. "It's not that, Mistress Fisher," he said. "They flung him against the cinder wall and I think he has had something of a stroke, perhaps from the exertion; I cannot tell. It looks from his knuckles that he gave some of them enough to be going on with; but he's a bit too old for that sort of game now. You'll have to keep him very quiet, Mistress. He mustn't be worried with anything for a long while yet."

In the morning when mother went in to him to ask him how he felt, father was lying still and cold, his mouth set and his battered fists still clenched. There was no need for Doctor Maguire to visit him again. At last he had set out on his voyages, so long delayed and now so suddenly come. His black yachting cap hung on the peg behind his bedroom door. Mother went in a listless way towards it and put her hand to it as though she would take it away.

“That should be buried with him, mother,” I said; but she could not understand what I was saying and just turned smiling at me and nodding, fingering the hem of her cambric apron and smiling as though I had said something to please her.

IV

FATHER's funeral took place on a damp windy day, in the afternoon, when evening was already creeping across a sky made lurid by the glow from the furnaces. A vicious wind whipped our black weeds behind us as we stood on the rising ground and we made a sad picture. We women stood weeping by the grave but Tom, the new head of the family, put on a brave face and saw our father to his resting-place with resolution in his heavy jaw. Elijah was not there; indeed I had heard that his broken ankle was a more complicated accident than had been imagined at first and at the time of the funeral he was lying in Walsall Infirmary.

I told Tom as much of the story as I thought he should know but it was in his suspicious mind that Elijah's accident was a fabrication. He seemed to think that Elijah had deliberately refused to attend his father's funeral. I did not argue with him for mother was so upset that Elijah was not there and I had no wish to give too great an emphasis to the occasion. Elijah had sent a wreath of father's favourite flowers, tiger lilies; but somehow Tom had contrived that they were tucked away, almost invisible, on the hearse, and so were not seen by those who came to pay their last respects.

No mourning supper was held at the house for mother did not feel well enough to provide anything that might even faintly do justice to our late father. But when we had returned home and were sitting before the fire to get the chill damp out of our bones, Phyllis surprised us all by announcing her engagement and forthcoming marriage to Herbert Gregory, a farmer of Penkridge. Even Tom was a little shocked that she should choose this moment to inform us of her plans; but mother only smiled wanly and said, "And is he dark and handsome as the fortune-teller said?" Phyllis answered with perfect self-possession, "He's mouse-coloured and quite handsome enough for a good wife's peace of mind, mother!"

Theirs was a short engagement and they were married less than three months after my father's funeral at the church of Saint Saviour's near Albrighton, where Mr. Gregory's mother farmed. Tom attended the ceremony since mother was ailing and carried with him our family present, a salver and a set of tortoiseshell hairbrushes decorated with Herbert Gregory's monogram in silver.

Tom reported that the ceremony went well and that the groom's people seemed sound country-folk with enough money to provide for everything Phyllis might want in the way of servants and carriages and clothes. He brought back a fond invitation from the groom to mother, asking her to visit them for a few weeks as soon as they returned from their honeymoon at Aberystwyth.

Mother smiled and held my hands. "Sue," she said, "there's only you and me left now out of them all."

"Oh mother," I said, "there's our Tom; he's going to be in the house a lot now. He's the new master of the house!"

She smiled a little wryly. "He always was, dear," she said. "But somehow I have never counted him as one of the family, not like you others. He's always been more like another father, another William, than a son. He's no more one of the family than our little Albert." Her lips trembled as she spoke that name. Indeed it was the first time I had heard it for many years. Little Albert had died in the small-pox epidemic which raged when I was seven. He was then a child of two and a half, a bright little rogue, and had passed away within the week. As mother spoke his name I called to mind the only photograph our family had ever had taken, with Albert sitting on mother's knee. A Mr. Poole came all the way from Walsall to take it and what a commotion there was! Phyllis would stand just so and not as the photographer wished her to stand. Elijah kept dragging away and throwing everybody out of line, until Mr. Poole almost tore his scant hair with annoyance. Then to crown it all little Albert was very sick immediately the first photograph was taken and before Mr. Poole could get another of us, to make sure.

Yet all ended well for that one and only photograph turned out to be an adequate one and was thenceforth kept in the Family Bible, on whose fly-leaf all our birthdays were recorded in father's meticulous copper-plate. Now mother mentioned little Albert, our youngest, in the same breath as Tom, our eldest. I looked across the table at her and saw that her face was deeply lined and that her hair was turning white very rapidly. I had not noticed these changes in her before.

She said then, "Susan, I've always held to our Phyllis rather than you, in a way, though I've tried not to be partial to any of you. But now it seems to me that you're the best of them all."

"Don't talk like that, mother," I said. "You have always been fair to each one of us, I declare."

She smiled sadly. “Aye,” she said. “Fair. That’s it. Just fair—nothing more. But a family needs love, warm love, not justice. An ounce of love will outweigh ten pounds of justice, or injustice if it comes to that. Always remember that, lass, when you come to have your own family.”

“Oh mother,” I said, “I’d never leave you, you know that.”

She shook her grey head and smoothed the front of her black bodice with white, blue-veined hands, tired hands now that crept so slowly down her body that they seemed to have forgotten what they started out to do. “Don’t say that, Sue,” she said. “I want you to have a family. I want you to get married and start your own life. Never fear, I shall not begrudge you that. I have had my time. I am ready to go any time now. There isn’t much left for me.”

I felt the hot tears rush to my eyes. “Mother!” I said. “Please don’t say such things. You will live for many years yet, please God!”

But she turned away from me and shook her head. “I feel that I am an old woman,” she said in a whisper, “and I do not wish to live much longer. I am not well, Susan. I haven’t been well for a long time; but I couldn’t give way while your father was so middling. Now it doesn’t matter very much. I can tell you, father has provided for you in his Will. You need have no fear.”

I could not stand any more of this and went from the room in tears.

From that time forward until she died, over a year later, my mother’s happiness was my whole concern. In a strange way I returned to my former self, my self as I had been before my new freedom. My many guilts came on me again and once more I became afraid of our Tom. He was but little in the house, yet when he was there, sitting with mother in her room downstairs, I always waited in the kitchen with great apprehension, listening for his call.

“Susan, Susan,” he would say. “Come on, girl; it’s time for mother’s hot-water bottles to be changed. Don’t laze about, Susan.”

Or at another time he would call, “Susan, I shall be out late tonight. We have an important conference. See that mother gets her meals nice and hot. Look after her drinks now and keep a watch on those hot-water bottles.”

I always nodded obediently even though I did all these things day in and day out and Tom knew that I did.

It was useless to argue with Tom and he was so overbearing that it was a matter of some anguish for me ever to discuss things with him either. Soon after Phyllis’s wedding he had said that Elijah was never to come to the

house again, and when mother was first taken ill I had broached this matter with him. But he had insisted that to see Elijah would upset mother too much and that if I valued her life I must consider his wishes in this respect. He even forbade me to mention Elijah's name to her.

But I had already seen what could happen by the sin of omission twice before; once when Phyllis had not told Elijah that Dick Belcher had been to see him as he lay sick in bed, and once when I had withheld information of Elijah's sickness from father and had let the old man walk out to his death by the cinder wall. This time I did not intend to fall into the same pit of error.

One morning I said to mother, "Dear, would you like to see our Elijah? I'm sure he would love to see you again."

She had recently become more of a child than a grown woman and she looked at me almost in fear. "Tom would never like that," she said. "Tom has forbid . . ."

Then she stopped in some confusion. I was suddenly very cross. "Do you mean that our Tom has forbidden you, his mother, to see her son?" I said.

She recollected herself. "No dear. I am forgetting. No, it's not that. No, I don't think I want to see him yet awhile. I have been thinking about our little Enoch again in the night and I don't want to see Elijah again yet."

I grasped at the straw she held out. "Do you mean that you will want to see him some day?" I asked.

She smiled weakly and a little sadly. "Perhaps Susan, but I don't know yet. I haven't thought about it yet."

So there it had to stay. There was nothing I could do then.

Looking back, mother's illness came on her very suddenly. It had happened almost as soon as Phyllis and her husband came back from Aberystwyth, in fact. Tom drove us out to Penkridge in the wagonette, since mother insisted on taking two trunks full of household things for Phyllis besides her own luggage; and father's favourite chair for Herbert, if he should want it. Bonny was getting old then and made heavy weather of the journey. Tom was a little cruel with her and used the whip more than father ever did, until I pointed out to him that the old mare never went well for anyone but father.

“She will have to learn who is the new master,” he said sullenly, and cut at her so callously that I almost snatched the whip from his hand and gave him a taste of it across the face. But I could have saved my feelings for I don’t think old Bonny even noticed it. If she did she made no show of having done so. She just kept on at the pace which she had decided on before and neither Tom’s voice nor his whip could shake her from that. When we got to Penkridge I told the groom to see that she had a comfortable stall and plenty of hay, as a special prize for beating Tom that day!

We were made very welcome but after a day or two mother began to hanker after her own fireside as she said. Phyllis pressed her to stay and mother pretended to consider it. Then on the third night we were wakened to hear mother groaning and went to her room to find that she was indeed very ill. Herbert Gregory’s doctor saw her the next day and told us how grave was her malady; indeed, he said, in his opinion it would not be wise to attempt to move her.

At this Phyllis became very concerned and it was obvious to me that she did not relish the idea of having mother very long in her house as an invalid. However, after a fortnight mother seemed to rally somewhat and the doctor said that she might travel, if she went by train and was carefully attended the whole of the way. Tom came out from Darlaston to help bring her back but we left Bonny and the wagonette behind. Mother wished Bonny goodbye. “I shanna see thee again, owd lass,” she said, lapsing into the local dialect to our great surprise. Nor did I see the mare again, though I have no doubt she had a more comfortable home at Penkridge than she ever could have done back at Darlaston with Tom as her new master.

When Doctor Maguire saw mother he had Tom and myself in the kitchen and said, “I diagnose a malignant growth. An operation might alleviate the trouble for a short while but there is no cure.”

“Is mother to know?” asked Tom.

The doctor said, “Yes, if she asks. Mrs. Fisher is a sensible woman. She will take it the right way I know.”

And so she did. “Nay Tom lad,” she said. “They shall not cut me. I shall go to my Maker as he intended me to be, without any snipping and snapping of surgeon’s knives.”

“Is that your wish?” said Tom.

“Aye,” she said.

And we never mentioned the matter again. Though sometimes when she was in great pain I half-wished that she had chosen to go to the surgeon's table, even though it might have meant her quick release. By the time she gave up the ghost I was a shadow of my other self, fatigued in body and in mind, for I had done everything for her, save at the very last when Tom got in a local woman to relieve me a little.

Elijah came one night, for I had sent for him without asking mother or even mentioning it to Tom. He was thinner and more serious than I had ever known him before. He spoke to mother but I do not think she knew who had come to see her, and he went away at last very sad. In the night she called me to her and said, "Our Susan, I have been dreaming. I think I saw someone I know in a dream, a young Mr. Perkins who used to come courting me before I ever knew your father. He stood by my bed and said, 'Never mind, love. God will be with you.' "

And I was troubled for Elijah had said just those words to her. I almost tried to tell her that she had not been dreaming; but she prattled on so calmly about it that I could not bring myself to break her fantasy.

All this remembrance harrows me and hurts the secret places of my heart, opening up wounds again that I thought time had healed over for ever. I have had to remind myself, if only because of my great pride; but I cannot go any further with the story now for there is a limit to the anguish one can bear.

We interred her in the same grave as my father. Phyllis and Herbert came to the funeral. Tom promised to invite Elijah but did not. I did not discover his omission until it was too late and then the damage was done. We were leaving the cemetery, Tom walking next to me, when I saw a tall dark figure standing at the gate. It was Elijah and he still wore his workman's clothes, a red muffler about his neck and his corduroy trousers tied below the knee with leathern straps. I even think he had his dinner basin in his hand, wrapped up in a big bandanna kerchief. He stared at our procession aghast as though he were witnessing a file of ghosts. As we came to the gates he stepped forward to Tom, who affected to ignore him and looked towards the carriage which he and I were to enter.

Elijah said simply, "Why was I not told?" But Tom did not answer him. Elijah walked alongside us for a step or two.

"Why did you do it without telling me?" he asked. "I've run all the way and I'm too late. They told me at the foundry gates. Why didn't you let me know?" Elijah's voice faltered as though he might break down.

I looked at Tom in horror but he went to the carriage and stood at the side of the door for me to enter first.

I heard Phyllis call from behind me, “Be a good lad, our ’Lijah. You won’t improve matters by a quarrel at this time and in this place.”

Elijah half-turned to her as he reached Tom. “Get thee in thy carriage, oor Phyllis,” he said. “And tak ’im in wi’ yer.” Herbert looked at him annoyed for a second, and then did as he was bid.

Tom tried to hurry me in and put his hand on my shoulder to do so; but suddenly a devil came into me and I hung back even on the steps of the coach. “Come on,” he said hurriedly. “If you don’t get in then I will.”

I felt him trying to push past me but I stood my ground. Then Elijah took him by the neck of his coat. “Oh no ye wunna, Tom Fisher,” he said. “I ha’ summat to say to you afore ye gets in that thing!” And he swung Tom round just as I had seen him swing the drunken collier on the bridge at Stourport in the golden days.

“Let go, you ruffian,” said Tom evenly, “or I’ll give you in charge.”

“Thee canst please theesen,” said Elijah, as he forced his brother back towards the cemetery wall. “I’ve half a mind to tak thee in theer,” he said, nodding towards the graveyard, “to mak thee beg her pardon for thee great lying sinfulness, thee creeping fatbellied slug of a Judas, thee!” And at each epithet he shook Tom until his jowls quivered and his face began a purple-red. Once Phyllis called from her carriage, but we saw Herbert draw her back inside and at last her vehicle moved off, the coachman not wishing to become involved.

Then Tom looked over Elijah’s shoulder at me, his eyes wide with something that was almost fear.

“Susan,” he gasped, “run and fetch the parson. He will be changing in the chapel. Tell him there’s a maniac outside desecrating God’s Holy Place.”

But I stood still and smiled into Tom’s face. And so that he should hear I said, “Remember that collier on the bridge at Stourport, ’Lijah? Could’st do the same again, think’st?”

And he half-turned and smiled at me, a grey grim terrible smile that may well have struck fear into Tom, for it struck fear into me and set me trembling.

“Yes lass,” he said hoarsely. “I could do it again, but I shanna. I shall shake this rat till he cries and then leave him. But God help you, Tom Fisher,

if I ever have to lay hands on you again."

Then he began to shake Tom slowly, remorselessly, with a smouldering savage glee, until the older man gaped and began to sink down to the pavement. By now his hat had rolled into the muddy gutter and his black coat was torn down the back. His black tie had twisted round and hung across his shoulder. He looked a sorry picture as I exulted in his misfortune.

And at last Elijah let go of him and Tom fell back against the railings, swallowing hard and afraid beneath his blustering expression. Yet give the man his due, he was no coward. When he got his breath again he made forward to strike at Elijah, but the younger man put out a gaunt grimed hand and shoved him back against the wall without ceremony, holding him there easily, making him seem, for all his bullying outbursts, as weak as a child.

"I'n warned thee, Tum Fisher," said Elijah. "If thee so much as squeaks a word at me agen, I'll throttle thee, I swear!" He began to turn away and as he did so his eyes fell on me. He turned back to Tom then and said, "And what's more, if thee lay'st a finger on lass 'ere, or treats her badly onnyway, 'er's on'y got to send word to me and I'll break thee bluddy nose, so as everyone'll know thee brother's bin to see thee! I'll mark thee for life, Fisher, an' delight in doin' it!"

Then he walked on into the burial-ground, but stopped to touch me lightly on the arm before he went. I got into the carriage and at last Tom followed me. He was breathing hard and with some difficulty; but when he got his breath back he said to me grimly, "I see what you are now, Susan. Have no fear I shall not forget it."

And I smiled back in Tom's face, great Tom's red and mottled face, and said sweetly, as Phyllis used to speak to me, "And by God, Tom Fisher, if you trouble me with your bullying ways, I'll have your nose broken the same night!"

He looked at me as though his eyes would start from his head. "You bitch!" he gasped rather than spoke. "You debased little bitch!"

But I only smiled back at him and began to hum. Though heaven knows I was in no true mood for humming. I was dog-tired with all the months of nursing mother. I was sick to the heart of my life at that moment. There was no kind future stretching before me as there was for Phyllis. Yet I hummed, despite my sorrow for dear dead mother, I hummed; and each note brought back a month of my lost pride from the man who sat opposite me in the unseamed black coat and the crumpled tie.

Yet before the night was out Tom had gained his revenge on me, in a way. Lawyer Foster attended to read out father's Will, and from it I found that though father had divided his stocks and shares and capital equally among all his children, the house went to Tom; with the provision that he was always to give me a home as long as I paid him the respect due to the eldest member of the family.

Tom's eyes lit up as this phrase was read. Phyllis caught Tom's eye and a significant glance passed between them.

Later Tom met me in the conservatory and said, "So you see, Susan, you will have a home here, yes, as long as I consider you merit one. If you choose to ally yourself with your brother you will forfeit that home and I shall have no qualms about throwing you into the street."

I have to admit that he was being just, within the limits of the law laid down by my own father; though at the time I was still nettled and said, "Which would you rather have, me or a smashed face?"

Quite rightly he did not answer this jibe but went back to the sitting-room where Phyllis and Herbert were enjoying a glass of port wine.

My new battle was about to begin; but thank God my pride had come back to help me fight it—and what was best of all, my dearest brother was only waiting for the chance to serve me, especially if in serving me he might have some part of his revenge on the brother he had always detested and who had always hated him.

V

I HAD known the mild family slavery of early childhood, then the golden years of father's trust and love, and then the fateful third act of death, when my parents had gone from me, leaving me to stand on my own none too sound feet almost before I had fully found myself. Now while I was still breathless with grief and while I was a young girl of eighteen—though less in knowledge and experience than other girls of my age because of the sheltered life I had always led—I was confronted with Tom, the strongest member of our family, as an enemy.

Yet do I not perhaps do him an injustice? Tom could not help seeing life as he did; nor do I think that he was naturally cruel to me. I think that his nature was a hard one, for he was greatly ambitious and would not allow anything to stand in his way. Deep in his heart I now believe he had a strong sense of justice, or of equity. Yet his was a Mosaic rather than a Christian Law. For him, everyone was either for him or against him; everything was either black or white; he would admit no intermediate shades of grey. Everything that was not right by his code, he firmly believed to be greatly and gravely wrong.

Now his belief was that his word must be obeyed, that his work and the position it brought him in the community must be respected. To Tom I was still the baby of the family, and Elijah was the ne'er-do-well who was beyond all reclamation and so must be blotted from the memory almost. Yes, Tom was proud, like a patriarch without a tribe though; for I felt no allegiance towards him and determined that though I should suffer for it, I would fight him and, if I could, break him and teach him humility.

And these things I did, but broke myself, I think, in carrying out my cruel purpose.

Our first tussle came the day after Phyllis and Herbert had gone home. Tom was on his way to the factory, immaculate in his frock-coat and high billycock hat. He paused at the kitchen door as he passed and stood looking in at me closely for a moment, smoothing his thick moustache as though he might be interviewing a young lad at the works. But I didn't tremble as the young lads did when he interviewed them. I looked straight back at him. "Well, what is it?" I said, whisking the cloth from the table and folding it against my body.

He drew his mouth straight then pursed his lips, almost like a doctor indicating no improvement in his patient.

"Phyllis and Herbert wished me to tell you that they will always be pleased to see you when you feel ready to come," he said.

I stared back at him for a space then I threw the cloth into the dresser-drawer, deliberately, so that my movement should be so different from my mother's as to shock him.

"Why do you bring the message?" I asked. "Why didn't they tell me so themselves?"

He turned the handle of the door. "They felt it would come better from me, as head of the house," he said. "Besides, they could see what mood you were in and Herbert was in no mind to be insulted by a young chit of a girl."

He went through the door at that. But I followed him and called out after him, "If they wait till I go to them, they'll wait for ever!"

Without turning and spoken quietly so that I could only just hear his words, Tom said, "You will please yourself. That is your affair." And then he walked on down the path, brushing imaginary specks of dust from the sleeves of his coat.

I did not come off best from that encounter. Moreover, my defeat rankled so much in my mind that day, I could not bring myself to eat for sheer anger! I even thought of starving myself to death so that he would come home one night and find me lying on the hearth-rug, withered and gasping! What a scene that would make, as described luridly in our local paper! Why, the very scandal of the thing would mean Tom's ruin in the town . . . I spoke the words to myself in my first annoyance, half-jestingly in a malicious way, but as they came from my mouth I knew that there was a strong basis of desire in them; they were not merely passing words. I knew then what I wanted—Tom's ruin, nothing less. His discredit among those to whom he cut such a solid prosperous figure. But why kill myself to gain this end, I thought? Full of my new goal I began to lay more serious plans to work my end.

When he came home, as was his habit, at something after six, expecting an evening meal to be preparing for seven o'clock or thereabouts, I sat in the rocking-chair knitting. I was not making anything in particular, just a straight length. I should unpick it the following day and do it all again, and again, and again. I felt sure that this would madden him . . . There you see to what depths of stupid and petty spite I was prepared to go. As I remember it I could writhe for very shame. But this night he did not seem to notice what

I was doing at all and about seven o'clock he came downstairs in his new dark grey suit with a carnation in his button-hole.

"I'm glad you didn't prepare a meal for me," he said, arranging the silk handkerchief in his breast-pocket. "I shall be out to dinner. I'm dining at *The White Horse* with an American client of ours. Don't wait up for me. I shall be late."

I put my knitting down carefully. "I shall not wait up for you tonight or any other night," I said, striving to control the spite in my voice. "What you do, whom you dine with, are not my affair, and I do not wish to know anything of your arrangements."

He smiled a little. "As you wish," he said, stopping to smooth his hair, which grew long above his ears, before the kitchen mirror. "My only wish is to keep you well-informed and happy, when you want such information and such happiness as I am able to provide."

Such was the smug expression on his already plump face that I almost lost my self-control for a moment. But I held back my anger and said, "As for evening meals, I have decided that a solitary life in this house does not suit my tastes . . ."

He cut me off short there and turned to face me. I could see from his face that he was grasping at a straw—the straw that I would voluntarily go from the house and leave him clear under the provisions of our father's Will. "Do you wish to leave already?" he asked.

But now I had something of his measure and I smiled back at him, shaking my head. "No," I said. "Don't jump to conclusions! I was about to say that I do not relish a lonely life in the house all day. Therefore I propose to go out as I wish and when I wish. I shall not tie myself to be in every evening when you return, to get your meals and wait on you hand and foot."

He nodded so sympathetically that I began to feel a little ashamed of myself; but my mind was made up. "I suggest that you get a part-time woman in to prepare your food and give me some help with the other housework," I said, not for a moment expecting he would agree without a struggle. But I had underestimated Thomas Fisher. He smiled at me so disarmingly that I began to wonder whether I had misjudged him all these years.

"Certainly Susan," he said. "Is there anyone you yourself would suggest? A clean honest woman preferably, but, of course, anyone you would wish to have."

It crossed my mind to suggest some old harridan who might help me to make his life a burden; but I was crafty enough to see that I must be a fellow-sufferer with him in that event, and I compromised. “There’s old Mrs. Bassett,” I answered. “She is a widow and could well do with the wage you would have to pay her.” I meant him to see that he should stand all the cost of such help.

He fingered his chin reflectively for a second or two. “H’m, yes,” he mused. “Mistress Bassett . . . She should do very well. Now will you see her or shall I? Whichever you think fit, since this is your province after all.”

“You can see her,” I answered, wishing to cause him as much inconvenience as I could. “It will be your dinner she cooks, not mine.”

“Very well,” he said. “So be it. I shall see the Widow Bassett tomorrow before noon and I shall ask her to relieve you of all things possible. Will that do?”

“Yes,” I said. “That will do.” Then feeling that I had beaten him to that post at least I pressed home with my next skirmish. “And there’s something more I wish to discuss with you while we’re about it.”

He took out his large silver turnip-watch that used to be my father’s. “Can it not wait, Susan,” he said, “I am a little late already?”

I shook my head with assurance. “No,” I said. “I wish to talk about something which is vastly more important to me than your supper with an American.”

He sighed and sat down opposite me in the green figured-plush armchair. “Very well,” he said. “Speak what is in your mind, but I pray you be as brief as you can.”

“I shall take my time,” I said, whereupon he nodded with resignation and began to examine his finger-nails. Indeed I was amazed at the forbearance of this man, this brother I had never known before this night. Elijah would have sprawled me flat on the hearth had I spoken to him like this. But Tom only smiled. I came to the point then for I could sense that I was losing ground again by my delay. The attack was becoming a farce.

“As you are well aware,” I said, “I have no money.”

“I shall make you an allowance for provisions and such things,” he replied.

“That is not what I meant,” I said. “I need my own money, money which I can spend as I wish on clothes or the other small luxuries of which I have

been deprived for so long."

"I am prepared to make you a personal allowance," he said. "Provided that you realise you are not entitled to such an allowance and that I should be doing it in father's memory, as it were."

"I do not wish to be under any financial obligation to you whatever," I said. "I want only my own money. Father left me money, didn't he? How much did he leave me?"

Tom sucked his upper lip with his lower for a moment as though making a mental calculation.

"It is difficult to say," he said at last. "He left you a lump sum and also certain stocks and shares which have not been realised, as you understand, so that I cannot declare to you what their value might be. Lawyer Foster would know with assurance. He has the administration of your money. It is to him that you should apply; he will sell your shares for you should you wish to dispose of them. I would be very willing to buy them from you."

I sensed then that Tom wanted to buy my shares, though for the life of me I didn't know why. I hardly knew what a share was. But I determined that he shouldn't have them. "I do not wish to sell," I said. "I merely wish to know what I am worth."

His lips curled a little as I said those words and for a moment he was about to make some witty remark based on them, but he suddenly grew grave again and said, "As nearly as I can estimate, and at the present market value of the shares you hold, I should say that your entire portion amounts to three thousand pounds; perhaps a little more or a little less. Will that do?"

"Yes," I said. "That is all I wanted to know. I shall see Lawyer Foster tomorrow and get him to make arrangements for a certain sum to be paid to me each week out of interest."

Tom said, "Would you rather I arranged that? You might not do it very well. And besides I am father's executor."

"I only want my rights," I said.

He bowed his head. "So be it," he said. "I shall leave it with you. Tell Foster so. Now may I go?" He had begun to rise.

I took up my knitting again.

"You can go when and where you please for all I care," I said.

“I do not think we ever understood you before, Susan,” he said reflectively and with an ironic smile, as he went towards the door.

I searched my mind to think of some retort that would appal him but no words would come. I did the only thing that occurred to me, a vulgar thing, a disgusting thing, a thing I had never done in my life before but which I had seen navvies do into their braziers on the roadside. I spat into the fire. He turned away his head and shut the door.

My last throw had defeated me. When he had gone I sank my head in my hands and wept with self-disgust.

Then with the twilight there came a great loneliness on me, a long emptiness that I had never known before. For the first time in my life I was quite alone in the house, with no one I might expect to come in. Now there was nothing to expect, nothing even to hope for, never, never again. I began to cry afresh, feeling very small, very helpless, like a small child again. This then was to be my life, a long twilit emptiness . . .

But when my tears had spent themselves and there was no more fight left in me, I seemed to rise again like a bird from the fire, nothing, yet everything; a shrivelled husk, yes, but one stripped clean and burnt dry of all false sentiment. I knew that out of my suffering had come some sort of freedom. I knew also that now I must fight for myself or go under. I had grown up in those bitter minutes by the kitchen fire. Now my life was entirely my own, my own, and no one else lived who should make me do anything I did not wish to do. A curiously sombre elation swept through me. I would make a test of my new self that night. I would be myself truly for the first time in my eighteen years. I rose and went upstairs to change my dress and do my hair.

I would go to see my brother Elijah, I decided, the brother from whom I had been barred for so long. That surely would be a final severance with all the restraints I had known before! It would be a symbolic act, a declaration of my bitter independence!

VI

The Railway, that small tavern where my brother lodged, lay almost hidden from the main road to Walsall, in a little hollow surrounded by trees. On one side of it ran the railway line to Willenhall; on the other the broad pockmarked fields that led at last to Bentley Common. This inn was set almost at the furthermost limits of Darlaston, before the ironworks of The Pleck began. I hurried through the damp night towards the cheery orange lights that shone from its low windows into the dusk.

As I descended the wooden steps that led from the highroad to the wicket-gate of the inn, I heard the sound of rough voices raised in song. At other times I should have suspected the singers of being mere drunken colliers; but now their tones came to me as a rude but sincere welcome. Here were living creatures, men and women who were close to suffering and had kindness in their hearts; folk who would not turn me away; folk among whom my brother had made his home.

Then the words of the song they sang came to me clearly, a song which I was to hear many times before my tale was done, a rough ditty called 'The Wedgebury Cocking,' which tells of a great riot that once took place during a cock-fight when one of the contestants swore that the other was not playing fair. It is a crude song, full of the dark savagery of the district, but that night it was so welcome to me that it seemed sweeter than any drawing-room ballad! And I would have joined in had I known the words then. Yet I did not learn them for many weeks and then against Elijah's will. One verse still comes back to me:

> "The cockpit was near to the church,
> An ornament neat to the town,
> On one side an old coal pit,
> The other well gors'd round;
> Peter Hadley peep'd through the gorse,
> In order to see them fight,
> Spittle jobbed his eye out with a fork,
> And cry'd, 'Blast thee, it served thee right!' "

This was the Wednesbury to which the great John Wesley carried the stern word of his God; and such songs did he hear when he preached against

cocking. Yet the very men whose faces were splattered by the blood of this sport, such men who now sang the song in the tavern, were the men who protected the evangelist against the ruffians who came from Walsall to make a mockery of him.

I stopped at the door and read the notice that hung over it: "Annie Higgs, Licensed to sell Tobacco, Ales, Stout, Porter and Spirits."

I was a little afraid to go in now but the door swung open just then and a man in dirty moleskin trousers lurched out, almost knocking me over. He saw me and touched his cap, "Goo thee in, lass," he said. "Thee'st cotch thee death o' cowd if thee stay'st theer."

Then he shambled to the hedgeside for his own private purposes and being afraid to stay out there any longer with him, I almost ran inside the tavern.

I found myself in a narrow passageway, panelled roughly in a dark brown wood, to which were hung posters advertising the various alcoholic beverages which one might purchase therein, almanacs from various seed merchants, grocers and such like tradesmen, calendars of the various Fairs and Agricultural Shows. At the end of this passage there was a bright light shining along the red-tiled floor. I could see the heavy hobnailed boots of men, the ends of their cord trousers, tied below the knee with string. I could hear the clink of glass and pewter and could smell the thick overpowering smoke of cut plug, exhaled from clay pipes and so very different from the delicate blend that my father used to smoke in his Meerschaum . . .

I put on my boldest face and walked along the passage. A woman in a black shawl made to pass me there but stopped and put her hand on my shoulder, "Well, well," she said. "If thy muther on'y knowed, me lass . . ." Then she went on down the passage, shaking her head, and I almost turned and fled from the place in shame. But my purpose drove me on and I pushed open the door at the passage end.

In the bar I was confused by the noise and the many strange words and the half-sprawling bodies of men and women, who sat or stood very near to each other, talking loudly or singing, and waving their pots of ale in the air.

Behind the dark oak counter and with shelf after shelf of bottles standing at her back, was a tall heavy-breasted woman, with reddish-golden hair and laughing bright blue eyes. She was drying a tankard and joking with some laughing men as I entered, but I saw her quick eyes glance over their bowed heads and light on me. She surveyed me from head to toe, sizing me up. Then she put down the tankard and came towards me, her mouth a thin

straight line. She hissed rather than spoke, so that few others could have heard her amidst all that noise.

"That's the door," she said. "There's no room for you red-velvet Walsall tarts in my house. This is a respectable house, so be off with you!"

And she took me firmly by the arm and walked me towards the door. I gazed at her almost in tears, trying to say who I was. At the door she seemed to relent. "Sorry, lass," she said, "but we canna risk the Justices closing the place down. Here's a florin and maybe yo'll have better luck if you try *The Nelson*, up at the Bull Stake. Say I've sent yer."

Then, so fantastic was the situation, I lost all my fear and began to laugh and laugh, so loudly that she looked at me as though I had taken leave of my senses. At last I managed to gasp out, "I'm 'Lijah Fisher's sister, Susan!"

She stared and then she snatched back the money she had given me. "Good God!" she said, "and I gave yo' a couple o' bob! For God's sake don't tell him! He's a violent man! He'd break all my glasses if he knew!"

Then she leaned against the dark wooden panelling and began to laugh too. "Well fancy that," she said, "an' I took thee for a Walsall whore! That's rich, that is! Dunna let 'im know that either!"

I said, "Why not? I think it's quite a compliment in its way!"

She shook her head, "Well there's no accountin' for tastes," she said. "An' I should know—I bin one in me time!"

Then she took me to Elijah, who was in a private room away from the folk of the public bar. He sat like a fallen prince, head and shoulders above those men and women who clustered round him at the circular table, his tankard in his hand, his throat bare but wrapped round with a knotted red kerchief, his cap on the back of his head, one thumb stuck into the narrow leather belt about his small waist. That is how I remember him that night.

As soon as he saw me he jumped up, spilling some of his ale over the dress of a black-haired young girl who sat next to him. She did not seem annoyed with him but rather with me, for being the cause of the accident. He came to me, his face suddenly white, "What is it, our wench?" he asked. "What's happened? Has he chucked thee out? I'll be up to see him this very night!"

I shook my head and smiled, "Nay, 'Lijah," I said. "I'n just cum ter see thee, tha's all!"

His eyes wrinkled a little as he heard me use the local speech. Then he was serious again, “Where is he, then?” he asked.

“Out,” I said. “He may be with Owd Nick himself for all I care. He goes his own way and I go mine now. And if you’ll let it be, my way is your way again now.”

He looked down at me, half in annoyance, half proud, for I must have cut a fine figure in my red velvet and squirrel cap, among these wives and sweethearts of rough working-men.

“Thee’st a rum ’un, oor Susan,” he said. “Yet this is no plerce fer thee.”

I said again, “Your place is my place if you will let it be.” But his face was set. So I played my last card, “An’ if thee wunna ha’ me, I’ll goo up ter Bull Stake an’ find someone as will!”

A strange look came into his eyes and I think he almost struck me for those words. But instead he took me strongly by the wrist and turned me round to face the company about the table.

“This is my sister, Susan,” he said. Then to me, “These are all my friends.” I bowed a little and the courtesy was returned to me from the table. Even the black-haired girl seemed to regard me with less enmity now.

Then a broad-shouldered man with a scar along his cheek rose and offered me his chair. “What can I get thee, Missis?” he said with rude gallantry. “Wut ha’ a pint o’ porter wi’ me?”

But Elijah pushed him gently aside. “Nay, Jack,” he said. “I’m on’y one as buys my sister her drink.” He went towards Annie, who still stood at the door. I heard his words, “Bring her lemonade in a gin glass, Annie,” he said. I flushed at these words for I could see that my brother still looked on me as a poor weak thing that must be shielded from all harm. But I was determined to show him this night! If I could best the great Tom then surely I could hold my own with Elijah!

And when the glass came back I drained it at a gulp. The people round the table looked at me in surprise. But I turned to the man with the scar and gave him a roguish look. “Is your offer still open, Jack?” I said. And he nodded, though frowning a little. And so did Annie as she set the pint of porter before me. When I looked across the table at my brother I was more afraid than I thought possible. His red fists were clenched before him and his mouth was set. The table was suddenly silent and Elijah spoke for all to hear.

“If Jack Simpkin weren’t a good friend o’ mine,” he said, “I’d knock ’is teeth out for buyin’ thee that drink. And if thou lift’st a finger to touch it, oor Susan, I’ll smash the glass against the wall.”

I met his eyes full and square and I felt my jaw go out almost to meet his! I made myself smile at him, and then cold to the heart I raised my hand to take the pint of porter. But before I could do so Blue-eyed Annie had come behind me and whisked it out of my way and poured the drink into the runnel behind the bar-counter.

Elijah drew a deep breath and settled himself in his chair again. “Bring her the same again,” he said.

Annie said, “What’s that, ’Lijah? The gin glass, do ye mean?”

Elijah smiled a great broad smile. “No,” he roared, “a pint o’ porter and you can lace it wi’ whisky for all I care. Lass wants to try the sin o’ drink and by Christ her shall! But I shall pay for it, nobody else. No, not even thee, Jack Simpkin!”

And so I took my first drink in a tavern and it tasted bitter, for I drank it in defeat. My great lout of a brother had humbled me when Tom couldn’t, for all his education and position!

VII

THAT then was my first step towards independence, but an independence in which I was still the protegée of my brother and so not the true self-sufficiency I had dreamed of. Yet it was good enough to start with; the road to Hell may be traversed by little steps as well as by great strides! Thereafter I saw much of my brother at *The Railway* and became liked I think by the company there as well as by Blue-eyed Annie; though never did Elijah really want me to go there, not truly in his heart. Though after one or two attempts to dissuade me he shrugged his broad shoulders and gave up the struggle, fearing that I might come to worse harm if he turned me away to follow my own unformed devices.

At home Tom was studiously polite now, and it was seldom we met for meals or even for conversation. It is strange, that. Our house was not a large one yet we contrived at times not to see each other for days at a stretch, and when there was anything which required urgent action, Tom would leave a note where I should be sure to find it or a verbal message with old Mrs. Bassett, who now spent much of the day in the house, leaving me to do little in the way of household chores.

Only once did I have anything which approached a quarrel with Tom, and that occurred one night when I got back from seeing Elijah. I was rather late, and I had had stout spilled on the sleeve of my red velvet, which, to tell the truth, was getting to be a sad travesty of what it had once been when mother had it taken from the shop window in Wolverhampton. So, I turned into the house with the odour of drink still clinging to me; and as I entered the kitchen my weak ankle gave way a little as I caught it against the door jamb. Tom was already in the house before me and sat at the table, reading a weighty book on the chemistry of steel.

He looked up as I stumbled and I saw him sniff ominously as I swept off my short cape and flung my squirrel cap on to a chair. I strolled round the kitchen without speaking to him, humming the air of ‘The Wedgebury Cocking’ insolently and with intent to hurt.

At last he put down his book and looked up at me. “Susan,” he said, and his face was very grave, “I am very concerned about you. You are still very young and you live in my legal care. I do not think you are behaving as our parents would have wished, do you?”

I sat on the edge of the table, a thing I never did normally, and smiled at him, hoping that I looked tipsy; though that is the last thing in the world that I was, since Elijah in spite of that first glass of porter would not let me have anything more than a small glass of sherry or of port wine now. Tom turned his eyes from mine and looked down to the hearth-rug, his hands clasped. It was a gesture I had often seen in my father and it put me out of my stride for the moment.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked him sweetly, hoping to tantalise him.

He did not answer for a while and even I could see that he was struggling inwardly to express himself to me.

"Are you asking me to leave home?" I said. "If so I will do that, and gladly, any time you say. Is it that?"

He swung round and his face was anguished I swear, if I have ever seen anguish on a face. "No, no, no!" he cried. "I did not say that, Susan. I have never said that; never even hinted at it. You know that!"

Then in a flash, almost as by an instinct, I saw that in truth he loved me or came as near to that emotion as his ambitious heart would let him. Moreover, I think that he too was lonely, that he too was missing father and mother and the others as keenly as I was. Yet my course was set, though I must confess that in this moment of realisation I came near to falling upon my knees before him and of begging his forgiveness. I was near to stroking his thinning hair and kissing him and calling him by some kindly childhood name. But I made myself strong by remembering the slights he had offered me, the harshness of his attitude towards Elijah . . . I held the picture of dear 'Lijah, in his coarse workman's clothes, standing alone by the cemetery gates that bleak day when we buried my mother. I kept that image before me to make me ruthless.

"What shall we do, Tom?" I said sweetly. "Go to church together this Sunday to show the town we are friends again?"

He half rose from his chair and a new light came into his eyes. "Yes love," he said. "Let us do that. I should be very happy."

Then the tears spurted from my eyes and I ran from the room, laughing hysterically, my mouth saying, "I hate the sight of you!" but my sobbing heart crying, "Dear Tom! Dear Tom! Dear Tom!"

As I turned to slam the door behind me I saw his strained face as he sat down again, looking at me with increased anxiety across the long mahogany

table that had once been my mother's pride. Never before had I seen Tom Fisher suffering as he did then. Nor did I ever see that look again.

VIII

"Fie! Hell is murky!" said one of the actresses we saw at the Royal Theatre that winter, 'Lijah and me. Yet I could not bring myself to agree with her! My personal form of hell was becoming less and less murky, more and more comforting and warm! Indeed, so much a part of *The Railway* was I now that Blue-eyed Annie had offered me a job behind the bar-counter should I ever wish to break away from Tom and earn my own keep!

"There's always a good future for a well-kept young lass like thee," she said. "Why, you'd get a good place at somewhere like *The George* in Walsall if you had a bit o' training here first. Think about it, Susie love. You don't want to give up the best years of your life to that stuck-up brother of your'n."

I pretended to consider it. "But Elijah would never agree," I said as though in doubt.

She sniffed. " 'Lijah! Oh, him! O' course he wouldn't agree. He niver agrees wi' onnything that don't suit him! But he'd ha' to learn, like everybody else in this world. Why, if you told him you were coming that would be half the battle. He'd get used to it in time! Besides, I shanna want to keep this place for the rest o' my days. I'm not as young as I was. And if you got the trade at your finger-tips, I see no reason why you and him shouldn't take over *The Railway*. How'd that suit you?"

I nodded with enthusiasm for her benefit. 'How that would spite Tom!' I thought. That would make him feel pretty small when he was lording it at Dinners and what-not with his Alderman friends!

One night I did mention it, all very casually, to Elijah. He whirled on me like a savage beast. "What!" he shouted. "Do you think I'd consent to thee livin' in this pig-hole all thee life? Hastn't any better idea in thee head than that, our Susan? Why I'm ashamed o' thee! What would thee mother think? And what would our Tom think for that matter?"

I was shocked by this new tone of his. "Do you care what Tom thinks?" I said. He shook his head a little sheepishly. "Fair's fair the world o'er," he said. "Tom is thy brother. Right's right. Tom keeps thee; he has a right to be treated fair—no more than that, mayhap, but fair."

I looked at Elijah as though I had lost a friend and he had lost his fire. Indeed I began to wonder whether he was changing until later that evening when Annie called him to dispose of a drunken bargeman who refused to leave the tavern and who was making a nuisance of himself. This man was a head taller than Elijah and evidently stronger. Yet my brother went for him without a word and fought him silently in that dark passageway until the man begged for mercy and ran from the place, glad to be free with his skin whole.

Yet *The Railway* was not often the scene of such violence—or such soul-searching either! Most nights we were a happy gathering and I learned much from the conversations I had with various regular users of this inn.

There was one tall stooping man with the voice of an Irving and the red-nosed damp foxy expression of a Welsh poacher. This was Jacob Tranter, or Bacca Chops, as everyone called him from his habit of chewing plug tobacco. Yet in his pepper-and-salt coat and the large pearl tie-pin which habitually held in place his brocade cravat, he looked a man of some substance, and was treated as such by the other users of *The Railway* tavern. He was a retired schoolmaster I believe and was remembered with respect by many generations of boys both for his severity towards hooligans and his seasonal generosity, which took the form of bun-fights, as they were called, or trips out to the Severn in a wagonette which he paid for from his own pocket.

It was from this old schoolmaster that I learned something more about the noble sport whose saga I had heard on the first night I visited *The Railway*. Jacob Tranter was a full-blooded devotee of the cocks, almost their local High Priest; and whatever Heaven he now rests in must resound perpetually with the click of spurs and the sudden vicious flurry of feathers, or he will not be happy there . . .

Jacob Tranter was never tired of talking about cock-fighting and even carried about an old chapbook on the subject, to which he would refer at times when the tavern was in full session. Many of the habitués were men whom Tranter had himself taught and caned and now they sat again at the master's feet as respectfully as ever, even quailing when his bright eye rested on them overlong, as they had done in the years gone by, while he read to them from the yellow pages of his book.

I remember broaching the topic to him one night.

"Aye, a gallant sport, my dear," he said. "As rich as India, as ancient as Egypt, as wise as China. Why the whole civilised world followed it at one

time—and still does, if the truth be known, love, despite this stupid Act! Why look, Miss Fisher, that great Greek Themistocles preached his sermon of valour to his warriors by showing them two gamecocks at the battle! Now, there was a true man, Themistocles! Aye, and the old Romans learned it from the Greeks, as they learned most things; and we seem to have borrowed it from them, like all the things a man enjoys, when you consider it!"

He called for another rum and asked whether I would join him but Elijah who had drawn near to listen to Bacca Chops on their mutually favourite topic, shook his head and I reluctantly refused.

"But do go on, Mr. Tranter," I said.

"Call me Bacca Chops to my face, young lady," he replied. "I know you do behind my back! Nay, no offence, they all do! But cock-fighting, or cocking as it should properly be known . . . Why, we have had it in this country from time immemorial, as they say. It used even to be taught in the schools in the time of good King Henry the Second! It must have been a pleasure to be a schoolmaster then! Every Shrove Tuesday they held their fights or Mains. The teachers approved of it—and well they might for they took all the dead birds home for themselves! Not right delicate eating as you will guess, but a substantial assistance to the table! Yes, it all went on very gaily till that warty old frump Cromwell put a stop to it! But not for long, young woman! No, not for long! When young Charles came back, you know, him who stayed down the road at Bentley, he soon had it back again! He knew a thing or two did Charles, God bless him!"

Elijah was never one for History and now he interrupted. "Read to us from that old book again, Bacca," he said. "Read Sue that bit about how to train a cock. That's a good bit!"

"Aye my lad," said Mr. Tranter, "and its methods can't be bettered today. I've tried them and know!"

"Have you gamecocks, then?" I asked.

The company grinned at me with some small scorn and nudged each other. But the old schoolmaster only smiled and nodded gravely. "You shall see them later, my dear," he said. "But to the book, for your fierce scholar of a brother is impatient I can see!" He prodded Elijah in the ribs as he spoke and my brother grinned back. Tranter was one of the few men I ever knew who could do what he liked with Elijah. Perhaps there is something about an old schoolmaster, some almost druidic authority that even grown men

respect, or at the worst tolerate. Now Tranter took from his coat-pocket a small calf-bound volume, printed in the black irregular type of the years gone by.

"This is a book called 'The Pleasure of Princes,' " he said, as though delivering a lecture, and that noisy room fell as silent as if a priest in full robes had walked through the door. "Sh! Sh!" came from all quarters and the man began.

"This book was written in 1614, ladies and gentlemen, by a famous scholar and fancier of the game, Gervase Markham. I pray you, give his words your attention for you will not find them better in any manual." Then he took a sip of rum, cleared his throat, and began to read.

" 'When a cock is to be trained for the pit he must be fed three or four days only on old Maunchet,' that is fine white bread, my friends, 'and spring water. Then he shall be set to spar with another cock, putting a pair of hots on each of their heels, which hots are soft, bumbasted rolls of leather, covering their spurs, so that they cannot hurt each other . . .' Then Markham goes on, my friends, that when the birds have finished they should be set near the fire in a basket and covered with hay. 'Then let him sweate,' he says, 'for the nature of this scouring is to bring away his grease, and to breed breath and strength. Ha! Ha! There's some of us here tonight who would profit from losing a pint or two of grease, eh gentlemen? You understand, Master Markham means fat! Well, he goes on that if the bird is not killed in a fray, 'the first thing you do, you shall search his wounds, and as many as you can find you shall with your mouth suck the blood out of them, then wash them with warm salt water . . . then stove him up again as hot as you can.' And that's the secret, Miss Fisher!"

"Poor creatures!" I remember saying, at which he turned on me with the wide eye of wonder.

"Poor!" he repeated. "Why, you should see them! There's nothing poor about them—like Spanish bulls and like your own brother, they only live for fighting! Eh, 'Lijah!" My brother smiled, embarrassed and did not answer. "Come along then," said Jacob, taking me by the hand. "You shall see my game birds; Annie lets me keep them round at the back. My missus would have a fit if she knew I still indulged!"

In the outhouse I peered by the light from a lantern into the straw-filled cages that lined the walls. From each cage a pair of fierce bright eyes stared back at me unwinking, and once a gallant little bird flew at the bars between

us, striking out with his spurs against the wires, even while he was still in the air.

Elijah, who stood behind us, sighed with envy. “What a cock!” he said. “I’d give ten pounds for that bird, Bacca!”

The old schoolmaster laughed. “I’d not take twenty now, ’Lijah,” he said. “But if he turns tail on Sunday I’ll give him thee to feed the dog!”

I was about to ask where the cocking would take place, but Elijah sensed what was in my mind and stopped me before the question might frame itself on my lips. He drew me towards another cage. “Look at this one!” he said. “A true Staffordshire Dun! A bird in a thousand this! Only an old skinflint like Bacca there could afford to buy a bird like that, eh Bacca?” The old man smiled. “I’ll give him to your sister if she’ll come with me for a week to Colwyn Bay!” he said.

Elijah laughed back at him, knowing the old man was only jesting. “If you speak such words again, Jacob,” he said, “I’ll not only tell thy wife on thee. I’ll pinch thee bird an’ all, out of hand, I will!”

But Tranter, seeing my sudden shyness at his broad talk, went back to his old tone of voice and led me closer to the gamecock.

“Look at him closely,” he said. “He’s nearly two, quite an age, but he’s a real warrior! See how I’ve trimmed his wings at the slope and how short his tail is. It has to be cut down by a third of its length, and you shorten the hackle and rump feathers too. See, his comb is cut down almost to his head. That’s to give the other bird, his opponent, less to hang on by! He’ll go into training soon.”

“For Sunday?” I asked.

“Lord bless you, no,” said Bacca. “It takes about ten days to train them ready for the pit. He’ll not be wanted for a fortnight. I’m putting him in a Battle Royal this time. It’s time he got himself finished off or came out champion. You see that’s what happens in a Battle Royal. You put a number of birds in the pit and there they remain till there’s only one bird left. So you see it’s a searching business. It’s not liked by the squeamish, I can tell you!”

I looked down again at the bright-eyed bird who strutted at us from the darkness of his pen. “I should think not,” I said with a shudder. “It seems almost horrible to me and I’m not against sports in general.”

Jacob Tranter smiled at me indulgently. “Maybe, maybe,” he said. “But I suppose that if we did not let them fight we should be depriving them of

their main enjoyment in life. They do enjoy it, you know, as much as we men. And I suppose we have some biblical justification for our sport: 'If Leviathan took his sport in the waters, how much more may Man take his sport upon the land.' "

On the way back through the yard, I thought of what Jacob Tranter had said; that the gamecock would find life intolerable without a fight; and for a moment I wondered whether I might not have something of that bird's spirit in me, for indeed I was fighting now more than ever, and in a strange perverse way even coming to enjoy it.

Yet old Bacca Chops was not always talking gamecocks. He had much lore at his fingers' ends and taught me a great deal about other things too. One evening when I knew him better I commented on his own nickname, to his amusement.

"We all have nicknames here," he said. "I'd tell you your brother's but like as not he'd lie in wait and wring my neck for it—so I shan't!"

I tried to persuade him to take the risk but he turned the question. "Nay, I daredn't, my lass," he said, "but let me tell you a tale about Black Country nicknames as a whole, and I don't suppose there's any county in the land that can match this one for its names . . . Well, there was a gentleman came to Wedgebury one day and got off the hossbus and asked a street-corner lounger if he could direct him to the house of Mr. Foster. 'Ay, no doubt I can,' said the man. 'But thee mun tell me fust which Foster it is thee want'st. Is it Gentleman Foster, or Jonah Foster, or Billy Gunner Foster, or Old Shake Tupty Foster, or Joel Tenney Foster, or Ode Wag Foster, or Tom Jonder Foster, or Ode Mouldyhead Foster, or Ode Boggan Foster?' The stranger was mystified. 'Well, what does he do for a living?' asked the Wedgebury man. 'He's a screwmaker,' answered the other. 'Oh,' said the lounger, 'well, thee want'st Ode Foxy Jack Foster. That's who thee want'st.' And so he did, when it came to it! What do you think of that!"

I was bemused by the wealth of names and could think of nothing much to say to the schoolmaster for a while. Then I asked, "Why Mouldyhead Foster?"

"Well, it seems that the man's hair was growing grey in patches," said Jacob Tranter. "You know, like mine!" And he lifted his brown Derby hat so that I might see. Then he fumbled in his jacket-pocket. "I've got something here to do with this," he said, taking out a leather pocket-book from which protruded an envelope, addressed and franked. "Look at this," he said. "This actually came through the post to an old friend of my father's many years

ago. That'll show you what nicknames we had in this district, years gone by."

I took the yellowing envelope and read the faint black superscription. It ran:

"To Mr. Wilkes, Darlaston, near Wednesbury.
Not My Lord Wilkes,
Not Gentleman John Wilkes,
Not Soft Water Jack Wilkes,
Nor They Wilkes,
Nor Brick End Wilkes,
Nor Whackey Wilkes,
Nor Dowker Wilkes,
Nor Dragon Wilkes,
Nor Hockey Wilkes,
Nor Bullet Wilkes,
Nor Darkey Wilkes,
Nor Fagler Wilkes,
Nor Tizzie Wilkes,
Nor Dunty Wilkes,
Nor Gallimore Wilkes,
But Bacca Box Wilkes!
That's the man!!"

That was Bacca Chops Tranter, on those evenings at *The Railway* tavern when we were all free and easy and the ale was flowing smoothly from the great tuns that Annie kept lined up against the plaster wall. It was a home for me for a while in that difficult period of my life and I sometimes bless Blue-eyed Annie for her kindness, her slatternly motherly kindness that asked no reward. *The Railway*, despite its local reputation as the gathering-place of many lawless men, was a warm sweet place to me and there I never met with insult or offensive talk, such as I might well have found at other more eminent places of refreshment.

But my time is running out and I have the most important thing to say yet. Soon the bell will ring and it will be time for me to go. Yet before I do go I must speak of *The Railway* once again, yet not of old Bacca Chops, for on that Sunday morning when his favourite Staffordshire Dun lay torn to shreds in the Battle Royal, the constables broke in and arrested all present; and so the old schoolmaster lay in a cell at West Bromwich at the time of which I shall speak next, no doubt running over in his mind the nicknames

and cocking-lore with which his shaking head had filled itself. He was a true Blackcountryman of a sort the world will surely never see again.

IX

SPRING had swept through the Black Country once more, whipping the smoke from the great chimneys, causing the drab roofs to glisten silver with rain, coaxing out the early flowers in sudden fitful drenches of sunshine. It was May once more and I was as restless as the season itself. Now my heart reached out after things I did not know and like a restless animal I could not settle anywhere. And suddenly life seemed to me like a curious comedy, despite its stretches of grey, its depths of black. They all passed away, if one waited, and then life was just a comic little puppet-dance where little mattered in the end and where sadness and gladness were but two movements of the same drunken jig!

Tom came to me in the garden, his steps slow and his face grave and grey. Yes, a grey tinge had tended to come into it recently as though he were getting old—yet he was barely thirty. He bent and pretended to take up a weed or two from the paths. Then he looked at me with an effort and said, "Susan, I have come to talk to thee. It can't go on much longer, lass. Nay, that it can't."

I sensed what he meant but I said, "What can't, Tom?" with as much surprise as I could simulate. And I gave him one of the roguish looks I had seen girls use in *The Railway*. His head turned away as though my teasing glance caused him to suffer some gentle misery.

"You know well enough what I mean, Susan. It's no good for you, and it's making a fool of me," he said.

"You don't like to be made a fool of, do you, Tom?" I said in the same teasing tone of voice.

"No man does," he said, "and I'll not stand it any further, Susan. You and your brother are the talk of the town for your tavern-ways. When I go out among the ironmasters they smile and nod towards me in their talking as though they think I'm a little light in the head for giving houseroom to a little . . ."

His feelings had led him to say more than he had intended, I could see. But I caught his unspoken word and said it for him out of cruelty.

"Would you say whore, brother?" I said with a smile.

Aghast, he gave a quick start. “I never hoped to hear that word come from your lips,” he said, looking very like my father as he spoke.

“Yet you would have said it, had your tongue not thought the better of its errand,” I said smoothly.

“There are many words a man may say, which a woman should not,” he said.

“Yet there are some words a man should never say to his sister,” I said. “Even when they are true! And, dear brother, though one day I may aspire to the condition you have hinted at should the mood take me, yet at the moment I can assure you the word is misapplied.”

He looked to the ground. “I did not say it,” he said. “It is what others think, not I. I know you better than they do, Susan. I know that you are merely a rebel like your brother, with good at your heart. Indeed, if I had not known that, if I had not hoped you would change, I should not have put up with the discomforts and annoyances with which you have humiliated me since our mother died. I had hoped for a change to come about if I gave you time. But you haven’t altered unless it has been for the worse.”

I came closer to him and put my hand on his sleeve.

“Then what would you like me to do?” I asked.

“I would like you to go and stay with our Phyllis for a few weeks,” he said. “In her fine house and in the fresh country air you would begin to find a new life for yourself, a good way of looking at things. Do that, Susan, and I declare to you that I shall be a happier man. And you shall not lose by it, I promise you.”

“But Phyllis might not want me,” I said, tantalising him, for I had not the slightest intention of going away.

“Phyllis has written to say she would take great pleasure in having you,” he said. “Her letter came this morning before you were up.”

I looked him in the eyes. This was the chance I had been waiting for. “Why did she not send her invitation to me direct?” I said. “Am I a child that she should deal with me through others?”

He screwed up his mouth impatiently. “She writes to me, sister, because I wrote to her last week, asking if she would have you,” he said in a sharp voice which he could not control.

I shrugged my shoulders. “There,” I said. “You and she deal with my body over my head! But you can’t deal with my mind, my will, my spirit, dear brother! That is my own and neither you nor she shall break it now that I have found it again! Remember that!”

He drew lines and half-circles with the toe of his boot in the gravel of the path.

“No one wishes to treat you like a child or to control you,” he said. “Though in law no doubt I could.”

“You do not let me forget it,” I said. “But rest assured I shall not go to Phyllis. I shall never go to Phyllis. As far as I am concerned Phyllis belongs to a past which I have no desire to relive.”

He said evenly, “Is that your final decision?”

I bowed my head with an expression as grave as his, I hoped.

“Very well then,” he said. “Now I must put my point of view to you fully.”

“Pray do so, dear brother,” I said, my arms akimbo.

He ignored my sarcasm and went on. “Unless you begin to act as befits you and as befits my household, I shall control you with more strictness. I shall see Foster and have your allowance stopped and I shall treat you for what you truly are, my ward. I shall see to it that your movements are restricted, moreover, by law. There are Houses of Reform, you know Susan!” He looked at me in triumph as he spoke but I did not flinch before his eye. Indeed I grinned back at him, cheeky as an urchin, though in truth there was a slight tremor in my heart as I heard his words.

“That would be no change from this house,” I said.

But I had underestimated my brother. He was now inflexible, having brought himself with difficulty to the point. All his gentleness had gone and I saw how truly they spoke who called him a just master but a vindictive one to all who transgressed.

He said, “Your stupidity is not your fault alone. I lay it largely at the door of your brother, Elijah. So let me say that if he continues to debauch his sister as he is doing I shall have him taken up.”

“There is no charge on which you can touch him,” I said, though unsure in my heart, having little knowledge of the law.

Tom smiled, this time indeed triumphantly. “Is there not, my dear? Consider his way of life for a moment . . . Is there not one moment, on any evening of his life, when an astute constable could not lay a hand on him—for drunkenness, brawling, committing a nuisance, cock-fighting, poaching, offensive language? Just consider a moment, will you?”

“You would make that one moment the excuse for your revenge?” I said.

“To protect your future, yes,” said Tom, turning away from me and kicking a pebble along the path.

“That makes you a worse blackguard than you call him,” I said righteously.

He turned round. “I am not interested in what it makes me seem,” he said. “I am only interested in your life while it is in my care. Whatever I think my father would have done, that I shall not fear to do!”

I was so angry both at his words and at the smile on his face that I took up a flint from the path and went towards him. He stood firm without looking at my half-raised hand.

“You beast!” I said and threw the stone.

It grazed the side of his face near the eye, but he did not move. He spoke to me as gravely as before as a trickle of blood ran down his cheek.

“I shall not be in tonight, Susan,” he said evenly. “You need not wait up for me tonight any more than you ever do . . . But I beg you to think on what I have said.”

I was trembling with the realisation of what I had done and of what Tom might therefore do to Elijah. I was confused by the many voices of Spring.

“Do you know what day it is?” I asked him.

“Indeed I do,” he said. “It is May 15th.”

“Yes, Tom,” I said. “It is May 15th with a vengeance, and tonight is Walsall Fair. So what chance shall I have, think you, to sit in here and brood on your foolish threats? What chance is there of my sitting up for you even if you wished it? Nay, nay, Tom, call out your constables, lock Elijah up and send me to a Reform House! And be damned to you and all your ironmasters!”

Then I ran before him into the house sobbing, and flung myself on the bed to cry and cry until my great flood of anger had exhausted itself.

X

At *The Railway*, to which I hurried as soon as I was able to get myself ready, Elijah was sitting at the cribbage board with Annie. The little tavern was almost empty. Annie looked up at me from the table.

"First customer tonight, almost," she said. "They've all gone to the Fair but doubtless they'll be back ere closing time—if we have a closing time this night!"

"Sit down, lass, and have a glass of Madeira," said Elijah. "We shan't be long playing this hand out."

I would not sit down for as yet I was too excited.

"Take me to the Fair, 'Lijah," I said. "I do want to go to Walsall Fair."

He scratched his head. "I'm not goin' out tonight, sister," he said. "Yon Fair'll be thronged with a great mass of Brummagem men. There'll be pocket-picking and razor-fighting and God knows what before this night is out!"

I said, "That doesn't frighten me, does it you, our 'Lijah?"

Annie smiled up at me and put her cards down as though she knew the game had ended. "That's it," she said. "Make him take thee, Sue! I would if I was younger!"

Elijah said, "You know as well as I do, Annie, I've got no money till pay day and that's three days hence. Come on, get on wi' this game."

Annie rose and went to the drawer behind the counter. She came back and flung two gold sovereigns on to the table. "It's pay day now if thee want'st it to be," she said. "Here, you take it, Sue, if he won't and be off with you both to the Fair!"

Elijah swore and blustered but Annie put the cribbage board away and went into the cellar to spile another barrel. And so we went to Walsall Fair as I had told Tom we should. Though be it said that Elijah took me there with the worst grace in the world, until he too got caught up in the gay noise, the hurly-burly shouting and vulgarity of the occasion. So among the steam-organs and naphtha flares, the whirling merry-go-rounds with their grinning horses and the Aunt Sally Shies, I blotted from my mind Tom's threatening

words and behaved like any young girl who knows her brother has a couple of sovereigns in his pocket and intends to spend them both before the short night is gone!

I remember that Fair almost more vividly than I recall anything else of this time, for it was the last Fair I ever went to and it was the most fateful I had ever known.

How tempting it is to let the memory dwell on the laughter and garishly-painted cloth, the side-shows and the howling music of steam-organs and melodeons! Yet my time passes so quickly, the shadows grow before my feet with each second and I must tell myself the end of this tale before it is too late . . . And that end came very easily, without prerecognition, as death must surely come, even after long suffering.

We were attracted by a booth that stood higher than most of the others, the front canvas of which was crudely-painted with pictures of gladiators in combat and bare-fisted men sparring up to each other while their seconds in silk hats waved handkerchiefs in the background. These pictures attracted Elijah especially though he found fault with many of them because the stance of this man was incorrect and the guard of the other inadequate.

"I have never seen a prize-fight," I said. "I have often wondered what they might be like."

He glanced at me. "These are poor things," he said. "You never see much at these places. The men are so grossly outmatched from the start."

Just then a man came out on to the high platform before the booth, carrying a naphtha flare and bawling through a megaphone to the assembled crowds.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "You have the opportunity tonight of witnessing some of the greatest box-fighters of our time. You have heard of Tom Crib! You have heard of Bendigo! You have heard of Pedlar Palmer! You have heard of the great Mendoza! And no doubt you may have heard of the Tipton Slasher, old Tom Perry!"

There was a shimmering guffaw as he mentioned the Slasher for there was hardly a man in that crowd who had not seen the old lion at his trade at some time or another, fighting knock-kneed in his barrel. The showman went on, waving the crowd to silence.

"Well ladies and gentlemen, tonight I have to introduce to you men whose names will go down on the roll of fame just like those I have mentioned to you . . . Ladies and gentlemen, pray permit me to introduce to

you my gladiators, who are prepared to meet all comers over three rounds, the prize money being a sovereign for a knock-out, half-a-sovereign for a win on points and five shillings to any man who can stay on his feet against my men for three rounds!"

As he spoke a small wiry pugilist stepped through the front flap of the booth and stood beside him, his hair cropped almost to the scalp, a dirty cloth thrown across his twitching shoulders.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have here Tony Gallo, three times lightweight champion of La Belle France! Tony will take on any man in the audience at his own weight or a little heavier, either with the mufflers or without!"

As he spoke he dangled a bunch of gloves on their strings before him. There was silence; then from among a group of dark-haired youths near the platform, a little hook-nose man in a check cap held up his hand. "I'll take him, bach," he said. "I've fought worse in Swansea!"

The crowd applauded and some one began to shout out, "Good for you, Welshie! Give him a bit of Cardiff lickerish, my lad!" And the dark-haired youths began to sing an arrogant Welsh song that rose in chorus like a battle-chant. And so they disappeared into the tent.

Elijah grinned down at me. "Those gloves are lightweight. You might as well fight with bare fists! They'll give the challenger the heavy mufflers. He won't be able to do much damage then. But the Frenchie will cut him up with the thin gloves! They're all tricksters at these places. I'd take on any of 'em on a pit-bank but I don't fancy this style of scrapping!"

But I was not listening to him. The next fighter had come out on to the platform and stood gazing above the crowd, coldly, insolently, a killer at momentary rest, waiting for his victim to present himself!

"Good God, 'Lijah!" I said. "Look who it is!"

He looked and gasped for there was no mistaking those great shoulders, that barrel of a chest, those long arms. Yet now the hair that had been shaggy before was cropped and he had grown a stiff moustache that hid his upper lip entirely. It was Dick Belcher, but such a Dick as we had never known before. He was three or four years older now, no longer flabby and shambling but a hard-bodied fighter, from whose stance and attitude had vanished all traces of fear or humility.

Elijah was gazing up at him with dilated eyes, his mouth clenched hard, the breath coming quickly through his nose.

The showman was shouting, “Yes ladies and gentlemen, I repeat, this is a coming world champion if I’ve ever seen one! Not a fight lost in fifty bouts all over the country, from Newcastle Town Moor to Nottingham Goose Fair; from the National Sporting Club to Merthyr—and back again! Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you the top of our bill tonight, the Bristol Kid! Any takers, ladies and gentlemen? Any takers at all? Come on gents, step up, the law won’t let him kill you! Come on, I’m willing to double the prize money for this great event. . . . Any takers, gents? Any takers?”

The crowd hung back, quivering, and I could feel Elijah’s arm tensed in mine. Then suddenly Dick’s eyes fell a little and met those of my brother and something like a wave of pain, a momentary spasm, passed across those large cheeks, over the blue eyes, and he looked away again over the heads of the crowd into the darkness of the pitbanks that fringed the fairground.

Elijah said, “By God, I owe him a thrashing!” And he dragged his arm from mine and pushed towards the platform.

“Come back, ’Lijah,” I said. But many hands held me away from the challenger and now the excited crowd began to cheer and shout and there was a rush for the entrance of the booth for no one wished to miss this fight. I felt myself carried along with them, but before I got to the pay-box I saw Elijah grasping the gloves that the smiling showman held down to him and I saw the hard bitter look that came into Dick Belcher’s face. His thick, punched lips moved rapidly as though he was warning my brother. But Elijah’s blood was up and he would have gone on even had the booth been filled with lions!

As I was pushed forward, I felt proud of him yet at the same time horrified. In Dick Belcher lay all the ghosts of our past, all the fears, the forebodings. He had come from nowhere tonight to claim some obscure revenge it seemed to me; and how right I was.

Then the bell inside the booth began to ring for the fighters to assemble . . . The bell, ringing, ringing, and the people filing in, just as the bell sounds in my ears now, vibrant metal summoning the soul, calling us from the green lawns of the twilight, as the last bell will ring that shall one day bring us a little nearer, a small step nearer to God . . .

Our simple lives are ruled by bells, be they the bells of the gay wedding-day, the bell that summons innocents to school, or yet the strident brass-tongued bells that warn our ships by night that treacherous rocks await to break their flimsy sides and spill their cargoes on the restless seas.

Yes it was such a bell as that last which sounded in my ears that night at Walsall Fair; but I was too foolish then to know its voice for what it truly was. Its fateful message was hidden from me as I hustled along with the others into the orange light of the steaming booth.

ELIJAH FISHER

born 1863

I

I KNEW his style of fighting and cross-buttocksed him as he came on. He fell before me, shaking the boards, and I saw his big eyes looking up at me like a cow's. I said, "You treacherous bastard!" and stood clear for him to rise. Then, when he had raised his hands clear of the canvas, but just before he straightened fully, I hooked him at the jaw level, but just then he slipped and my fist struck him below the eye, on the cheekbone, laying it open for two inches. He toppled back on to the boards and sat for a moment, dazed.

The crowd was shouting so much that I could hardly think. I turned to them and shouted for them to be still and let me finish my work on this man; but my voice was not heard in that great commotion. I saw Susan sitting below me near the ringside and she was shouting with excitement like the others. It was in my mind to call her a bitch, for I was confused by it all, and to tell her to go home and behave herself as a young woman should. This was a private battle between Belcher and myself.

But then I felt the boards shake behind me and I turned towards him again. He was on his feet, wiping his mufflers down his long black tights, and the blood covered the lower half of his face so that I hardly knew him again. I felt glad that I had done this to him. His left eye was almost closed with the wound I had given him and his backers in the corner were yelling to him to give it up before he was spoiled for the night. "Give the fellow his money and let him go!" shouted a white-jerseyed second. But Belcher shook his head and moved at me.

I came on guard again and sneered at him. But he didn't close right away. Within a yard of me he muttered, "I s'll fight fair, 'Lijah, whatever thee dost."

I sneered at him again and the crowd saw it and screamed with delight. I wanted to call them bastards as well for they were only there to see blood for their money. They wanted me to chop the champion up before them, to hurt him and cripple him for their pleasure. I wanted to do that to him; I meant to do it; but not for them. I wanted it for myself and a bit for Susan who sat yelling like the rest of the mongrel dogs.

I stuck out my left to feint at him, meaning to clip him again with my right as he swayed to miss my lead. But he never swayed. Instead he blocked my left and counter-punched as I came on in with a long left of his own. He caught me on the jaw-point for I did not expect this, and I staggered back on my heels. I heard the crowd shouting now just as loudly for my blood, so I spat some of it into their clustered faces to be going on with.

Then I had to keep an eye on Belcher, for I could see that he was a better fighter now than he had ever been in the days of our friendship.

I let myself sway to the ropes but instead of coming back straight at him as he expected I slipped off to my right. He was already lunging to meet me, but I wasn't there! His forward rush caused him to strike against my left leg, which I couldn't get out of the way fast enough, and he was taken off his balance for the moment. I whipped round and back-handed him at the nape of the neck as he fell forward and then he was out of the ring altogether, the crowd scattering not to be hurt as his big body fell among them.

Some shouted 'Foul!' but others laughed and called, 'Good owd 'Lijah!', for I was well-known beyond Walsall at that day.

Suddenly the white-jerseyed second jumped into the ring and made to strike me but I turned on him and he backed away, for I still wore my heavy boots and he could see that I would have used them on his face if he had meddled me.

Somebody began to count Belcher out, but then he was scrambling back into the ring at eight and as he wiped his gloves again the bell rang and we were waved to our corners. He sat on a stool while they put stuff on his eye and smoothed the torn muscles of his leg, which he had hurt in falling from the ring.

I had no second. I ignored the bucket they upended for me to sit on and stood with my hands on the ropes, jigging up and down to keep my legs working. Then the bell went again and I turned to face him.

He was moving stiffly now but his face was smiling. So he could not be suffering much pain, I thought. Well, I'll stop that gallop! I'll give you something to grin about! And I went out to meet him, crouching, my two fists held square, not trusting my left lead on him now. He came on me with a rush and as I straightened up to him I felt my forehead strike against his brow, as I had intended. I only hoped it had split his other cheekbone, then the fight would be over. But it hadn't. His face was as whole as it had been

before, though there was an angry mark across it where my head had butted him. Then he clinched with me and we stood locked for a while as the crowd yelled to us to break it up and give them a fair fight for their money. Belcher's voice in my ear said, "The swine! They want dead men, not boxers! I've heard it all before!" He did not seem to bear me any resentment but rather seemed to be siding with me against the crowd.

I intended to bring my knee up while we clinched and the folk not aware of what I did, but he forestalled me by placing his own leg in such a position that I could not get mine up. So I jabbed him hard in the soft part of the body between hip and ribs and had the satisfaction of hearing the breath come out of his body. Then before I had enjoyed the triumph of that blow to the full, his great fist swung to catch me below the breast bone and I was on my knees, winded and groaning in spite of myself. I think that I should have stayed there but for my wish to best him. I pulled myself up by the ropes, taking what time I could, for I could hear that the timekeeper had counted only to seven—though it seemed like a hundred years to me! Then Belcher was at me again almost before I could loose the ropes. "This'll be the end of the fight, 'Lijah," he said. "I'll not drag it out, lad!"

And he punched me hard to the side of the face and I stumbled and fell back among the slack ropes, hitting my head on the boards. I heard the timekeeper counting again and saw that Susan was near to me, for I had fallen just where she was sitting. She spoke in my ear, "Get up, brother! Get up and smite him down!" Her voice was so vicious that half-stunned as I was I moved my shocked lips to send her home and be damned, when the bell went and I was saved for another round. I truly think that I should have been counted out but that by now the showman was anxious to give the crowd a treat, for he felt that his man would stand no further chance of injury.

Some men from Darlaston clambered into the ring and carried me to my bucket. "Fair play!" they shouted. "Gi' the lad a second, dammit!" And they began to fan me with their dirty coats and shirts. I tried to wave them away but they would not go. They were doing me no good; they were taking the breath from my lungs with their flapping when they should have rubbed my stomach where he had hurt me so badly. Then the bell went and they took the bucket from under me and somehow I staggered to the middle of the ring.

I shook my head and wriggled my shoulders to bring back my movement and to clear my head. I was in my shirt with the front all open and I saw that my own body was dabbled with blood, though whether his or mine I did not

know or care. There was even blood on the sharp buckle of the belt that kept my trousers up and I think that he must have run his face on it when we were clinching like two stags earlier on.

Then as the mists cleared from my eyes, I saw that Belcher could hardly walk now for his stiff leg and I saw from his grimaces that it must be hurting him more than my wind was hurting me. I had enough sense to see that I should make him move about as much as I could, to tire and hurt him, and that I must hold off coming in to close quarters till he was done. Then I should smash him down with a right hand to the damaged eye or to the jawbone again, for that, as I knew from boyhood tumbles, was his weak spot.

Now the crowd was silent as we advanced towards each other, for they sensed the kill and did not want to miss it by shouting! I moved round him to the left so as to keep well away from his hard right hand and so as to avoid clinching with him, for I knew now that he was my master at the clinch.

He turned wherever I went and his movements were painful ones I could see. I grinned at him and said, “That hurts yer, don’t it, Belcher?” But he did not answer me. Then his second shouted out, “If you don’t fight, Fisher, you get no money of ours!” And I half-turned to tell him what he might do with his money.

That was a bad mistake, to take my eyes off Belcher, and I should have known better, for he was on me again, despite his injured leg and had me in his own corner, hard against the post. Each time he punched me my head struck the unprotected wooden stake till I was dazed with the pain of it and felt the blood coming down through my hair on to my neck.

Then at last, when I thought my senses would surely leave me, he overreached himself and his leg muscle gave way. He groaned and drew back, his face contorted. I slid from the corner, half-blind, and swung a wide right at his head. He saw it for it was so slow; but his leg would not let him avoid it and his tired hands were hanging by his side. I caught him fair and square on the throat, knocking the breath from him and leaving him gulping and gasping with the pain. Once again men shouted that I had fouled him but if I had it was not with intention this time and I did not mind one way or another. So I struck him again and again, as he gaped and rolled about the ring, clutching out for the sagging ropes to keep himself on his feet. I punched with all the force I had in me but I was too weak to knock him

down by now, though I hurt him again and again, until his eyes were piteous and he seemed to be asking me to finish him off or stop fighting.

Yet try as I might I could not put the closure to the bout. My own blood was blinding me now and my chest was sobbing with breathlessness. I felt that unless something happened, I might well fall from exhaustion before he did. And then something did happen—he lurched and fell on to me and we both went down, he on top of me, so that I could not rise.

And there we lay, our blood mingling, our breath mingling, our courage mingling. They could not begin to count until one of us had risen and I could not rise now, I knew that. Belcher looked down at me out of his good eye and I swear that this one eye had the power to smile, though his face was set and haggard. And he muttered thickly, "They shall not count thee out, 'Lijah! We'll lie together!"

And lie we did, until at last he found the strength to roll from me and lie by my side on the canvas; and then we rose together like two exhausted lions, neither of whom has gained the day. And so they rang the bell and declared a draw and the crowd in the tent went wild and hats were passed from man to man so that we might both be given money for the blood we had spilt.

As we rose, Belcher took my hand and gripped it. "I am still thy friend, 'Lijah," he said. "Wussn't call me Dick again?" And I called him Dick and slapped his shoulder, for now my passion was all spent and I knew that my hatred for him had gone. And while Susan helped me to tidy myself, the showman came and put a sovereign in my shaking hand; then a black-faced miner put my cap at my feet, brimful with coins, both silver and copper, but mostly silver. And I said to Susan, "Lass, we should come to Fairs more often, then thee should'st ride in a carriage and pair!"

The tent was empty now and we made our way out. At the door Dick was waiting, dressed more splendidly than I had ever seen him before, even with a flower in his button-hole. He said, "Can I come with thee?" Susan looked at him, half-angry, half in admiration, for he was a fine figure and he had fought like a hero that night.

I said, "What about thee trade here?"

He laughed and said, "After tonight I've had enough of fighting for a while. I've told the Master I'm leaving. He's given me a week's wages and says it's a good job, if I canna fight better than what I did tonight. So that's all square. Can I come, 'Lijah?"

I said, “Shall he, Susan? Thee decide.” And she nodded, with pleasure it seemed, and walked between us, holding both our arms and proud to be seen with two such bloodied warriors, I think.

Indeed, the fame of the fight had gone round and wherever we went, crowds parted to let us pass, as though we were the nobility; and men and women we did not know slapped us on the back as we hobbled along, the three of us cripples, offering us drinks or pork sandwiches or what we would.

“The night is still young!” said Susan. “Is there no place where we might get refreshments? Watching you men has made me thirsty!”

Dick led us to the booth where ale and such-like was sold and we sat on boxes at a long tarpaulin-covered trestle-table.

And so we stayed there till the lights of the Fair went out and the people went away singing, Susan between us, tarting at every man she saw with her big dark eyes, daring them to speak to her while she had us to guard her; and the two of us, stiff and aching in every limb, the blood caked on our cuts, exhausted to the very bone . . . We drank ale for the fight had given us raging thirsts; but this night Susan drank gin, one glass after another, and I did not stop her. I suppose she had suffered in her own hidden way while we had been fighting. And at last she swayed on the box where she was sitting and put her hand to her head and went very white. Then she sank forward on to the trestle-table.

“Yon lass’s drunk,” said Dick.

I began to swear then. I had never wanted Susan to touch liquor when she was with me. I did not want the charge laid at my doorstep that I had led her astray. Indeed I had never wanted her to come to *The Railway*, but could hardly turn her out once she had come, for fear of bringing the girl greater unhappiness than she had already. But now she was drunk and there was nothing we could do about that.

Dick and I supported her out of the tent and took her to a quiet spot at the edge of the field. She began to moan and then was sick. Then she started to cry for father and mother and I turned away from her, for anyone, man or woman, must set their faces against calling on the dead, whatever they are suffering. It is only the living that matter; only they can help you or harm you, and it sickened me to hear my sister betraying our courage in that way.

At last I turned back to her and said, “Be still Susan Fisher or I shall leave thee here, I swear to God.”

And at last she was quiet again and even tried to smile.

"Thank God I have you, 'Lijah," she said and leaned on my arm. So we got her to the main road, but by now all the horse-buses had gone and even had they been still running I'd not have dared to take her inside one, where the state she was in might have been observed and spread about the town. So we walked the two miles back to *The Railway*. It was a fine night and at any other time I would have enjoyed a moonlit ramble such as this but tonight I was tired to the very heart and every step seemed a mile.

Yet we got back and Annie was waiting up. She gave us both a good cursing for letting the girl get into that state. "I dunna give a tinker's damn about you and your friend here," she indicated Dick, and I was glad she had not recognised him, for if she didn't no one else would. She had seen him often enough when he was a lad. "But I won't have the lass got into bad ways, that I won't!" she said.

"What shall I do?" I said. "She can't go home like this."

"Do!" she said, "What is there to do but keep her here tonight? Your friend can share your room and she can share mine. We'll decide what we can do next in the morning. Blast you all, you Fishers!" Then she took the weeping Susan off to the back of the house to give her a strong cup of tea while Dick came up to my room under the roof and we sat and talked till the morning showed its first lights over the blast furnace chimneys at Wednesbury. I remember my last words to him before I began to prepare for the day's work, "Stay as long as you want, Dick. There'll always be a job for you where I'm working. They want good men."

He said, "Am I a good man, 'Lijah? I don't know, my friend, nay, I truly don't know; but God help me, I try to be."

II

WHEN I got back that night Annie was waiting to tell me that Tom had turned Susan out. He had put the worst construction on her staying out all night, after the words she had spoken to him during their quarrel in the garden the evening before, so Susan had upped and packed her traps and had wished him goodbye for ever.

I said, "The damned young fool! What's she messing at! She was in the wrong. She should have begged his pardon. He keeps her, after all."

Annie shook her head, "Come now, lad," she said. "She's your sister, made of the same flesh and blood. Would you have begged his pardon even if he was in the right?"

I said, "Well anyway she has as much right to a home there as anyone. He can't turn her out like that. Where is she, I'll talk to her!" For what with tiredness and one thing and another I was in a rising temper.

But Annie said, "Calm down, 'Lijah. It's no good taking on like that. She's old enough to know her own mind now and I'm not having you laying into the lass while she's upset. It's her own life and if she feels she canna live any longer in the same house wi' him, it's nowt to do wi' you nor anybody else."

"But I thought you said he turned her out," I said. "Now you say she left. Which is it to be?"

Annie smiled tolerantly. "You know what young girls are," she said. "I reckon she give him a bit of old buck and he told her what he thought of her."

"Nothing more than that?" I said, for I was annoyed at being troubled in this manner by other people's affairs. I have always fought for the right to live my own life, just as I wanted it and be damned to the world. And I wanted everybody else to live their lives too and not trouble me, no not even my sister. "I'll up and see him," I said, "if she won't. Mayhap Tom Fisher is in need of a few straight words to let the fresh air into the attics of his heart!"

But Annie shook her head and said, "If you go there you'll run your silly neck into the noose. It's just the chance Tom Fisher is waiting for. He'll have

you locked up for trespassing; he's said as much to her. He made no bones about it, she said. He told her that he was finished with both of you and that if it was the last thing he did, he'd make you pay for breaking up the family. He's out to ruin you, 'Lijah, and there's no mistake about it. You go up there now and you'll be asking for all you get and then it's no use running back here for sympathy."

I said a word or two to her for that last remark but she took it all in good part, as a woman should when she's sworn at. But yet I had to agree there was a lot in what she had said. Our Tom had right on his side and I'll never deny a man that; but he never seemed to understand the human side of a question. He thought I had dragged Susan away from him into the gutter, which was one of his favourite phrases; whereas the truth is that she was suffering like a caged bird in that old house, all alone through the daytime and often into the night. I hadn't anything to offer and never set out to promise anything; but I had at least warm blood in my veins and while I had a roof over my head, she could share it.

I don't say I loved her dearly or anything like that; I was never much of a one for women, anyway, sisters or not. I always reckoned that God made them to humble men, and so gave them the sort of bodies that would do this. And I wasn't going to be humbled by any woman, however pretty, or by any man either! But she was my sister, she shared my pride, and if she wasn't able to protect it herself, then I must do it for her.

"What's the worst he could do to me, Annie?" I said. "If I went back and thrashed the lights out of him? Come, out with it!"

She snorted in disgust for she hated to hear me talk like that; but I couldn't help my nature in those days—and am little better now, God knows, though being an ill man I don't fight so much.

At last she said, "Your Tom has many friends among the lawyers and magistrates; he could get you five years in Stafford Gaol for Assault and Battery, especially if he could prove other charges, like Robbery with Violence—which no doubt he could!"

Five years is a long time, I thought then—though I know only too well how short a time it is now.

"It isn't worth five years of a man's life," I said. "I'd be old when I came out!"

"Aye," said Annie with a wry smile, "you'd be way past thirty! What's more you'd be locked up, 'Lijah, not free to come and go as you do now. No

roaming for you, no cocks, no dogs, no fighting, no ale!"

I called her a gloomy bitch and slapped her on the backside, how she liked it. Then she said I'd better go and see what Susan planned to do.

I walked into the private room where I always had my tea. I had taken off my working boots as I always did and was in my stocking feet. Nobody could have heard me coming, though that was not in my mind then for I've never spied on a man in my life. But I opened the door and went in and there was Susan, her head on Dick Belcher's breast and him loving her and saying soft things to console her and seeming to make out that it was all worse than it really was!

I felt I couldn't stand it. I turned and went out and they didn't even see me till I was closing the door behind me. They were so tangled up in their love-making and tears.

And that is how Susan came to live at *The Railway* and no power of mine could shift her. I was damned if I was going to fight Belcher again over her, or any man.

I went to another pub that night, *The Tavern* near Falling's Heath, for my drink, though Annie played hell about it; but I couldn't bear to watch my own sister serving behind the bar at *The Railway*, which she was now going to do, and Belcher leaning over the counter at her with his big cow's eyes, a man undone if ever there was one.

While I was in *The Tavern* a puddler came in from Bilston.

He came over to me at the bar and said, "It's all over Bilston, Fisher."

I said, "What? Horse manure?"

He said, "No, that fight o' your'n wi' the Bristol Boy. An' that quarrel about your sister and your Tom."

I said, "Why the hell can't grown men mind their own business? What's it to do wi' them?"

The puddler said, "Well your family was always a bit stuck up like, and folk like to hear on a family comin' down i' the world like that! It makes amusement for some on us!"

I pulled back my fist to punch his teeth out for those words but just before I let it go I saw that he was right. More than that, he taught me a lesson, that if I kept myself right and above suspicion, it didn't matter a damn what the men of Bilston or anywhere else said. If the family liked to

rot then to hell with it, as long as Elijah Fisher watched his step and didn't rot along with it!

But the man didn't know what went on in my mind and he shrank before me in fright and the big Irish barman rushed round in his apron and said, "Plaze, sor, I beg of yez, don't fight in here, sor; take him outside and fight him in the yard if ye must. But not in here, plaze!"

I turned on the big barman, just for a joke, and he backed away from me suddenly and knocked over a case of wine bottles. I laughed openly then and bought both of them a pint of ale for they had given me the warm company of their fear and hate. That was all I wanted from men then; that was warmth enough for me. My own spirit burned brightly enough without anyone's love.

III

I was never much of a one for other men's poetry, for it always seemed to me that a man should make his own poetry if he needed such a thing, poetry being such a personal matter like a man's clasp-knife or the vest he wears. But there was one poem I had often heard our Susan say as we sat under the wall in the garden and which now came back to me without any effort of the mind. It was by some parson, I remember she said, and I often used to wonder how a clergyman came to think of such things:

"Airly Beacon, Airly Beacon;
Oh the pleasant sight to see
Shires and towns from Airly Beacon
While my love climbed up to me!

"Airly Beacon, Airly Beacon;
Oh the happy hours we lay
Deep in fern on Airly Beacon,
Courting through the summer's day!

"Airly Beacon, Airly Beacon;
Oh the weary haunt for me
All alone on Airly Beacon,
With his baby on my knee."

This poet's name was Kingsley and he had only recently died, Susan said, after being our Queen's Chaplain or something of that sort. I suppose his poem was about someone he knew; I couldn't imagine it happening to him. But it seemed real enough and came to my mind often during these sunlit months and especially one Sunday morning when I had set off to walk the commons and fields near Great Barr and to call at *The Parson and Clerk* for a pint of ale before making my way home again for dinner.

It was a pleasant morning and I started up an old hare before I had been more than an hour along the hedgerows. I didn't get her but she gave me as much sport as I needed. The beer at the tavern was in fine fettle and that further raised my spirits. Indeed as I climbed up the slope to Barr Beacon, towards the clump of tall trees that set it out as a landmark for many miles around, my mood was one of good-humour and tolerance in spite of recent

events and I went up the hill whistling and wishing I had a good dog to run beside me and share the morning.

From the top I was able to look round at a wide sweep of the countryside as it lay in the sunshine. For once the Black Country seemed to belie its name; even the yellow smoke merged with the new colours of the year and a blue haze that rose from the ground, the relic of a heavy night dew that was being sucked up by the new day's warmth, hid many of the scars that the land had suffered, even shielded the furnaces and pitgear from the eye.

Below me lay small clusters of houses here and there, cottages and farmhouses, for the ironworks had not yet claimed this part of the country and some form of agriculture was still carried on, even so close to Walsall. Away across a field or two there was a village and from the elmtrees that lay beyond the houses stuck up a small church tower. I saw the birds start up and fly away from the trees as the morning bells began to sound for Service, and that old Chaplain's poem came into my mind then, just at the moment when something else happened that changed my mood of tolerance to one of anger.

From behind a hedge and picking their way between the clumps of gorse that were scattered about the lower reaches of the hill, came a couple hand in hand, stopping now and then to look back down the slope towards the church and the clustered houses.

The man wore a grey greatcoat and carried his shoulders high; the girl wore a white dress, the full skirts of which were caught by the breeze and blew out to the side of her as she climbed. My eyes are attuned to distances in the open air and one glance told me who these people were—my sister and Dick Belcher.

For an instant I felt the impulse to turn back below the brow of the hill and go down the way I had come but just as suddenly I felt that if I did this, I should be running away from them, as though I and not they had committed some fault. So I stood there trying to make up my mind as to what I must do, my body hidden by the bush behind which I had been standing.

At last when they were half-way up the slope Belcher put his arm firmly round her waist and seemed to drag her back a little so that she found it hard to climb higher. Then she seemed to laugh at him and to strike out playfully at his face; but he caught her hand and drew her head up to his and kissed her.

I knew that this was what young couples did and I had never given it much thought; it had always seemed a natural thing to happen though I had never wanted to do it. But now when I saw this happening to my sister the blood began to thump in my head and I came near to running down the hill upon them.

Then they stopped altogether and I heard their laughter coming up through the clear blue air and mingling with the constant repetition of the church bells from the village. I put my hands over my eyes, being unable to bear the sight any longer, and when I dared to look again, I had a great shock for I thought they had disappeared altogether. But they hadn't; I could see the hem of my sister's dress, that white dress, peeping out from behind the thick gorse a hundred yards away from me. She was lying down and Belcher was there with her.

The sun came out more strongly now and my pulses raced. I listened for the sound of their laughter but now it had stopped and they were silent. For a moment a great rage overtook me and I thought of all the jeers and the rumours that this behaviour could create in such a prying place as Darlaston. I suddenly felt as though I was being wronged, perhaps as a husband feels when his wife betrays him with a friend and in his sight too. That made it worse, that I could see them betraying me.

Then I could contain myself no longer but began to run down the slope towards them. I think the thick matted grass must have deadened my footfalls, and I am naturally light on my feet, for I did not seem to disturb them even when I stopped at the other side of the bushes where they lay.

Yet even as I stood there, my anger risen to its height, my fists clenched to strike Belcher down, to strike my sister herself for her wantonness, I heard her voice, soft and gentle, almost yearning. I had never heard her speak like that before yet I did not hear her say any words that I knew. She was not speaking in words but in such sounds as the animals might make in the new warmth of the sun, the female animals, the gentle treacherous female ones.

My fists unclenched. How could I strike a man who was hardly responsible for what he did? A man who was bewitched by the differences of a woman's body, the scent of a woman's hair, the sounds that came from a woman's throat! I might as well strike down the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the blossom from the apple-tree.

I stood for a few moments longer until I heard Belcher's voice, thick and beseeching and wordless too; then I ran on lightly down the hill so that they

should not hear me and came breathless to the road below, all thoughts of the morning sunshine gone from my heart.

An hour later at *The George* in Walsall I fought in the coach-yard with a gamekeeper from Pelsall who swore he had chased me the night before with a partridge in my hand. He was a big man and took some of the bad blood out of me against the cobblestones before his companions dragged him off me. And I was glad enough for that fight for it eased my mind a little from the thing I had seen on the hill; but I was also glad enough when it ended for the gamekeeper would have punched me until I had admitted stealing his birds and that I would never have done in my senses, had he killed me!

IV

So that's how it was. All through the summer they both lived at *The Railway* and Annie seemed to encourage them. She said it was a shame to deprive a young girl like Susan of her bit of comfort in life. I couldn't bear to see them holding hands when they thought no one was looking. I began to feel a bit of a laughing-stock myself and even came to see our Tom's point of view up to a degree. I began to feel that I couldn't stand it much longer and told Annie so. She said there was always a home for me at *The Railway* but I had to make up my own mind whether I stayed there. I was never one to argue the toss about anything like that. I said I would find a fresh place. She said she was sorry if I felt like that but I was old enough to know my own mind. She thought I was bluffing her I think; but I wasn't.

I went in to tell Susan and Belcher what I had decided. She was prinking her hair up and wore a new blue bodice with her fawn-coloured skirt. Her lips were reddened and she had put black on her brows. I was about to tell her that she looked more like a tart than my sister but then I pulled myself together and held my words in. I told her I was leaving and asked her what she was going to do.

She said that she was going to stay right where she was. She had a nice little job as barmaid, she said, and one of these days, who knows, she might even have a tavern of her own. This gave me great distress for I did not want to see her as a tavern-keeper. God knows, I have used taverns all my life and know what fine folk keep them; but I couldn't see my sister as a tavern-keeper, listening to any drunkard's foul jests, mopping up the dregs of ale from other men's tables, demeaning herself to every lout who had a shilling in his pocket. It hurt my pride; though I am no snobbish man. I should have felt just as bad if she'd said she was going to marry an earl. There would have been something not right about it; and that is why I was angry. I think I said more than I should have done then and Belcher jumped off the sofa and came towards me.

"You can stop that, 'Lijah," he said. "I'll not have you talking to Sue like that."

I looked at him for a moment. He seemed a softer flabbier man now than he had looked when we faced each other in the booth. He was the sort of

man who soon showed the effects of a comfortable life. But I decided I wouldn't lay a finger on him again.

"Belcher," I said, "I've half a mind to take you to the back and knock a bit of sense into you for an interfering bastard! But she's not worth the trouble. I can see that now. I'll go and you can keep her and your friendship, for I'm finished with them both!"

They just stood smiling at me as though they were quite happy about the situation. I walked to the door and never even bade them goodbye. Annie was in tears out in the passageway but I just paid her my week's rent and told her to send my box on when I gave her an address to send it to. She followed me to the door wringing her hands and hoping I'd change my mind; but I told her not to be a snivelling old bitch for she had got what she asked for and no one can grumble at that in this world!

I was so confused, I spent that night out at New Invention in a shack that an Irish labourer had vacated. It stank and the rain came in; but I felt free of that little slut of a sister and of that great blockhead of a friend. The next day I pulled myself together again and wondered whether I had put myself in a bad legal position with regard to Susan. So I went to see Lawyer Foster and told him as much of the story as I thought he should know. He heard me in private and in silence and it became increasingly easy to see that he already knew both sides of the matter. Indeed, I was in no doubt that Tom had recently been in to see him for there was a smell of cigar in the air when I entered the office and I have a quick nose for scents. It was the brand Tom smoked.

"Well and what do you want me to do?" Foster inquired guardedly.

"Nothing," I said, "except tell my brother when you next see him that I do not hold myself responsible for Susan. She decided to come to *The Railway* and she has decided to stay there when I leave. Tell him that and say that I disclaim all legal responsibility. If he wants her he must go and fetch her and I'll back him in that!"

"And that he will never do, Mr. Fisher," said Foster, rubbing his long hands.

"Then she may rot there for all I care," I said. "Good day to you!"

He did not get up and see me to the door but sat there rubbing his cheek, quite taken aback by my abruptness. He always was an old fool, though father could never see it. Had he not had the administration of my affairs I should have given him even more to rub his hands about that day!

The next day I got a job at Willenhall with a small family firm that drew out bars for the buckle-makers. It was a light job and suited me at that time. I lodged at a hostel for working men for I had had enough of taverns for the time being. They had lost me a sister and a friend. Yet I still used to come over to Wednesbury and Darlaston for my pleasure. The gamecocks and terriers in Willenhall weren't worth bothering about at that time!

And almost every time I went to Darlaston I heard from one man or the other that my brother Tom was out to catch me as soon as he could. An old match-seller from Spring Head even said he'd heard it in a pub that Tom was having me watched and that two constables were waiting to pounce on me the minute I set foot near a cockpit. Yet they didn't, and I attended a dozen mains quite openly before they did strike!

V

I was a proud man, that was my downfall. I never hid away when I heard that anyone was looking for me. On the contrary I'd usually go to meet them instead. It seemed a foolish way to live a life, to skulk away whenever a breath of rumour passed one's way. Man was not born to live like that. God gave him two fists and two feet and a head to fight with. I have spent all my life fighting and I know that I speak the truth. There are many things I do not know for I never went to school much, or to church either for that matter. I have never conversed with learned men, save those learned in the sports I am fond of—but I can tell you this and it is the truth, a man who is afraid is already half a man. Be fearless, by God, and you have life in your hand; the world may break your body but your spirit will rejoice while it breaks if you know they didn't defeat you. So I laughed when they told me that Tom was looking for me.

I said, "God damn him! Let him come! I am waiting!" and everyone shrank back from me aghast for they thought I was mad. Indeed many have thought I was mad from time to time, but I can't help that. A man must be as he is made and I am made mad, if that is what they call it.

Yet I was humbled before I was broken and that in a way I should have expected, had I truly known more of the ways of life and less of fighting-cocks.

One evening just when I was washing to go out for a boxing-match at Wednesfield a quiet knock came at the street door. The landlady called out that there was a young lass come for to see me and I said it must be a mistake; but she insisted, so I said she was to come up. I was in my trousers only, but I was decent, I said. If she could bear the sight of me, I'd try to bear the sight of her. I heard a woman's footsteps on the wooden stairs and then Susan came into the bare dirty room that I shared with two others. In spite of her full-draped coat I could see that she was changed and I was not such a fool as not to see why she was changed.

There was nobody but us in the room. The other men were working on a late shift and wouldn't be back for an hour or more. I said, "There's only one chair. Sit down. I'll put my shirt on."

Susan smiled at me and said that she wouldn't sit. She said she felt she had to keep walking about all the time as though she was restless and wanted to wear the restlessness out of herself. Then she helped me to button my shirt, though I had not asked her to, and smiled at me so gently while she did it. I was quite taken aback and now there was something quite lovely in her face that I had not seen before, although I knew what had brought her and I was beginning to hate her for it.

I lit a cigarette and she asked if she might have one as well. I had never seen my sister use tobacco before but she did it as though she was quite used to it now and not so many women can do that, despite their knowing ways.

I sat down on the bed but she still stood. We were silent for a while, for each of us tried to make the other speak first. Then at last she walked to the window overlooking the narrow street and said, "I am going to have a child."

I said, "Is it Belcher's?" and she nodded. I think I swore for she turned and said, "It was not his fault, nor mine. It was nothing we could help."

I remembered that Sunday morning on Barr Beacon. I said, "Don't be a damned fool, Susan."

Then we were silent again but at last I said, "What was Annie doing, not to have stopped you at that sort of thing?"

But Susan said, "She didn't know. Dick doesn't live at *The Railway* now. He lives at The Pleck. Annie didn't know what we did. How should she? She is my friend, not my gaoler!"

"A fine friend," I said. "It would have been better if she *had* been your gaoler! Where did this happen then?"

She caught her breath at my question and only whispered when she did at last speak. "In the old testing-house," she said. "Among the ferns where I first met Dick, when he was a lad."

I put my hands over my eyes. "Good God!" I said. "It all goes back as far as that! Shall we never escape that day!" This seemed like a blow of malicious fate to me for I could not shake off the guilt that seemed to hang about me. Then I said, "Is he going to marry you?"

"No," she said. "He has never spoken of it and I would never say it to him."

I could see that whatever else she had lost, she still had the Fisher pride, that stupid maniac pride that has ruined our family; the iron family that

would break rather than bend, damn it!

"When is the child due?" I asked. She had begun to weep at last and said, "I am six months gone."

Now I swore with a vengeance and said what a devil Belcher was for not taking her to church; he had had time enough to consider it. And then I said something which her pride would not have let her say, "Susan, if there is any justice, he shall be brought to it if I have an arm that can bring him! Cry no more, thee'st been a bad wench but it's always happening somewhere and there are others much worse'n thee! Now dry thee eyes and he shall marry thee—or I'll ha' the throttling on him!"

This made her cry worse than before but I never was much of a hand at talking to women. Then I sat down beside her for she had sunk on to the bed. "Look," I said, "I'n been a bit rough wi' thee. Forgive me, oor Sue. Just thee let me say this—whether he marries thee or not, thee needn't fear. I'll always provide for the little bairn, an' love it, an' treat it like my own."

She held my hand and drew me to her a little. "Thank you, 'Lijah," she said. "He'll need a Dadda for I'll never marry Dick Belcher, not if he was to ask me a thousand times."

"Now, lass," I said, "you're overwrought. Don't say that."

"But I do say it, our 'Lijah," she said. "I hate Dick Belcher. I do not love him. I shall never marry any man. I have seen what my sin is; I have seen the depth of my wickedness. I've betrayed you all, father, mother, Tom, you . . . I'm no good to anyone, no good to the world. My way is clear to me at last."

I looked at her in horror. "You wouldn't harm yourself, Sue?" I said.

She turned to me a face so transfigured by the light about it that I was spellbound. "No," she said, "I must not take the life that is inside me. This child may one day make good for the things I have done wrong. He is my hope of salvation, perhaps."

I told her not to talk like that but to think of the folk who still loved her, each in their separate ways—even Tom and Phyllis. But she shook my hand from her arm and stood up.

"I do not wish to hear of them anymore," she said. "I want to go out of their lives. I want no one ever to look for me. I am sick at the heart of my family, of the house and its memories, of my childhood, of everything. When I have borne this child, I may walk lightly again but it will be along

my own way, the path of my own choosing and I want no one to follow me there, or to meet me at the crossroads."

"Don't you want even me, our Sue?" I said.

She smiled bitterly. "No, not even you, brother," she said. "I am almost as sick of you as of the others. Let me go, 'Lijah, and promise you'll care for the child."

"I promise, if it is your will," I said.

"It is," she said and kissed me lightly on the cheek, coolly and without affection. Then she turned to go to the door, but I got there before her.

"What do you intend to do?" I asked. "I must know that."

"I shall go somewhere where I can be useful, whatever my mistakes of the past. If they would have me, I would even enter a religious house. Perhaps they would let me be a nursing sister, or at the worst, work for them in the kitchens. I know kitchen work well. Our Phyllis saw that I had the training! But I don't suppose they would accept the likes of me." And she smiled, ever so little, yet in that little smile, a little bitterness.

I could see that nothing would change her now. In that moment I think I loved my sister for the first time in my life.

"Does our Tom know?" I asked. And she nodded. "Lawyer Foster told him for me but he says that while he wishes to see nothing more of me, he would willingly have the child and see that he is brought up properly."

I felt a great pang in my breast but forced myself to say, "The child would stand a better chance in life with Tom as his father."

She said, "I would rather God took us both."

I said, "So be it. I have promised and I shall stay by you."

Yet I did not. I was in Stafford Gaol when the child was born and Susan had already left the Infirmary for some place in the north before I might take charge of her little son. And once more it was my foul pride that let this happen.

VI

I HAD made inquiries and one Saturday night I heard that Dick Belcher played in a Pitch and Toss school over Bescot way on Sunday mornings. The following day I put on my best suit and went out there. It is rolling country, tall green grass, and then pit mounds. You can see the hill at Wednesbury with the big black church on it and the high roofed foundry at Old Park. All round it are chimney stacks and slag-heaps. It is a wild place at night time with the furnace glow hanging over it, and almost as wild on a bleak Sunday morning with the harsh wind sweeping across it. Yet it is full of hollows where a man might crouch away from the weather and it was in one of these hollows that a group of men were crouched, playing Pitch and Toss.

There were six of them, raw-boned labourers, Scots mostly, from out Walsall way, and they did not know me. They started up as I came to the lip of the hollow silently and I saw that Belcher was among them. One of them shouted to me to get away from the place but Belcher told him to be still or he'd smash his face in. Then the men sat down again like obedient dogs.

It was my intention to fight Dick Belcher and humble him before his mates, to beat fear and repentance into him and then force him to agree to marrying her, for I had no wish for her to lock herself away from the world as she had threatened.

So Dick Belcher stood looking up at me and I think I saw fear in his eyes. He tried to smile but his mouth wavered and he could not. I shouted down to him, "Are you coming up here, Belcher, or have I got to come down to you?"

His mates fell silent, waiting for him to answer. Then he said, "I want no quarrel with you, 'Lijah. We can settle this without blows. Just give me time. I can settle everything."

I laughed bitterly. "Aye," I said, "by running away and leaving the lass to bear her own trouble. Not me, Dick Belcher! You've had time enough to settle everything with the girl six months gone. I've thrashed you before and by God I'll do it again."

Then I began to slither down the steep clay slope towards him, with him backing away among the pennies and crying, "Now, 'Lijah, have a bit o'

sense, lad! I can settle everything!"

But a red cloth seemed to swing before my eyes and I knew then that I was going down there to kill Dick Belcher. My stomach felt empty on the sudden and my chest expanded itself and I felt my teeth clenching tight on each other till my jaws ached again. And he backed before me and before me and his mates spread away from me, seeing the look in my eyes, and scrambled like frightened animals up to the lip of the hole.

Then he stumbled on a pile of brickends and fell and I felt my face relax into a smile when I began to run the last few yards that kept me from him.

But suddenly there was a great shout and a scuffling behind me and I half-turned to see three policemen rushing at my back. It was too late for me to shake them off. They held my arms down at my side, for they were big strong men. And they clapped handcuffs on my wrists before I could shake free of them. Then we were alone in the hollow, for Belcher and all his mates had gone.

Alone, yes, except for Tom Fisher, grey faced and triumphant, who stood where I had stood but a minute before, on the crown of the hollow, looking down at me.

"I said I would do it, Fisher," he said. "Aye, I said I would do it!"

So it was that I, who had gone into the hollow at Bescot to kill a man, was brought before the magistrates on a charge of gambling in a public place and of offering violence to Her Majesty's Police Officers. And they locked up Elijah Fisher for three months in Stafford Gaol, when he should have been with his sister at Walsall Infirmary, at the birth of a son who came near to costing her her life.

TOM FISHER

born 1856

I

"I AM TOM FISHER!" THAT is what I say to myself in the cold country mornings when the wind blows wild from the bare moorlands over towards Wales. And I say it to myself at night time, when the rain flurries against the window-pane and even the heavy door-curtains move in the draught that steals somehow or other through the chinks in window-frame and lintel. "I am Tom Fisher!"

But do I say it to reassure myself? Is it because these hands upon the coverlet do not look like mine, because the face that stares back at me from the mirror as I shave is grey and lined and old? Because I can no longer make men run to my bidding? Because I can no longer even walk upstairs without help?

I who was once a powerful man am no longer even master of myself. I think of my father, who became an old man while he was yet in his forties. I can remember him when he was in his prime of youth and all things seemed possible to him. He would stride with me along the steep downhill road that lay between the pitbanks on the one hand and the humped hill of Wednesbury on the other, down to the works on a Sunday morning. He was never one to let his men stand idle and he would inspect the furnaces almost immediately after breakfast, while Mother and Phyllis and perhaps young Enoch were getting ready for church. "Everything must be ready for Monday morning," he would tell me. "We shall be about God's business this evening, Tom, but we must see to the iron in the morning. God will wait for us but the iron will not."

Sometimes on his shoulder if there was no one walking the road to see, and always clutching his hand, whoever was there, I would go with my father to see after the furnaces.

That was my early training, that was to be my life, and a life modelled on my father's. Down at the works I would walk among the pigs of metal, prodding here and there with my stick, asking a foundryman to turn this one over or to uncover that. I would climb ladders and look down at the angry seething mass of iron, demanding this and that of whoever came within reach of me. Men did not matter to me for they were only alive to tend the iron, it seemed. I never saw them as folk with lives of their own and children that they loved.

Sometimes, as I grew older, my father would say as he leaned over the papers in the office, talking to the Engineer, “Take yourself for a walk round the works, Tom. See if there’s anything that wants doing.” I would nod as coolly as I could, though inwardly elated at this trust and would stroll outside among the men and the workings. My eye soon became expert in this little world of railway-wagons and sidings; I would notice a culvert that needed covering, a wall that wanted repointing, a length of rail that needed new shoes for its sleepers. And all this I would note in my book with the black leather covers, in the blank section for ‘Remarks’ after the tables of tensiles and stresses. Then father would come out with me and we would cover the same ground again as I pointed out to him what I had found. Usually he would make no comment unless I was at fault; then he would point out my error immediately though quietly so that none of the men might hear. At other times he would call one of the foremen over and tell him to set this to rights or to attend to that. I would stand back, my head held proudly, while the men did what was, after all, my bidding. I knew that they did not like me but that did not trouble me. My life was the iron, not the men. I never stopped to ask myself why this should be; I merely accepted it as the true destiny of a Fisher. Once when my father had stopped at the gatehouse on our way out of the foundry, I walked round to the back of the building until he had finished his conversation with the gatehouse-keeper. Two men were sitting out of sight on their haunches playing cards. They were Irish labourers, I think, from their dirty appearance. They did not hear me coming but I heard what they said.

“One fine day some self-respecting man will baptise that young sod across the head with a pick-shaft! He wunna keep his nose out o’ another man’s business.”

I knew that they were talking of me and I gloried in the challenge. I strode up to them and said, “Put those cards away if you want to keep your job. Fisher’s don’t pay you to play whist!”

One of the men flung the cards down in the mud and jumped to his feet. He was a very big man with a rough red face, and he towered over me, his hand upraised to strike at me in his anger.

I was very frightened for I was not more than twelve at the time but I made myself stand still. I kept my own hands at my side and said to him, “Be about your business, Mick, or you’ll be begging at backdoors for a crust by dinner-time.”

I stared back into his dark eyes and I swear he could have killed me there and then and I would not have budged.

He stood undecided, as though a douse of cold water had been thrown into his face. Then he lowered his hand and turned away. His companion had disappeared while I had spoken and had taken the cards.

I told my father about this on the way home, without too much pride, I think, but as a matter of course, for in those days I had faith in him and hid nothing from him. He was the only person with whom I could talk. He said, "Tom, lad, you must be careful with these men. They are not animals, you know. Those two were having a bit of a break before they went on to another shift perhaps. They can play cards in their own time, you know."

I said, "Father, once a man walks inside Fisher's gates he works or goes his own way to another job."

My father patted my shoulder and shook his head. "If that were so," he said, "we'd get a power of work done here; but don't forget these men have what they call their rights. We only see things from a master's point of view; but the men have their opinions too."

I said no more for I took my father's words as a sign of weakness then but I pondered over what he had said when I got home and I told myself that one day when I was the Master my men would learn that their views must be mine, that when one's life was the making of iron there could be no two opinions.

I saw those two men later, on another Sunday morning. They were sitting down by a wall that sheltered them from the wind. They saw me coming and got up as though to carry on with a new job, touching their caps to me as I passed. I paused for a moment and looked into their faces. They did not smile, nor did I. When I saw that they had found a job to do, I nodded and passed on.

That was the sort of lad I was, the only sort I had it in my power to be. Physically I was courageous, I think, though not agile or good at sports like many of the boys I met at the Grammar School in Wolverhampton. I was never interested in football and cricket though I was not looked on as a weakling because of that. Indeed, in a fight I usually came out the victor though I never fought unless I was forced to do so and after a while when I grew to be thickly-built and strong few of the other lads ever dared to challenge me. They seemed to give me best, to leave me alone. In all my

schooldays I never had more than one friend and because of that, I recall him well.

He was a pale-faced lad named Jeremy, which I think was short for Jeremiah. His name made him the butt of the others and before I got to know him they often ducked him in the trough at the bottom of the playing-field or made him kneel on the concrete by the front gate and say the Lord's Prayer as passers-by went to and fro.

I was contemptuous of him then. I felt that had they done that to me I would even have annihilated myself in order to turn the tables on them. But Jeremy never showed fight. He let himself be ducked and then let himself get another punishment from the masters when he presented himself in class wet through. He knelt humbly in the roadway and said the Lord's Prayer as loudly as his tormentors required, only his terrified rabbit's eyes showing the suffering he was enduring.

Then one day when the Captain of the School was twisting Jeremy's arm because he would not sing the Hundred and Twenty First Psalm, I could stand it no longer and I struck the boy below the ear as hard as I could and without warning. He fell down and struck his head on a paving-stone. The other boys ran away so that it was left for Jeremy and me to carry him in and bathe his head, which was bleeding freely. Jeremy was crying now, afraid of what would be done to him in the dinner break, I think. I pushed the head of the School Captain under a tap and left him there with the water running down his Eton jacket, a garment which we were all required to wear in those days. Then I went directly to the Headmaster's study and told him the full circumstances of the affair.

Once during my recital the Headmaster stopped me and spoke sharply to me as though I was in the wrong. I bridled at this and told him that if he and his Staff would not see right done then it was up to those of the pupils who had justice in their hearts to fill the deficiency. The Headmaster became angry and even adopted a threatening air. I wished him good-day and walked from his room. I remember the startled expression on his face as I closed the door behind me.

My intention was to go home there and then but before I could get far down the street the school caretaker came running after me and asked me to go back with him.

I did so without any feeling of annoyance or defeat, without any emotion whatever, I think. The Headmaster asked me to sit down and came as near as he could to apologising to me. I sensed his weakness as he fumbled for

words in which to express himself. A strong man would have admitted his defeat directly.

I was made a prefect shortly after that and the School Captain was demoted as soon as a suitable opportunity occurred—for stealing apples from a neighbouring garden, I think. Jeremy became my only friend then—for the other boys were more than ever suspicious of me and felt, in some way, that I was a spy acting for the Headmaster. Yet in fact I hated him and them, as I had always done for their weakness, and now I knew that I must always stand on my own two feet, that I was not the sort of person who could ever look for support from his fellow-men. That did not trouble me. I wanted neither friendship nor even kindness. I did right and expected to be punished should I transgress; though I must confess that the idea of transgression never came much into my head. I always made it my business to learn the rules, whether of the school or of Latin and mathematics, and I adhered to those rules.

Jeremy used to wait for me at break times for he was in a lower class than me. He would bring small offerings to school for me like a disciple attempting to please the master, a book of riddles, a bag of glass marbles, or a package of shortbread that he said his mother had baked specially for me; but I never accepted his gifts. Indeed, although he used to walk about the playground or the fields with me I hardly ever found anything to say to him, apart from desultory things about the weather or the state of the football ground—though goodness knows neither of us was interested in the game.

Jeremy was taken away from the school after I had known him for a few terms, when it was found that he was suffering from consumption. He wrote to me from abroad once or twice but though I tried to reply to his letters there was nothing I felt that I could say. My letters to him lay about on the bureau at home for a week or two and were then burnt. What became of him I do not know and at that time did not care; though more recently, as I have had time to think about life, I have wondered, and have even wished I might learn news of him. He was a poor soul, weak and without a friend; the difference between us was that I did not mind about not having a friend as long as I had my father; my father and the iron.

II

They have called me a hard man but I think that they are wrong. I have always tried to be a just man and to do those things rightly which I have felt I was put on earth to do. What is there wrong in that? Man can only be called civilised insofar as he obeys established rules. And rules may only become established if they have been found to be right and just. So much that is termed 'human', 'compassionate', 'kind', is in actuality weakness, evasion of natural law, an act of selfishness.

I soon discovered that my father was a weak man. He bowed down before my mother; he sold his foundry; he allowed his family to tear him away from his right as a man to carry out his destiny, even his pleasurable destiny, for I believe that had he had the courage of his beliefs and had gone away to Africa, or indeed to any place on the world's face, he would have been a better man. He should have made the family do as he wished, leaving me behind to carry on the tradition of our folk in the iron industry.

Elijah was outside all my reckoning. He did not seem to be like us then. I abhorred his shiftless selfishness. I even called him a murderer in my heart, for I loved Enoch and hoped that one day he would be a credit to our family in his own way, though his way was not mine.

Mother was a law unto herself. She was not truly a Fisher, not by blood, and must be allowed the exercise of her own blood and of her irrational sex. Yet she might have ruled us differently. I do not know about Phyllis. There is so much that I have to thank her for that I dare not raise my voice against her ways, though she too might have worked with me more earnestly in those days when I tried to bring order and strictness into our family.

Why should we love those who bring us the most pain? That is a question which comes to my mind more often than any other in these days. How perverse is the human spirit, for it is Susan whom I always loved in the true depths of my heart, and Susan who has brought most suffering and degradation to me! What could it have been that I loved in her? She never showed me any affection or even any obedience. Was it perhaps that in her own defiant spirit I sensed some part of my own determination? I wish that I knew. I wish that I had known this much earlier in our lives, then I might have schooled myself to treat her differently. I might even have brought myself earlier to my knees before her and so have averted the shame which

she dragged down on us all. So I might have built up our family again instead of letting it fall, like a rotting pit headgear, into the black and echoing depths of destruction and forgetfulness.

Sometimes as I lie awake through the small hours of sickness and despair, hearing the owls hoot from the wood beside my window or the dogs barking from the distant stables, Susan comes back to my mind and I see her with gentle affection, almost as though she is standing at the foot of my bed, smiling her old calm smile; and then I yearn for her with a strange love that is almost more than a brother's. And I weep in my shame that I might have helped her to live differently, but did not. I weep until there are no more tears in my heart and the dawn comes inevitably to my window once again.

III

THERE is a dream that once used to trouble me nightly but which comes back less often to me now that the years have mellowed all our sufferings.

Christmas has passed and the trees have lost a little of their gaunt blackness, but have not yet put on even the first tenderness of green by which we shall know them when Spring has matured. Yet there is the aura of Spring in the air, some almost ineffable smoothness in the breezes that slide now and do not roar across the roofs of factories and warehouses; some half-cloaked hint of warmth; a faint sweetness as of one's youth remembered in a golden glow, impossibly happy—for whose youth was ever a happy one? But I remember in that dream something of hopefulness and promise, as of young boys laughing beside rivers with the sun falling across their slim shoulders and over their lithe flanks and the first birds of the new year trying out their voices tentatively but with a growing confidence that once again all things shall be well. In my dream that delicate sweetness comes again to me, surrounding me but not finding its echo in my inmost heart.

For in my dream I am alone, as I ever was, knowing that Spring was on its way but not part of it myself. In my dream I still stand in the bleak anteroom of the Infirmary at Walsall, not part of that either, but forced by my conscience to be there. Compelled to be present when my sister's child was born since its father had taken the coward's way and deserted her and her other brother had taken the dolt's way to the gaol where he belonged.

So I stood in that bare and whitewashed room, holding myself aloof from the many sick who crouched or sprawled along the benches by the wall side. Outside in the busy street Spring was whispering that it would soon be here; but inside there was only the evidence of Winter. Men and women too coughed and wheezed, sometimes groaning quietly and privately to themselves, at other times complaining that the nurses here were cruel and the doctors lazy and incompetent.

An old woman whose red-rimmed eyes peered out at me from a black shawl that half-covered her head spoke to me once. She said, "Wot's wrong wi' yo, mister? Bin yo' poorly as well as us poor 'uns?"

I moved away from her and tried to look through the dim grey window but all I could see were iron railings and cobblestones.

At length a thin-faced woman in a white cap and apron came to me and said, “Are you Fisher?”

At first I resented the manner in which she addressed me and my anger rose, but I controlled it and said that I was Thomas Fisher. She smiled at me in a superior way as though she was beyond such luxuries as anger, beyond all christian names and civilised modes of address.

She half-turned from me and said, “The doctor will see you for a moment now, if you will come this way.”

I followed her past the sad diseased waiting ones, who looked up at me from their apathy to resent my presence as I passed. At the end of a long narrow corridor we stopped and the nurse held open a door for me.

“Say what you have to say and don’t waste doctor’s time. He’s a busy man,” she said.

Her admonition was unnecessary. I had little time in which to say what I had intended for the doctor waved me to a plain wooden chair and spoke to me without asking my business. He sat at a bare table on which lay a litter of papers and prescriptions. He looked very tired and drawn and I noticed that his clothes were rumpled as though he slept in them.

“You are the brother of Susan Fisher?” he said and then went on before I had time to answer him. “Your sister does not wish to see you. A patient may give such instructions and you must obey her wishes. She is financially able to defray any costs we may be put to and it seems to me that your presence here is unnecessary. We are very busy as you will have seen. You can rely on us to care for your sister. I do not think there is anything more for me to say.”

He bent over the papers and wiped the back of his hand across his lined forehead, as though he were weary beyond description. Already, I fancied, he had dismissed me from his thoughts. His hand went towards a bell-rope beside the table as though he would call in the nurse to conduct me away. I felt that I must put forward my point of view as the head of the family at least.

“Doctor,” I said, “this is an unfortunate business. We are not poor people. I know that my sister has done wrong but she has done no more perhaps than many others. Can you arrange for her to be transferred to some

other place, more in keeping with her station, let us say? I should be very willing to cover the expenses."

The doctor looked up at me with something like distaste, even hostility, showing in his tired face.

"My dear sir," he said, "we are not concerned with your finances or with your sister's morals. As for putting her in a hospital for wealthy folk, that is not my business. It is something which you should have arranged previously. Your sister may have her child before evening. It is too late to move her. I must bid you good day."

He rang the bell and shortly the door opened and the woman who had led me to that room stood waiting for me to leave again.

At first I was about to say that I would see the governors of the Infirmary immediately and have him reprimanded; then I realised on what insecure ground I trod. I could do nothing but ask whether I might have news of my sister after the birth.

"If you come here and your sister has given no further instructions, no doubt the matron may let you have news," said the doctor.

I thanked him as calmly as I was able and then followed the nurse past the sick out-patients who were sitting along the passageway. The woman did not speak to me but saw me quickly to the door as though intent that I should leave the building without further delay.

I went home and sat for a long time wondering what would become of Susan and her child. My mind was a turmoil of conflicting ideas and fears, without a single hope among them. Soon perhaps my own sister was to become the mother of a bastard child; and there she lay, untended by her own family, among strangers.

It was late before I went up those steep stairs to my bed. For some reason I had never felt so lonely in my life before.

The next day I went again to the hospital, to be told that my sister had given birth to a boy at two o'clock in the morning and that both were as well as might be expected. I sensed something menacing in that phrase and pressed the nurse for more detailed information; but she had her orders, she said, to say no more than she had already told me. I asked her when I might have more news, whereupon she replied that I might come the next day if I chose. When I asked to see the doctor, she shrugged tiredly and said that he was far too busy to be bothered by all and sundry who strolled in from the street to pass the time of day in the warm.

Such was the distressed state of my mind then that I did not reprove her as I would normally have done. I went from the place like a beaten dog and returned home to write a short note to Elijah, informing him of the child's birth. Though there was no joy in writing it, it was at the least a Christian thing to do, I felt.

After that I went daily and sat among the suffering in the anteroom, waiting for further news, taking in such small gifts as I thought might bring some comfort to my sister, a basket of grapes or a pineapple. I do not know whether these things ever reached her, though the women who served at the Infirmary always took them from me with an expression of pleasure. As I sat waiting for some crumb of news of Susan's condition, I got to know many of the sick folk who attended the hospital and even became familiar with the nature of their sufferings. This one had a sore on the buttocks that would not heal; this one coughed blood in the mornings; this one had an internal growth; and so on. I listened to their symptoms and their descriptions, day after day, making myself sympathise with them, sometimes giving them money, always remembering to inquire how they were progressing and even coming to know their names, some of them . . .

That was the level to which my pride had sunk at that time—that I should concern myself with the squalid little affairs of others, whose very existence I had not been aware of previously. I have thought since with mortification how these whimpering old folk would call out to me as though they had known me for years, as though I were their neighbour, sometimes even pulling me down on to a seat beside them and pawing my sleeve or patting me on the back. It was a short period of great humiliation to my spirit, yet I suffered it because there was nothing else left for me to do if I was to receive news of my erring sister.

On the third day the grey-faced attendant pursed her lips and told me that Susan had had a bad night and that the doctor suspected a fever of some sort. Even then, despite my anguish, I was not permitted to visit her.

Old Mrs. Bassett, the widow-woman who came every day to attend to the housekeeping, shook her head gravely when I told her this and said that the fever was the thing to fear most in childbirth.

"I dunna gi' much for 'er chances, poor lass, if 'er's got a right bad attack," she said. "Our Moses' first wife was taken off wi' that when 'er 'ad 'er second. Poor lass, your mother would 'a gone mad over it. Yon lass should 'a bin put in a proper place to 'ave 'er bairn, I say."

She busied herself about the house, muttering for the rest of the morning, glancing at me from time to time in such a way as left me with no doubts about her feelings towards me.

I saw Lawyer Foster later that day and asked his legal advice. But the old man was unfamiliar with such situations and in any case I believe that he did much business for the Infirmary and was anxious not to prejudice himself with them. He said that there was nothing to be done, short of bringing a civil case against the hospital for neglect—if neglect could be proven, he smiled cynically, and that would be difficult for many hundreds of women died of puerperal fever each year, however good the attention they received.

There is a point beyond which a man cannot pass in his endeavours and I had reached that point. I had been neglecting my work for some weeks now and my constant absence from the foundry had become the subject for some comment, at first light and bantering, but latterly more caustic. Old Mr. Griffith, the Managing Director, was a stern man, though good at heart, and well-known for his benevolence to charitable institutions; he had not pressed me for details of my sister's misfortune, though indeed they were not unknown to him for most of the town knew, one way or the other. Susan Fisher's name must have cropped up in conversations in the district wherever two women leaned over a wall to gossip as they shook their hearthrugs, or wherever two men put their heads together over a pint of ale or a glass of whisky. So I was hardly surprised when Mr. Griffith sent his boy to my office one morning with the request that I should call in to see him before I went off for my luncheon.

Mr. Griffith was a small but upright man in his early seventies, the last of a great line of iron founders who had originally come from Wales. His most noticeable feature was his still luxuriant white hair, which he wore long over the ears in a bygone fashion. His thin sallow face and lantern-jaw, together with his direct grey-eyed stare, gave him the aspect of severity which was somehow not lessened by the pink carnation which he wore with meticulous grace in the lapel of his black morning coat. I entered his office that morning with some slight misgiving for he never sent for any of his staff unless he had something quite out of the ordinary to say; he was not a man to waste time or words on desultory conversation.

Now he waved me to a chair with the well-kept white hand that I knew so well, fringed at the wrist, as it was invariably, with snowy linen.

"Thomas," he said, without leading to the point, "I am worried about you."

"What is it, Mr. Griffith?" I asked.

He regarded me fixedly for a moment and then said, "You know well enough what it is, my boy. It is your profession, your status and mine."

I was nonplussed for the moment and said, "I do not quite understand what you are implying. Have I done something you disapprove of?"

He did not relax his stare but smiled a little and said, "Thomas, in some ways I am *in loco parentis* towards you since your good father died. I have no son and it has always been understood that when I retire you will take over from me here. Ours is a family firm and the relationship between Managing Director and Works Manager has always been one of close family intimacy. It is the relationship of father to son, as one might almost say. Is that not so, Thomas?"

I nodded my head. "Yes, Mr. Griffith," I said. "You are concerned about my sister?"

He looked away from me and said, "I find the words rather hard to say, Thomas, but I shall do my duty and shall say them nevertheless. We of this firm are more than iron founders; we are the pillars of our community and have a moral as well as an industrial status. Apart from our benefits to the charities of the town we are in some measure the upholders of the religious institutions. As you know I personally concern myself with the welfare of the Chapel. You, I am aware, are a churchwarden and contribute generously to your church. I am not concerned with the nature of your religion. It is every man's right to choose the manner of his worship. The thing that matters is that he *should* worship and, in our position, should make the extent of his religious sincerity known in his town."

I said, "No one has ever called my religious sincerity into doubt, Mr. Griffith."

He smiled and said, "There is an old saying that one rotten apple will turn bad the other apples in the barrel. That is a strong way of expressing it you may think, but we are discussing a strong topic now, my boy. Let me put it bluntly, your brother's indiscretions have long been a topic of discussion in the town. But we of the Board of Directors have never concerned ourselves with him. As far as we are concerned he does not exist as a member of your family. Your own behaviour has made that obvious to us. However, your sister is a different matter altogether. One expects the

women-folk of a family to set the tone, as it were, of the other members. Now your sister has recently been the cause of much talk in this town wherever men gather together."

I felt my face flushing at his words and broke in before he could say any more. "Mr. Griffith," I said, with some heat, "My sister is not wholly to blame for what has happened. We are not a court of morals to decide what she should or should not have done."

He took up a quill from the rack on his desk and began to smooth the feathers slowly with his long white fingers. He spoke quietly to me but none the less firmly.

"Thomas," he said, "I know that your heart is good. I know that you would defend your sister as a brother should. But I must ask you to look beyond the immediate family loyalties and to realise that we live in the public eye, that what we do is observed by the community in which we live. We are a thriving firm, not only because the iron which we produce is good, but because men in the district and all over the world indeed respect us, respect our word, our behaviour, our integrity. You may say that your sister's behaviour has nothing to do with the making of iron and that we iron founders have no right to interfere with a matter which is one of morals and not of industry; but I say to you that these things are interdependent; that men judge us and trade with us by reason of the metal we produce and also by reason of the respect which they have for us."

I rose from my chair and said, "Are you speaking as a Christian man should, Mr. Griffith?"

He put down the feather and looked me straight in the eye. "Thomas," he said, "you have never said such a thing to me before. I am widely known for the Christian precepts which I uphold. There can be no doubt about my spiritual attitude and beliefs. I am telling you that my Directors and this town will judge you by your family. They will interpret your anxiety for your sister as your condoning of her offence."

Now I could contain myself no longer. "Sir," I said, as strongly as I dared, "then all I can say is, so much the worse both for the Directors and for the town. I should despise them both!"

He rose too and went over to the window. "Your attitude has for some time been a matter of concern among us," he said. "Had you publicly disowned your sister, we should have thought the better of you. But since you seem to persist in shielding and even in defending her, we can only

assume that her behaviour has your approval. And if that is so, Thomas, much as I dislike saying these words, we shall be compelled to safeguard our own moral and industrial rights. That is all I have to say, Thomas. I don't know whether you have anything more?"

He turned to me now and I saw that his mouth was drawn thin in a way which I had often noticed before he dismissed a useless clerk or an inefficient workman.

I shook my head and said, "I have nothing to say, Mr. Griffith, that you do not know in your heart already."

He came over to me and put his hand on my shoulder. "Do not take this so much to heart, Thomas," he said. "I still have a measure of faith in you and if you can see your way to meeting us in this matter, no doubt we shall weather the storm together. No doubt we shall see you sitting in this chair of mine after all, one of these days."

I went from the room without replying, without looking at him even and walked round the works in the open air, trying to collect my thoughts.

Early that evening I took a cab and once more visited the Infirmary. As we made our way along some of the side-streets urchins ran alongside the cab, calling out to myself and the driver and asking for pennies. I watched them as they ran, ill-cared for, ragged, and presumably, verminous; the children of the poor. I shuddered as I thought that this is what Susan's boy might become, could become, and pulling down the glass window I flung out a handful of small coins to them, then turned my face away as they fought for their spoils like small wild beasts, in the middle of the cobbled roadway.

The driver called out to me, "It's that sort of thing that makes these kids worse. You shouldn't give in to them. They expect everybody to throw something out. I know that gang; a lot of little bastards. All they get from me is a slice from the whip."

He grumbled on until we stopped outside the Infirmary and there I paid him off, suddenly outraged by this harshness of my fellow men towards those less fortunate than themselves. Yet as I mounted the broad grey steps that led up to the entrance door, I suddenly recalled that many folk had in the past called me harsh and I wondered as I passed through that grim door whether I was suffering some strange change of character. I shrugged away this fancy for I sensed no alteration in my attitude to life and to mankind in

general. I still looked on my brother Elijah with contempt and on Dick Belcher with a positive hatred.

This time I was allowed to see a doctor, the same one whom I had spoken with previously. He greeted me with more friendliness and told me that he thought my sister was now out of danger and that the child was prospering well with a foster mother. I asked whether I might see the child, but he smiled and told me that it had been taken away on the mother's instructions and that he was not at liberty to say where it had gone. I assured myself that Susan was truly on the way to recovery and then went, stunned in a strange dumb way, back into the thronged streets of Walsall. It was market day and the steep cobbled street that mounted up to the church on the hilltop was lined on either side with stalls, selling clothing and food, sweetmeat and vegetable produce from outlying farms. I went past them and on to the church and then unaccountably I entered through the high grey stone gothic doorway and knelt in the shadow of a pillar.

I say 'unaccountably' because I am not in the habit of visiting strange churches; I find my own church sufficient for my needs. Yet now as I knelt in that dim church I knew that I had been drawn there for a purpose. I began to thank God for my sister's safety and although I am not a man to whom speech comes easily, now the words of my prayer came to me freely, unbidden by my mind almost, as I offered up my gratitude for this mercy.

It was only as I rose and prepared to leave the place that I noticed another person standing a little way away from me, an elderly man in a long black frock-coat, who was watching me with smiling sympathy. As I moved to pass him on my way to the door he reached out his hand and placed it on my arm.

"Forgive me for addressing you, sir," he said, "but I think that I dare do so. I think that the light in your eyes can only come from gratitude for some good thing that has been given you."

I smiled back at him and told him that I was indeed grateful for God's tolerance that day.

"Then you will pardon me," said the old man, "if I try to profit a little by God's kindness to you and ask you to show your thankfulness by some act of generosity to those of His creatures who are not as happily placed as you are yourself. I am the secretary of a Society which attempts to care for sick children in this town. We try to send them out into the country to convalesce when we may, to let them share God's bounty of green fields and clean skies. May I beg an offering from you, my dear sir?"

He held out a small polished wooden box and I saw that his hand was shaking. I felt in my waistcoat pocket to find two sovereigns, which I slipped into the box thankfully.

The old man shook my hand and said, “Sir, if everyone in this town was as good a Christian gentleman as you are, we should be a happier community. Your offering will bring health and happiness to many of His little ones. I thank you, sir.”

I was moved by these commonplace words beyond my powers of expression. I have never thought of myself as being a good Christian; indeed, many have said the exact opposite of me in my lifetime; yet the old man’s words brought me a strange inner peace although I knew how little I truly deserved them.

“If you will give me the address of your Society,” I said, “I will arrange for a sum to be sent annually to you for this purpose.” The old man put a printed card into my hand and once more smiled at me before he himself knelt to pray.

“If you have never been to the parapet of this church, dear sir,” he said, “please do so now. You will see the need for green peacefulness and rest.”

I went out from the church and climbed the stairway up to the parapet, passing under a broad squat archway below the Chancel. There, leaning against the stone balustrade of the church, I looked down on this town of busy industries—pig-iron, harness, ironmongery, saddlery. Below me fell that steep cobbled street, with its stalls and swarming market-folk, a street bordered by tired-looking trees which seemed to have strayed in from the country and never to have found their way out of the place again; then beyond the main road, cluster on cluster of close-built dwelling-places, back to back, the breeding-ground of such epidemics as small-pox and even of cholera. This was the steep hill up which generations of Walsall folk had climbed to pray at the medieval church on which I now stood; the steep hill which, I recalled with something almost akin to a smile, had produced a race of bowlegged folk in Walsall just as chain-making had created a race of hunchbacks in Willenhall . . .

And beyond the clustering houses, smoke-stacks and spoil-heaps and pitbanks . . . And only then the heights of Cannock Chase and the great distant hump of the Shropshire Wrekin.

As I gazed about me from this superb point of vantage, I saw for the first time, I think, the nature of the purgatory in which we all lived, we of the

Black Country. Once I would have accused any man of disloyalty who had expressed a wish to live elsewhere than this area of industry and endeavour. Now, with the old man's words still in my mind, I saw for an instant to what darkness of spirit we had condemned ourselves and our children in so transforming God's earth as we had done. And even as I thought this I smiled grimly at my own change of heart.

"Tom Fisher," I said to myself, "your father would be ashamed of you, wanting to turn your back on the land that has given you a livelihood!"

Yet as I went down the steps back to the street I called to mind that once my father had desired just that very thing, only he had wished to leave England altogether, to live in a land of rich foliage and blue skies.

Feeling lost now, I wandered past the crowds that milled about the stalls and found my way to the Public Reading-room to pass an hour before I should return to my lonely home again. The idea of the ugliness about me was still strong in my mind and I took down from the shelves of that dingy little room such works as I could find on the Black Country. I read how John Wesley had been mobbed by the ruffians of Walsall and, let it be said in all fairness, defended by the no less ruffianly men of Wednesbury: "A little before ten," he wrote, "God brought me safe to Wednesbury, having lost only one flap of my waistcoat and a little skin from one of my hands. I never saw such a chain of providences before; so many convincing proofs that the hand of God is on every person and thing, overruling all as it seemeth Him good . . ." And later, when he visited the town again "How is Walsall changed! How has God either tamed the wild beasts or chained them up!"

And as I read those words, I wondered how true John Wesley's hopes were! I wondered how he would have written had he known my brother, Elijah, or his bully of a friend, Dick Belcher; or, in a different way, my own benefactor, John Griffith, pillar of the faith which Wesley himself had so courageously evangelised . . .

Turning to the autobiography of James Nasmyth, the inventor of the steam hammer, I read the following words:

"The Black Country is anything but picturesque. The earth seems to have been torn inside out. Its entrails are strewn about; nearly the entire surface of the ground is covered with cinder-heaps and mounds . . . The coal, which has been drawn from below ground, is blazing on the surface. The district is crowded with iron furnaces, puddling furnaces, and coal-pit engine furnaces. By day and by night the country is glowing with fire, and the smoke of the iron-works hangs over it. There is a rumbling and clanging

of rolling mills. Workmen covered with smut, and with fierce white eyes, are seen moving about amongst the glowing iron and the dull thud of forge hammers . . .

"Amidst these flaming, smoky, clanging works, I beheld the remains of what had once been happy farmhouses now ruined and deserted. The ground underneath them had sunk by the working out of the coal, and they were falling to pieces. They had in former times been surrounded by clumps of trees; but only the skeletons of them remained, dilapidated, black, and lifeless. The grass had been parched and killed by the vapours of sulphurous acid thrown out by the chimneys; and every herbaceous object was of a ghastly grey—the emblem of vegetable death in its saddest aspect. Vulcan had driven out Ceres. In some places I heard a sort of chirruping sound, as of some forlorn bird haunting the ruins of the old farmsteads. But no! the chirrup was a vile delusion. It proceeded from the shrill creaking of the coal-winding chains, which were placed in small tunnels beneath the hedgeless road . . .

"When it became dark the scene was still more impressive. The workmen within the works seemed to be running about amidst the flames as in a pandemonium; while around and outside the horizon was a glowing belt of fire, making even the stars look pale and feeble . . ."

I shut the book, bemused by the horror and the fascination for that horror which so marked these words of a man who was himself partly responsible for the desert-place which he condemned. Was this my world, the world to which I was eternally bound?

I woke with a start to this question which had come unbidden from some deeper part of my being. For the first time in my life I was asking questions about my future. I had always taken it for granted that my course was set and that the ship I sailed in was the only one possible or even desirable to me. Now perhaps because of the various shocks which I had received in the last days I had pulled myself up with a jerk and my bewildered mind was casting round for an answer to this dilemma . . .

I had come to a crossroads in my life, I knew then; a crossroads brought about by my sister and by the attitude of my employer, John Griffith. What must be my plan of action now? Was I to cut myself off for ever from my sister, to express my public disapproval of her misfortune? Or was I to cling to her for good or ill, and wake to find myself an outcast from the community of masters and Managers to which I belonged and to which my family had belonged for generations?

If I took the one course and continued to make a home for my deserted sister, what hope was there that our relations would ever be better than they had been in those dreary months since my mother's death? If I chose the other, what had the future to offer me but continuing, even though prosperous, loneliness in this wasteland so terribly and so truly described by Nasmyth?

As the light faded from the sky I made my way from the Reading-room and walked once more among the market-folk, letting them push me hither and thither and delighting strangely in the contact of their bodies. I had never experienced this sensation before, this desire for warmth and nearness to another human creature and I was somewhat afraid of it now that it had come to me. I knew that among the men and women who jostled me were thieves and pickpockets, bullies and carriers of disease. Singly there was not one of them to whom I would have given a word of friendship, yet in the mass I almost loved them. I awoke to this emotion suddenly and then I knew that some unforeseen change was working in me. I was in need of comfort, of human solace, for the first time in my life.

I tried to analyse this experience as I pushed among the sweating crowds to listen to red-faced men bawling out the merits of their wares and exposing the faults of the wares sold at the next stall and I knew then that today I had received two blows the like of which had never before come to me; I had been threatened, though gently, with expulsion from the firm for which I worked and which one day was to have been mine; and I had received news that my sister was out of danger from puerperal fever. I had never before even imagined that there might come a time when my services would be dispensed with by the great firm of Griffith. I had never before realised how much Susan's life meant to me. Now my fear on the one hand, my relief on the other, had thrown me off my balance and for a while I was no longer the Tom Fisher of old. Now the world had turned a little on to its side, not quite topsy-turvy, but crazy enough to let me see that life even at its most certain was a curious farce of insecurity.

In my muddled way now I was trying to hide, to submerge myself among these Walsall folk who did not know me and who swept round me like the waves of the ocean, taking me with them. I wanted to be swept along with the crowd, to be taken out of myself, to have my problems settled for me without my effort.

At last I stopped before a broad window in which were displayed dishes of various sorts of meat, pork, beef, mutton, veal, steaming invitingly and causing runnels of moisture to collect on the plate glass of the panes.

Beyond them was set a long gilded mirror in which I saw my own face reflected as I stared in at the cooked meats. I looked grey and haggard and almost old. My heart was beating heavily and there was a strange sweet taste in my mouth which I did not like. I wondered whether I was really ill or whether my unpleasant physical state was due largely to hunger, for I had not eaten since breakfast that day.

I went inside the place and found long trestle-tables set along each wall and hungry marketers swallowing great hunks of bread with their baked meats and potatoes. I ordered what I heard others about me ordering and ate it as they did, dipping my bread into the thick gravy that swilled against the lip of my tin plate. Then, my hunger satisfied, I began the long walk home, for once intending to give myself time for reflection on the new turn that my life was taking.

But before I had well got away from the lights of Walsall's main streets, I had to lean against a railing for the faintness which had come upon me again. I knew now that it was not hunger which so troubled me and for a moment wondered whether in my visits to the hospital I had picked up some complaint from the scores of ailing beings whom I had met so frequently. It would have been a prime stroke of fate if, that very day, God had chosen to heal one member of the family only to bring sickness to another!

I stood for a while getting my breath back and then from a lighted house in a street to the side of me came the sound of singing and of a violin. I turned into the street and found the place to be a public house, *The Cross Keys*. My upbringing and profession had not been those which had ever taken me into such places but tonight I needed warmth and company. I made my way along the little sawdust passageway, past a bare room where men and women were singing as they drank, their arms about each other's waists, and so to a curtained sideroom where the lamp burned low and a good fire was blazing in the narrow little fireplace. I sat on a plush-covered bench beside this fire and when a serving-girl came to me ordered a glass of hot rum, for I thought that this spirit might drive away my chill. The girl smiled down at me a trifle saucily and said, "Would you like anything with it?"

I said, "Yes, bring hot water, please, and a spoonful of sugar."

She still stood beside me. "Yes," she said, "I understand that; but is there nothing else you want?"

I asked, "No, why should there be?"

The girl shrugged her thin shoulders and flounced out. “No offence meant,” she said. “I just wondered.”

I warmed my hands before the fire and soon she returned, putting down my drink on a small marble-topped table by my side. I gave her a sixpence for herself since she had been so prompt in serving me. “I knew you weren’t so bad, sir,” she said as she bobbed out again to attend to shouts from another such alcove as the one I occupied.

I am not a drinking man and soon I felt the fumes of the rum affecting my head, yet I drank it for its comforting warmth and then called for another. This time my serving-girl entered leading another girl by the hand. “This is my sister,” she said and went to fetch my rum, leaving the other standing before the fire close to me.

I asked her whether she would care to drink something and she asked for a port wine. Then her self-styled sister returned to say, “Ah, I thought you looked a bit lonely, mister! I can see you two’ll get on famous like.”

I looked at my companion in the firelight. She was not more than seventeen years old and had a pretty winsome face in a dark sallow way, though I noticed that her finger-nails were rough and dirty. She was the sort of girl born to slatternliness and taverns, I thought, as I noted the wink she gave me when her glass was raised to her lips.

At length she sat beside me and said, “My God, but ain’t it cold tonight! Cold enough for snow, I should say, shouldn’t you?”

I nodded for I had begun to feel chilled again, despite the fire and my two glasses of rum. When her hand crept into mine and later when her arm even moved about me I did not repulse her. Instead I almost gloried in the contact of her thin young body with mine. And soon I had ordered yet another glass of rum and another of port. The serving-maid grinned at us when she brought in the order.

“There,” she said, “and that’s him who said he didn’t want nothing with his rum! Oh, you’re a calm one, sir, that you are!”

At first I felt a little put out by the girl’s familiarity but then recollected myself and admitted that she had reason for her opinions of me.

Soon I felt my head slipping as I leaned against the wall and realised that I was rather more than tipsy. For a while my self-respect struggled against my recognition of this state, then I gave up my attempts to fight against it. I was not well in body or mind and I had drunk too much. Now I sank back against the wall and smiled stupidly when my companion began to stroke

my face and whisper something to me, earnestly, almost urgently, in that dim and firelit room.

I think it was midnight when I woke. I had some recollection of the church clock chiming out the hour. I did not know it from my watch, for that had gone, and so had the few sovereigns which I kept in a fob-pocket. I was not in the little room where I had drunk the rum but a small bedroom further along the passageway. I lay on the hard unclean bed, my clothes disarranged and my tie loosened. A rough-voiced man in shirt-sleeves was standing in the curtained doorway grinning down at me, the gaps in his mouth giving him a villainous aspect.

"Come on, sir," he said, "This ain't a London bawdy 'ouse, you know! No all-night capers here, my lad! Come on now, up you gets and off 'ome to your wife!"

I stared at him in astonishment as the drift of his words came to me only too clearly. "I was not well," I said. "The rum made me sleepy. I have lost my watch."

He made a half-threatening gesture. "Come on now," he said. "Let's 'ave no trouble with you. 'Ome you go or I'll 'ave to call that Bobby on the corner to put you out and if he comes he'll take your name and address, then what'll your family think of you, eh? Come on and let's have no more sauce about your watch! Why, God love me, they all say that! It's quite a joke here, it is!"

He lifted me up and even helped me to tie my stock again. Then he brushed me down with his hand and led me to the door. I went out into the cold street and at the corner leaned against the railings again until a cab came by.

So I returned home that night, desperately unhappy and unsure of myself; for the first time in my life ashamed of myself and conscious now that in my veins ran the same blood that had tainted the lives of my sister and my brother.

For the first time in many years, I knelt beside my bed and prayed, "Oh, what shall I do?" I said. "What shall I do?" I knew then, as I heard my own voice, that I was a sick man; for only a child or a sick man asks such questions.

IV

THE next afternoon young Doctor MacAllister, who was taking over more and more of Old Maguire's practice now that the old man was losing his sight, stepped back from my bed and shaking his head said, "It's no use, Mister Fisher, you'll just have to take things easily. It's a good job you stayed in bed today and sent for me."

I said, "I should have been at work, you know, but I just felt that I hadn't the energy to move."

The young doctor looked down through my bedroom window and said, "When the warmer weather comes you'll be able to go out and sit in the garden; but, mind you, no gardening yet awhile."

His manner frightened me for a moment. "Do you mean I am not to go to work? Is that what you mean? What's wrong then?"

"Nothing that rest will not put right, I hope," he said. "You've been overdoing it, I'm afraid. Too much work, too much worry, no doubt. You've got the heart of a man of fifty or more. You have been overworking your most faithful servant without realising it, and all things need rest."

I said, "But I'm a young man, as the years go, Doctor. I can't become a bedridden old pensioner at my age. Why, my life hasn't really begun, lad!"

He began to pack away his stethoscope and to collect his hat and gloves. "That may be," he said, "but I can only tell you what I know, and I know that your heart needs a long rest."

"What if I choose to ignore your advice?" I said, more to tease the young man than anything else. He turned towards me gravely and without a trace of jocularity. "If you do that," he said, "I will not be held responsible. If you do that, you might drop down in the street and die before any help could be got for you. That's all."

There was no more to be said on that matter. I asked him to be good enough to drop a note in at Lawyer Foster's and he sat beside me while I wrote, requesting the solicitor to come and visit me at his early convenience. Then the doctor left and I heard the sound of his pony's hooves as he clattered on along the street.

When Foster did come I instructed him to see that Susan should want for nothing while she was in hospital and afterwards if he should find where she went. I told him that I wished to provide for her child, should it need my assistance in any way. And then I turned away from him, suddenly very weary of myself and all that life held for me.

As he left he stopped by my bedside and said, “I ought to tell you, Thomas, that Elijah came out of Stafford this morning. Don’t you think that we ought to ask the police to keep a watch on him? He is a desperate man and might do you harm, out of revenge, you know.”

I did not turn back to him, for at that moment I did not care very much what Elijah did. “He will not harm me,” I said. Then, as an afterthought, “And if he does, who is to lose? My life has come to interest me very little in the last few days.”

I heard him tut-tutting like an old woman, as he made his shuffling way down the steep stairs. When he had gone I told old Mrs. Bassett to leave me alone for I wanted nothing that she could get for me. Now my life was without purpose and in some strange way I knew that I must lie here and suffer my own thoughts until such time as God would give it a new purpose or let me fade away altogether.

V

BETWEEN each act of man there is a breathing-space, a pause, time for reassessment, just as Winter intervenes between the harvest and the sowing-time, or night between one day and the next. It is in that pause that a man may shuffle together the cards of his past experience and deal himself a new hand for the coming game.

I lay in my bed, sick at heart, yet in a way glad that illness should have taken from me the necessity for action, an old man while I was yet young, dreaming and thinking of the past, and of what future that past might well produce before my hand was finally played out.

My life had never been a full one, a rich one, though it had been a busy one. Now I realised that I had gone wrong in putting things before people, my professional ambition before my family, before Susan; even, in a way, before Elijah, for I might have saved him had I had the wish to do so.

I remembered the warmth of the market crowd at Walsall and my own self-identification with that milling herd; I remembered the sick ones at the Infirmary; and I remembered the little slut at the tavern who had taken me helpless to bed and had stolen my money and my watch. I remembered them all with compassion now and with only the vaguest sensation of nausea. If I felt distaste at all it was against myself, my own emotional weakness, and not against their frailties.

I knew the answer then; my life had always been without love and now my starved heart was crying out for love for the first time and did not know where to find it or how to look for it.

An old memory came back to me as I lay looking at the ceiling, listening to the boughs scraping against the wall outside. It was a memory of my early youth, my springtime; a memory of an opportunity lost because weakly grasped at. I remembered a girl.

Even now I cannot recall her name, or what her face looked like. Perhaps philosophers would laugh at anyone who wept as I have done for a forgotten name, yet I did weep as I lay in my lonely loveless bed, trying to recall that child. I only knew that, in the way of breathless reckless young things, I had fallen desperately in love with a girl in a white muslin frock and hair-ribbons of satin.

Where I met her, I do not know. I cannot even recall what her voice was like, whether it was high or low; or what she ever said to me, if indeed she said anything at all. All I can recall with certainty is that she smiled at me as I opened the garden gate for her to enter. Her eyes were large and generous and she looked directly into my own eyes when I asked whether she would come to her garden wall that evening and talk to me. She smiled but I cannot remember whether she spoke. Then she went up her garden path swinging her broad hat on its white ribbon, her frilled skirt moving like the petals of a lily in the light breeze, never looking behind to smile at me again.

That was all my love story. I stood by the wall that evening but no one came. Young folk, arm in arm, passed me as I waited. Some of them knew me and whispered my name and nudged each other, smiling that I should be kept waiting. I did not dare meet their eyes but looked on to the ground, my face burning.

I told myself that I would count twenty, or fifty, or a hundred . . . And so silently I would begin to count, slowly, so that she might have a chance to change her mind; as slowly as I could bear. Yet still she did not come to me.

At last when the birds were swooping low across the road beneath the branches, almost into the faces of those who still walked the highway, I turned away from that garden-wall and began to make my way home. I envied the boys who had their girls. I yearned as only a young human creature can yearn for the touch of another's hand, someone who would love me in return and be content with me. And as the dusk came down finally and the passers-by became dark giggling shapes, I allowed my heart to break and let the tears stream unchecked down my young lad's cheeks.

That girl and the little slattern at the public house were the only two I had ever known. But then, how was I different from the others of my family? Elijah to my knowledge had never had a sweetheart, indeed he had always despised womankind. Nor had Susan known the love of any man but that coward reprobate who had left her with his child. We Fishers are a strange loveless family, I thought to myself. What have we done, what law have we transgressed that we should be so punished? I wondered.

I decided that once I was well and about again, I would seek to repair this deficiency in myself; I would find folk to like, would try to cultivate their liking in return, would make an effort to explore that territory of love which was unknown to me, if God would give me the opportunity of so doing by letting me have the use of my tired body once again. And with that

decision in my mind, I slept as I had not done for many months before, easily and peacefully like a child.

VI

THE days passed slowly but I was grateful for their slowness, for I had still a long journey to travel before I had remade my mind, my heart, my attitude to life. I realised as I lay then how tired I had been without knowing it, how hard I had flogged my willing body, poor beast, towards a sterile ambition. I smiled to think then how sterile we Fishers were when all came to all, and in all respects . . . I even made a prayer that God might give us richness, luxuriance, one day before it was too late.

John Griffith came to see me on three occasions, bringing news of the foundry—of number two mill having to be closed for repairs, of a new order for a bridge in South Africa, and of the appointment of a new director, James Kirkstone, a young northerner with progressive ideas.

"You'll have to buck up, my lad," he said smiling, "or you'll find you have a rival there! I have great faith in that young man!"

A sly devil came into my mind and I said, claiming the privilege of a sick man, "Are you going to put him into my job then, Mr. Griffith?"

The old man looked at me as though he were genuinely shocked. "What Thomas!" he said. "You mustn't say things like that, no, not even in jest. We think the world of you, you know that. Why the firm wouldn't be the same without you! Put that silly idea out of your head immediately and come back to us fit and well again. There is much for you to do, my lad."

On another occasion the Vicar, the Reverend Chatterton, called to visit me, rubbing his hands and passing on to the topic of the new Church Hall which he was building almost as soon as he had asked me how I was. I tried to bring him round to speak of my sister but he slid away from the topic like a minnow round a stone.

Others came and went without bringing much comfort with their gifts of fruit and trade journals; my fellow directors and their wives, even the tailor who had been in the middle of fitting me out with a new suit of dress clothes before I had taken to my bed. I asked him if he had come to see whether I should die before his bill was paid, but like the others he was so unaccustomed to my making a joke that he did not take it as I had expected.

“Good gracious me, Master Thomas,” he said, “But we’ll be dressing you for another fifty years, I hope!”

I told him that I hoped not and old Mrs. Bassett showed him out, a puzzled and distressed little tradesman.

Then when I had been laid up for a month, our Phyllis came. I had not sent for her but I think Lawyer Foster had done so. I heard her carriage pull up outside the big gates. It was a bright morning without any wind and I heard her voice through my open window as she gave instructions to her driver to be back in an hour.

She came into my room like the goddess of Spring, all white and floral and smelling sweetly of eau de cologne. She wore a broad flowered hat and carried a parasol of cream silk. Her white gloves reached up to the elbow and I thought that she looked rather as though she was going to a Garden Fête than visiting a sick brother.

“But Tom, dear,” she said, sitting on my bed and pulling off her long gloves, “whoever would have thought an old warhorse like you would have taken ill! Fancy a man like you lying in your bed and never a thought for the ironworks!”

I could have blessed her for that jocularity. Here was a Fisher who dared make a joke of illness.

“You might have had the decency to come in black,” I said.

“Black,” she replied, “Why Tom! Black is not my sort of colour at all! Why Herbert would go mad if he saw another shred of black! He says that too much black has been worn in this family already. He wants me to be happy, just happily prinked out in white from now on! I do declare, Thomas, that if you were indeed dying I should either have to come in white or not come at all!”

“You are a cool customer, Phyllis,” I said.

She smiled wryly; “It is a pity that my sister was not so cool,” she said with a bitter lift of the lip.

We did not speak again for some time and then Phyllis said surprisingly, “Tom, she is our flesh and blood, and although I never want to set eyes on her again, I would like to do the right thing by her child. I would be prepared to bring him up as my own.”

“What of your own children, when they come?” I said. “Might they not come to resent an intruder? And might the little intruder not come to hate

them?"

"I shall have no children," said my sister. "My doctor has told me that categorically. There is no hope of it."

I stared at her, aghast at this news, but she only smiled down at me, unconcerned and lightly.

"I am not sorry, Tom," she said. "No woman takes well to the idea of childbirth and I can remember how mother was when she had Enoch. No, I can't say that I regret it. Though I would like to have a boy who could carry on when Herbert retired. The farm needs a man's care, you know, and there's no one of his relatives I like well enough to think of them becoming my boss when my husband goes."

"You are a hard woman, Phyllis," I said. At which she began to laugh, surprising old Mrs. Bassett who was just coming in with the best silver tray and the tea-things.

"That's good coming from you, the hardest-hearted Fisher that ever trod on shoe-leather!" said my sister. "But to get back to my idea; if it can be arranged I am prepared to take the child always provided that she gives up all rights to him."

She poured out the China tea and sat sipping elegantly from my grandmother's Coalport. I thought how untroubled she was by all that had happened. She was as fragile as a flower yet as strong as a steel bar. I suddenly knew that she was the one Fisher worthy of our tradition of driving a hard bargain.

"You seem to forget that the child has a father and a mother who may want him one day," I said. "They are human beings like ourselves after all, Phyllis."

"They are fools," she said. "She has gone away north, somewhere near Leeds, I think, with the intention of entering some religious House, if they will have her, which I doubt. And Belcher has run away with the Queen's shilling to Africa. I think he was afraid of what you or Elijah would do to him! He'll be among the right folk there, the black men! He will be used to their savage ways, no doubt, and will never come back to claim his child. He'll have little grey-coloured Zulus of his own before long, I shouldn't wonder!"

She spoke these words with such bitterness that for a moment my sympathies went out to the people she insulted, yes, even to Belcher.

“How would you go about finding the child?” I said. “Shall you see Foster about it?”

My sister smiled and took up her parasol to twirl it. “No,” she answered. “Foster is a doddering old fool. I have taken all my business away from him now. Herbert’s lawyer deals with my affairs. No, I shall ask you to arrange it for me when you are about again. You will do that, like a good brother, I know.”

She had risen and was looking at herself in my long mirror, beautiful in her way, exquisitely dressed, confident of her power over me. I resented that confidence then and could not hide my resentment.

“What if I refuse to have anything to do with it?” I said.

She bent over me and kissed me lightly on the forehead. “You won’t, dear boy,” she said. “You know I could always wrap you round my little finger, Thomas.”

I nodded and said, “Times change, dear sister. A man’s heart can alter as he lies in bed alone, thinking.”

She blew me a kiss as she stood by the door, “Yours will never change, Tom,” she said, “only for the worse! Now I must fly for I have a call to make for Herbert in Wolverhampton and then I am to meet him for tea at the vicarage. Goodbye, Tom, and do come to stay with us as soon as you can travel. We always want to see you and to hear of the new bridges you are hammering together!”

Then she was fluttering down the stairs, chatting to old Mrs. Bassett and never waiting to hear the answers to the questions she asked.

Later I heard the carriage drive away and then my old housekeeper panted her asthmatic way up the stairs again.

“Oh Master Tom,” she said, “But your Phyllis is like a breath of Spring air, ain’t she?”

“Spring air that would freeze the water on a pool, Mrs. Bassett,” I said.

The old woman nodded as she cleared away the tea-things, not having grasped what I said.

“Yes,” she went on mumbling, “a breath of Spring air, I always say. So sweet and kind and gentle, she is. A model woman.”

VII

For many days after my sister had gone, I turned over in my mind what she had said about Susan's child and I sensed in Phyllis's desire to bring him up a reflection of something which was already shaped in my own mind. That was what we needed, both of us, a child to love and mould to our ambitions. Susan had such a child but had run away from her responsibility; that was how it seemed to me then. Why should not I recreate my own damaged life by rearing her boy as my own, by training him as a Fisher but a better one than any of us had been before?

Now suddenly I had something concrete to live for, a new warmth and love to give, and, if God was good to me, to receive. Phyllis had her fair share of this world's blessings; Susan was going to make sure of the blessings of the next world; Elijah was beyond both worlds; there was only myself to consider. Susan's boy should be my first thought now and already I became impatient for the doctor to give me his permission to rise from my bed and begin the task I had set myself.

And that permission came earlier than I expected, for soon after the first buds of Spring had truly broken through and the skies were turning a fuller and fuller blue each day, young MacAllister stood back from my bedside and said, "Well Mr. Fisher, there's good news for you today. Your old heart has worked wonders with itself. Another month of taking things quietly and you should be back in harness again."

He left after telling me that I could get up but must attempt no work of any kind and I made my way downstairs with the help of the old woman, Bassett. Everything seemed new to me, even the old familiar ornaments and articles of furniture. Yet I noticed a thick layer of dust on table-tops and observed that some of the plants in the conservatory had died from want of attention. The old woman was really too feeble to keep my house going and I decided that as soon as I decently could I would get a younger woman in to look after things, and perhaps a man to give a hand in the garden, which was now in a sad state of neglect.

Once, all that would have bothered me and made me fretful; but now I sat back in my easy chair and smiled at the work before me for I was sure now that I knew the direction in which my life should move; I knew now that soon I would be strong enough to prepare a home for the boy. Never

once at that time did I doubt for a moment that I should find him and that I should be able to carry out my promise to myself.

And so at last I put a new flower in my button-hole and stepped into the cab that would take me to the foundry once again. A new man, if ever there was one!

John Griffith greeted me, coming into my office without warning and holding out both hands to shake mine.

"It is good to have you back, Thomas," he said. "There are a few things changed but nothing of which you would not approve, I feel sure. Try not to overwork yourself for a day or two, just look round the works and see what you think of things."

I decided to take the bull by the horns and see what John Griffith had to say of my new plans. I told him that I wished to adopt my sister's child and to bring him up as my own and asked him what he thought of that. The old man mused for an instant and then replied, "A most Christian sentiment, my dear Thomas, and one of which I most heartily approve. Always provided that you make it clear that the mother has no call on you. The boy has to be yours and yours alone. If you can assure me of that, I on my part can give you my whole-hearted approval of your generous impulse."

He turned and gazed at me for a moment with a smile, his finger-tips together; then, he said, "And who knows, Thomas, but one day we may even have another generation of Fishers in this firm!"

He went out then and I was glad, for the relief of his words was too much for me. I sank down in my chair and put my head on to my hands, thanking God for giving me a purpose at last that I could honestly follow.

That was the beginning of the day, a joyous one. The end was less joyful, however, though like all else in my life it was inevitable. On my walk round the works, I came upon a new gang of men, employed during my absence to carry out rough constructural repairs and the removal of broken machinery. One of them seemed familiar to me as he bent at his task and when he turned to look at me, I knew his face. He was an old mate of my brother's, one of Elijah's cronies from *The Railway*. Although I knew the man to be a liar and a thief and one who worked only as long as the foreman was within sight I had no intention of letting my knowledge prejudice my justice to the fellow.

However, I called quietly down to him, "Noah Harper, do you intend to work for us as a fair man should?"

He put down the head of the great hammer with which he was knocking out a sleeper-bolt and rested on the haft, looking up at me insolently. His gaze was frank and unafraid and his mouth carried a faint trace of a smile at its edges. He spoke up so that all his mates should hear what he said.

" 'Ow bin yer, Tum Fisher," he sneered. "I didn't know yo wukked 'ere."

There was soft shimmer of laughter among the men who stood about him on the lines and Noah Harper, confident that he had the measure of me, smirked round at his mates as though to show them the sort of man he was. I felt the raw anger rising in my neck and had almost taken him by the red handkerchief round his neck and flung him down, when I recollected myself. I was not only a man of authority in the works, I was also a sick man and had been warned not to exert myself. I smiled at him as best I could and said quietly, though afraid that my voice would give me away, would expose the fury against which I struggled, "Noah Harper, I did not ask for your insolence. I asked whether you intend now to do a good day's work for your employers, for a change."

The man slung his hammer down and hitched up his moleskin trousers, taking half a step towards me as he did so, in a movement of extreme bravado. Then he spat almost on to the toecap of my polished boot and wiped his wet mouth with the back of hand. He did not answer my question. Instead he looked me straight in the eye and said, " 'Ow's that sister o' your'n, Tum? I ain't 'eard anythin' of 'er lately."

He turned to his guffawing mates and said, "Yo' cn laugh, yo' chaps, but 'er's a nice bit o' stuff, is Susan Belcher! Ain't 'er, Tum?"

He turned back to me as I struck him and his wide-open eyes stared stupidly at me as he fell backwards, as though expressing great surprise and disappointment in me for behaving so badly. His head struck the iron shoe of a sleeper and as his cap fell away, a trickle of blood ran down the side of his head, above the ear.

His workmates stood staring at me like startled cattle but without making a move to help their fellow. I was gasping from the sudden exertion, my heart pounding at my ribs, gazing down at a man to whom I had done an injury.

Then someone at the back of the crowd said, "We'll have the law on you, Fisher. You bosses think you can knock a man about, but you can't. Times have changed, Fisher."

Now the devil came into me at those words and I ceased to be Thomas Fisher. I became Elijah's brother, I think, in that moment. I strode among them shouting, "Which one of you is next, you bloody scum!"

They fell back from me muttering, some of them even taking a firmer grip on their pike-shafts and raising them to keep me off. But I went towards them until they turned and fled. Only then did I stop, trembling and gulping the fresh air into my panting lungs.

"When he comes round, tell him he's sacked," I said. "And if any of you feel that he's been treated unjustly, you can come up to my office and tell me so there. I shall know how to deal with you too!"

I turned and made my way back to the shelter of my office, but I had scarcely sat down when John Griffith himself came in and his austere face was sterner than I had ever seen it before.

"In the name of God, Tom Fisher," he said, "what has come over you! No master has ever struck a man at Griffith's before! This is something outrageous, man."

I spread my hands on my desk before him and noticed as I did so that the knuckles of my right fist were bleeding. I leaned back in my chair, expanding my chest, for it felt that my heart would burst unless I gave it room to move in.

I said, "That swine insulted my sister and tried to belittle me before the men. Was that not provocation enough?"

John Griffith's face was working with suppressed anger. "I saw it all," he said. "That man did not threaten you with violence. That would have been your only justification for striking him. I saw him speak to you and then you struck him down, like a savage."

I said, "I have told you, John Griffith, that the man insulted my sister. Is that not enough?"

He stared at me for a moment as though he hated me, which indeed I think he must have done then. "We are not here to behave like savages," he said. "We are here to set an example. I will not have this foundry become the cockpit of any pair of hooligans who choose to break God's law! If that man insulted you you should have sacked him. That would have been just punishment. What can have entered into your heart, Tom Fisher, to let you behave in this manner! You are not the man we thought you. I shall say no more."

He began to walk towards the door but I called him back. “May I ask who set that man on?” I said. “He is a known blackguard and a thief. I would never have employed him.”

John Griffith stuck out his jaw. “Mr. Kirkstone set him on,” he said. “He is a good judge of men, I find.” He spoke the last words with studied insult which I could not let pass.

“Your new broom is sweeping clean, Mr. Griffith,” I said, “but it misses the corners where the real dirt lies. Your young Mr. Kirkstone may have set him on but your old Mr. Fisher has sacked him!”

John Griffith leaned against my desk as though he might fall to the ground with a stroke. When he could speak again he said, “Thomas Fisher, but for my memory of your father I should ask you to leave this foundry now. But I shall control my words, believing as I do that you are a sick man and should not be let loose among your fellows. I shall tell you this, that Mr. Kirkstone set that man on to work here and only Mr. Kirkstone shall sack him. Mr. Kirkstone or I. Is that understood?”

He paused for an answer, his thin face working viciously across the desk at me. Although I was half-dead with fatigue and frustration, I forced my mouth to smile and I said, “You are a straight-talking man, John Griffith, and a man whom I have always respected. Today I respect you a little less than I did, perhaps because I respect myself more and can see men in their true light. Now I say this to you, you can have your Noah Harper and your Mr. Kirkstone, or you can have Thomas Fisher—but you can’t have both by the look of things. Now what do you say?”

He gasped for air like a fish which is suddenly swung on to the canal-bank to gape out its life.

“Good God,” he said. “Has it come to this, that I must be dictated to in my own works?”

I said calmly, “Mr. Griffith, this works is my life. I live for it. All my money is in the foundry, and it comes to no small sum. Half the processes used here were introduced either by my father or by myself and most of the goodwill that came with this firm is the result of my father’s dealings. I have a right to speak to you as man to man; I am not to be bullied and browbeaten in favour of an upstart young pup from the north and a broken-down tavern-swiller from Tipton. If you choose to put your firm in the hands of such folk, then for God’s sake dismiss me and have done with it for I shall have lost my faith not only in your firm but in you also.”

John Griffith turned ashen pale and clenched and unclenched his white hands upon my desk.

"Have you any brandy, Tom?" he said in an altered tone. "For God's sake get me a doctor. I am not well."

I led him to a chair and sent a boy from the outer office for a glass. Then I poured the old man out a stiff glass of brandy from the flask which was always kept in my cupboard. When he was recovered he put his hand upon mine and said, "Tom, you almost came near to killing me then. I have never been spoken to in that manner before. I will not gainsay that you have a little right on your side, but only a little. Your action today will bring the firm a bad name, have no fear. I shall have to put it before the directors and we must abide by their vote. I can do no more."

"Am I to be present at that Meeting?" I said. "A man has a right to know what he is accused of."

The old man shook his head. "I would prefer you not to be there," he said. "Then we may talk more frankly. But I will go this far with you, Mr. Kirkstone will not be present either."

"Very well," I said. "And when you decide my fate, remember that should you dispense with my services, you will dispense with my financial backing."

He smiled up at me, a thin angry smile, and said, "That should not trouble us too much, Thomas. The firm is doing quite nicely."

I did not wait for him to rise and go to his own office. Instead I went to wash and brush myself down and then walked out of the works gate. A cluster of men hung about the entrance and began to whisper and point at me as I got into a cab. I saw that Noah Harper was among them but I ignored him.

As the cab started off, however, I saw that he was running alongside it and shouting at me. Such was my coolness now that I even pulled down the window to hear what he was saying. His face was moving violently and all I heard were the words, "You can watch out, Tom Fisher, from now on! Either your 'Lijah or I sh'll be coming to see you before long and fine words won't save you then, you swine!"

He spat at me as a final insult but his spittle only ran down the window-pane and did not touch me. I smiled at him but did not reply. Then as we drew away from him I sank back against the cushions of my seat and almost fainted from fatigue and desperation.

VIII

Noah Harper was not at work the following day nor on any day afterwards and his mates showed no active hostility towards me when I went out to inspect them in the afternoon, though I knew such men too well to think that I had won the final victory over them.

John Griffith called in to see me for a moment before I left to tell me that he had called a Meeting of the Board for Friday, in two days' time. He was formal but not hostile as before. I greeted his news with as much nonchalance as I could muster and went home to rest.

I remember that the sky was stormy that evening and carried in it some of the menace that I felt in my own heart. When old Mrs. Bassett had wished me goodnight and left I went round the house, seeing that the catches were fast on the windows and that the door leading to the conservatory was bolted. I had never done that in my life before and laughed at myself for doing it then; but somehow I felt that it must be done. My house was a lonely one and I was in no condition to defend myself if it came to that.

That evening I drew the heavy curtains in the big kitchen and sat down to read before I went to bed. I have forgotten what book I had chosen but it must have been a solid one for I remember becoming sleepy as I turned over the thick closely-printed pages. That and my general debility and the monotonous flustering of rain on the window panes acted as soporifics, and a time or two I caught myself dozing off. I knew that I ought to get up and put more coal on the fire if I was to stay up; but the scuttle seemed so far away and I did not want to move. Then I must have fallen directly into a deep sleep, which may in reality have lasted only a few minutes but from which I leapt as though I had been a whole night in bed. I came to my senses with the echo of a footfall in my ears and I waited for someone to knock upon the door, thinking that someone had chosen to visit me at that late hour. But nothing more happened then.

I settled down to read my book again, having given the dying fire a poke, but could not concentrate on the words before me. Then almost as though some inner voice directed my movements, I looked up and towards the window. In a little space of black window-pane between the heavy plush curtains, a human eye was regarding me. I jumped to my feet, my heart bounding, and went to the window, whereupon the eye disappeared. At first

I thought of flinging open the window to see whether my senses had played me false but I recollected myself in time, realising the danger in which I should put myself.

I sat down again, trembling in every nerve and muscle, unable to see my book for the giddiness that swept over me in regular waves like the tidal waters on the sea-shore.

At last I found enough strength and courage to go to the glass-covered conservatory door and to look out over the silvery moonlit garden. All I could see were the long shadows thrown by the bushes across the lawn and I began to laugh at my fears. What I had seen might well have been a cat's eye or even perhaps my own eye as I stared at the black space between the curtains.

Yet that night as I lay in bed, watching the shadows thrown on to the discoloured ceiling of my room from the narrow blue-tiled Dutch fireplace, someone tried the conservatory door. Now there was no doubt about it and I lay tense, listening, full of a strange pent-up horror. There was a tingling silence and then I heard footsteps down below, going from window to window and each one was rattled, or tapped, or gently pushed. I sat up in bed, my nerves screwed tight, my muscles pinched with terror, feeling the tangible cold at my back and the cold sweat starting on my forehead.

Then suddenly from that cold, I began to cough, loudly, uncontrollably. Whoever was below would know well enough that Tom Fisher was abed upstairs and suffering from a bad cold too!

I don't know if other folk have it too but we Fishers have always seemed to suffer from a special instinct of self-destruction, like those curious creatures, the lemmings, who swim out each spring into the icy northern waters, never to return. Well, once I had coughed, my spell of terror was broken. I jumped from my warm bed and almost ran across to the window. Then, flinging it open, I stood there, looking down on the bright garden.

"Who is it?" I called. "If there is anybody there, let him speak up like a man!"

I waited a while, trembling now with anger not with fear. Then as my ears rang in the cold silence it seemed that a sly chuckle came up to me from the thickly-shadowed ivy that grew about the porch below.

"Are you there, Elijah Fisher?" I called and I must confess that my blood seemed to stand still as I asked that question, lest the answer should have

come back from my brother's lips. But there was no answer, only that disgusting demoralising silence.

Now I felt that I must end this suspense one way or another, for this way lay madness. There was no weapon in the house with which I could arm myself but as I passed the old clock on the bedroom wall, I unslung one of its weights. It was of heavy cast-iron and shaped like an elongated acorn. It swung on a brass ring through which I could pass three fingers to keep a hold on it. I swung it in my hand in the firelight, and was appalled at the viciousness of this weapon I had discovered. Then I carefully made my way down the steep stairs, my arm muscles tensed in preparation for the blow which I should strike.

In the conservatory, however, I stopped, some of my courage drained away by then. "Go home, Elijah Fisher," I shouted. "You have done harm enough in this house already. Go home!"

The ghastly moonlight shone down on me through the glass roof and the heavy plants seemed to sigh in the still air about me. There was a rank lichenous scent in the place that made it seem like a graveyard rather than a retreat of pleasure.

Then as I listened that sly chuckle came to my ears again from outside. Now I could no longer control my fury. He was laughing at me, listening out there in the moonlight to the terror that trembled in my voice and laughing at it, relishing my fear, without giving himself away.

Now I had drawn the bolts of the door and had turned the big key in the lock. Holding the clock-weight ready in my right hand I flung open the door wide and stood on the first step.

"Come out like a man, Fisher!" I cried and swung with the weight at the ivy on either side of the door.

But there was no one there. The ivy leaves crunched beneath my blows and my knuckles struck painfully against the brickwork. The moonlight still shone down evenly and without partiality across the broad garden. I began to shiver with the midnight cold and at length I went back to bed again and lay shuddering between the chill sheets.

Much later, it seemed, the footsteps came again and once more the windows were tapped and rattled. But now I did not move, not even to shut my gaping bedroom door. I knew that whoever was down there was trying my nerve, and I knew equally well that now I had gone beyond fear of such

things. If they wanted to come upstairs and cut my throat then they must do it, for there was nothing I could do to prevent them.

So at length I fell into a troubled sleep, in which I dreamed that for all eternity I was to creep up and down those steep dark stairs, the clock-weight swinging in my hands, to stare out in the moonlight across an empty garden.

IX

The following day I went to the Police Station in Darlaston and asked to see the Inspector. He came out to me from his office, buttoning up his tunic, a red-faced man in his early fifties, inordinately vain of his bushy side-whiskers which he stroked and curled all the time I was addressing him. His breath was heavy with the scent of spirits and as he smiled at me I felt that I could not trust this man as I had done his predecessor, who had known our family for years.

I told him the story of the prowlers round my house and asked whether he would have a man keep a watch on the place in future. But he only smiled and held his head on one side, twisting away at his whiskers until I could have struck him, such was my irritation. I repeated my request, speaking slowly as though to a small child or a foreigner who did not know the language very well.

"So you suspect someone, do you, Mr. Fisher? And might I ask whom you suspect of causing a nuisance to you? Might I ask that?"

I did not like the man's tone and almost told him so. He was treating me like a fool, treating me differently from what I was accustomed to expect in this town, as though my status had recently changed, had become less important, less powerful. I sensed dimly at first and then with an undeniable strength that this new Inspector was taking his tone from others in the town, others who thought the less of me because of my sister's disgrace. I even suspected that this smiling lout was trying to trap me into an allegation against an innocent person but I was prepared to risk the consequences of that possibility.

I said, "I suspect my brother, who has recently been released from Stafford Gaol."

"Oho!" he said, looking round cautiously to see that there was another policeman in the room who might bear witness against me should the need arise. "And what do you charge your brother with, Mr. Fisher?"

I saw the trap which was baited for me and retorted that I charged him with nothing but that I did not want him to create unpleasantness in my home.

“That is not a thing we can legally prevent, Mr. Fisher,” said the man, smiling indulgently. “If your brother breaks the law we can apprehend him, but we cannot take action against him merely because you think he was walking round your garden last night! Your brother has recently served a prison sentence, I am aware, but that is nothing in his disfavour. He has paid the penalty for whatever crime he is alleged to have committed—and I believe he was taken up on your instructions, is that not so?”

I understood the implication of his words but was compelled to nod my head at his question, though it went against my pride to do so.

“Well, you are entitled to your beliefs, Mr. Fisher,” he went on, “But in this case I can assure you that you are mistaken. You see, your brother spent most of last night in this station.”

I stared at him in amazement. “What has he done?” I said.

“Nothing but good,” the Inspector replied. “He was here because we were drying his clothes for him; and we were doing that because they were wet, as you will appreciate; and they were wet because your brother, only recently released from Stafford Gaol, as you will not let us forget, had jumped into the canal below Simmond’s Reach to drag out a young boy who was trying to make away with himself. Your brother is a brave man, Mr. Fisher, and I for one will have nothing but good said of him!”

The man looked down at me in triumph, his eyes shining narrowly between their fat lids.

I was indeed taken aback at this news. Then there stirred in the deep recesses of my heart another chord; Elijah had saved a child from the canal, and it was he who had caused a child to be drowned in a canal. Elijah had expiated his crime against our family happiness in a way. He had saved someone who might have been Enoch, in his own mind.

“Are you certain of this?” I asked.

The Inspector nodded towards the policeman who sat at a desk, writing out a report. “Ask Phillips here, if you doubt my word,” he said. “He brought your brother back here and gave him a hot drink. Didn’t you, constable?”

The man nodded without even looking up from his note-book. The Inspector smiled again, “So, Mr. Fisher,” he said, “You will have to set your mind on another culprit, if you can think of one.”

Nettled by his insolence I said, “And that would not be hard. Have you ever heard of Noah Harper?”

The man’s face was grave now beneath its surface joviality. “Yes,” he said quietly. “He is the man you struck yesterday and who would have brought a charge of battery against you had we not given him a drink and sent him packing. And I have no doubt, Mr. Fisher, that his charge could have been substantiated, judging from the number of witnesses he brought with him.”

Defeated now, I thanked the man as politely as I could for his trouble and would have gone away there and then but for his final remark.

“I shouldn’t think too harshly of your brother, Mr. Fisher. I have known many worse men in my time. Mark my words, now that he has family responsibility he will change beyond all recognition.”

I said, “What responsibility? Has the dolt got himself married then? Why, he can’t keep himself, much less a wife.”

The policeman rubbed the side of his thick nose with a stubby forefinger. “I should have thought you’d have heard,” he said, “he is the guardian of your sister’s child now.”

The dingy room spun round me and I leaned against the door-post for support. The boy I had planned to bring up, to fulfil a purpose in life for me, was in the charge of a ruffian like my brother. He had poisoned my past and was now set to do the same to my hopes of the future. Yet my mind told me as I stood there, a man will do many things for money and especially a man like Elijah Fisher. He could be bought, no doubt.

“Where is he living?” I said at last.

“No, no, sir,” said the Inspector, “if you don’t know that, I’m not the one to tell you! That’s not part of my job at all, Mr. Fisher, and you shouldn’t be asking me. That man is straight, I tell you that. Let him be. Let him live the new life he has started and don’t interfere with him again. If you do that, I think he will let you be.”

I went from the Police Station knowing that now the tide had ebbed in Elijah’s favour. That now his ship was being carried out proudly into a sea which I would so gladly have sailed myself, but could not.

X

Now the days did not seem to matter to me, for I became locked in my thoughts of defeat and was beyond time. I heard the footsteps about my house each night and the laughter under my window. I only rose from my bed once and then I saw dark figures slipping among the rhododendrons, but could not recognise them. I was no longer afraid of them, for I knew that whoever was there meant only to intimidate me, to bring my nerve to the point of breaking and I became resolute that, whatever else happened, this they should not do.

Friday passed and on the Saturday morning when I went to my office, John Griffith sent for me and told me that the Board had expressed their continued faith in me the previous day, but that they were concerned for my welfare as I was behaving in a manner more fitting for a superannuated old man than a young Manager with a future before him. He asked me whether I would like to take a long rest, to get away from the neighbourhood for a while, to go and visit my sister in Penkridge perhaps.

"We are only human, you know, Thomas," he said, "and if anything else should happen, well, it would not be so easy for me the next time to convince the Board of your continued suitability for the post you hold. Think it over, my lad, and let me know in a day or two."

I told him that I would and went back to my office; but already I was a stranger there. Already I felt that I was sitting in another man's chair, nor as I walked through the drawing office or among the furnace-men did I find anything to disabuse my mind of this idea. Everywhere men seemed to be observing me, waiting for some calamity to befall me. It was as though I was a pre-ordained sacrifice, known to all but myself. I could sense it in their covert looks, their whispers behind their hands, even in the set of their heads as they passed me or in the tiny shivers of sound that came back to me when they were behind me.

I tried to think why this should be. I had done no more than any man would have done; yet because I was a man set in authority I was a natural target for all men's malice when misfortune struck my family. It was the law of the herd that the leader be dragged down once his weakness is seen. And my weakness had been—what? I asked myself. Simply that I was my father's eldest son and had tried to rule his family when he had gone,

nothing more than that; for from that sprung Elijah's rebellion and Susan's shame, and from those beginnings had come the other misfortunes . . .

There was no avoiding such a destiny; it was born in me, it was in the first blood that my father gave me and there was nothing I might do about it now.

And what would happen if I took the long holiday which John Griffith recommended? I would come back to the works to find that another had established himself in my position while I was away, and though I might be given back my office, nominally, that other man would have a certain moral superiority over me, he would be waiting there, always, waiting for me to fall ill, to make a mistake, to leave off my armour; and then he would strike. And I knew that it would be young Mr. Kirkstone who would plunge the dagger into my back then.

I saw no way out of my dilemma but to go on, taking great care that I offended no one now, until such time as the whole situation had blown over. This was the dark tunnel through which many men have to pass, I told myself; the tunnel which must surely lessen their days in purgatory.

I laughed at myself for giving in so easily to depression as I had done and recalled the days when my name was on everyone's lips as the future head of Griffith's Foundry. I was no worse man than I had ever been, indeed, apart from this slight indisposition, I was more able, more knowing and astute than I had ever been before. I knew more about men than I had thought possible, sensed more subtleties in their behaviour, no longer took them at their face value. Yes, I told myself, that means a great deal, to know men!

Yet I little knew then how melodramatically I was to be taught the opposite, and how soon that instruction was to take place! Had I known, I think I would have risked Kirkstone taking my job and have gone away into the country without any delay.

XI

The New Conservative and Unionist Club stood opposite the Park gates in Wood Green. A solid self-confident red-brick building, erected for the use of solid self-confident red-faced men. It was the only public place where the iron masters might meet to talk over their trade to a background of billiard-balls and a glass of whisky.

I had been a member of the club since my young days when my father had become concerned about my adherence to my trade, and had forced me to join, not for political reasons, for he had always been a staunch Radical, but for the purpose of relaxation. At first I had gone there regularly, almost religiously, sometimes to play chess with another young man in a similar position to myself and sometimes to read the illustrated journals which were kept in the comfortable Reading-room. I did not approve of billiards then, nor do I consider it a game of any importance now. But that is beside the point; I was an old member but had visited the club less and less as time went on and as my work seemed to gain in importance to my life.

So, as the early summer came and the evenings lengthened, I began to go there again, for it was a melancholy thing to sit at home night after night, without even the prospect of a friend coming to visit me—and now I seldom had a visitor.

My normal habit was to eat dinner at a chophouse in Darlaston and then take the horse-bus into Wednesbury for the later part of the evening, and over a glass of port to read those of the magazines which were new to me. I seldom took more than two glasses, or three at the most, if I met anyone willing to join me in a conversation; though that entertainment became less and less frequent as the story of my escapade at the works was passed on from one newcomer to another. It is curious how everyone is theoretically willing to stick up for the right, but when a man actually does do that very thing, he is considered a blackguard by the very folk who had supported his action in words . . .

Nevertheless, I was tolerated at least in the New Conservative Club and at that stage of my depression, I was thankful even for that small mercy.

On this particular night, at the beginning of June, I sat in the smoking room, a glass of port by my side, scanning the pages of *The Country*

Gentleman. It was a warm evening and we had the windows open even when darkness began to fall. It was a pleasant view out into the garden where other members had given up their game of bowls because of the fading light and were sitting round the green, talking and drinking their ale. I sat there tired, as I usually was now by the end of the day, somnolent and not overmuch interested in the piece I was reading. Although at the back of my mind there always lurked my anxiety for the future, there was nothing about this night to put me on my guard, nothing to make me feel that it was a different night from any other. Outside in the street I heard the sound of footsteps or the clop of horses' hooves, coming through the open window. Inside was the pleasantly monotonous clicking of billiard-balls from the next room and the constant cries of raillery that seem to attend such games. I had my hand on the bell to call in the waiter for another glass of wine when the porter's boy looked round the door and said, "Mr. Fisher, there's a man out in the street wants to speak to you, urgent, he said it was."

I said, "Who is he? Bring him in."

But the boy shook his head. "Rules is rules, Mr. Fisher," he said. "I don't know him but I know he ain't a member. He can only come in if you sign him in. It's more than me job's worth to bring him in among the gentlemen, sir."

I said, "Did he say what he wanted?"

The boy scratched his head, "Something about a child I think, Mr. Fisher," he said. "He mumbled something about to tell you it was about a child. That's all I can remember. Nothing definite, like."

My heart leapt now. What if this man was Elijah? Elijah, come to ask me to take over the child, Susan's boy? Elijah who had now found that he was not capable of tending to the child! I gave the boy a sixpence and almost ran out of the room and along the passageway to the street. I stood on the top step of the Club but could see no one. Then, almost when I was thinking that this must be some stupid practical joke, someone whistled to me from the broad entry-way that ran alongside one wall of the Club building. He was in there, away from the passers-by who might recognise him and wonder why he should be talking to the brother he hated. Yes, Elijah must be in that entry.

I walked down the steps as slowly as I could and with as much dignity as my excitement would let me muster. I would show him that I was still the master of the situation, I thought. I even stopped and glanced down at my

shoe, as though to examine its shine in the gaslight of the street-lamp that stood outside the Club.

Then I went to the entry-way. It was very dark there but I could just make out a shape, that of a man, and in his arms a white bundle. A child, I thought. I stood there for a moment and then said, “What do you want with me, Elijah Fisher?” I could hear that my voice trembled with my anxious delight at this good fortune.

The man who I took to be my brother held out the white bundle towards me and said in a muffled voice, “Take it, Tom Fisher. It’s yours.”

Like a man in a trance I stepped forward into the darkness, my hands held out, my mind free of all malice or suspicion. Then the dream broke. Dark shapes of men seemed to cluster about me, pushing and jostling to get at me, like terriers at a rat. There was a frenzied scuffle of feet behind me, between me and the road, and before all light was blocked out, I saw the bundle flung aside and the white shawl coming down over my head. I put up my hands but someone dragged them down again. Then I was smothered in the thick wool of the shawl. I felt arms about me and tried to kick out; but the sharp edge of a clog hacked at my ankles and I went down upon the cobblestones of the entry, knocking the breath from my body.

I rolled as best I could and thrust upward with my knees, but the weight of numbers was against me and at last I was forced to lie still, even as they kicked at me and punched me in breast and side. I heard a muffled confusion of voices, thick drunken voices, which I did not recognise, although my ears were searching for my brother’s voice among them. Then as the stifling blackness swum about me, I felt a pungent wetness covering my face and throat and the smell of rum filled my blind world.

Out of the chaos about me, as I struggled to breathe, a vicious toast came to my ears. “Drink up, Tom Fisher! ’ere’s good ’ealth to you and may you prosper, you swine!”

Then there seemed to be the sound of many feet scuttling over the stones and I felt myself being pulled and buffeted like a sack of oats across the rough paving. I could stand out against this savage assault no longer and fell backwards, down into a darkness of my own.

When I came to, there was bright light in my eyes and a frantic ringing in my head. The light was real enough, for it came from the street lamp outside the Club, though the bells were audible only to myself; they were the pealing carillon of my own overwrought nerves. I lay uncomfortably across

the stone steps of the Club, my limbs sprawled out and my waistcoat open. There was a heavy scent of rum about me and my head and clothes were still wet with the spirit. I saw faces about me, curious, grinning, unsympathetic faces. Some of them were the faces of passers-by, men and women and even small children, people I did not know. But one face that bent over me from an upper step was one which I saw every day at the foundry, the face of a dour Scots engineer. I had seen him in the Club earlier that evening, when he leaned over the billiards table as I came in. I had never liked the man particularly, for there was a smugness about him which I have often observed among his compatriots who come south to get a better living in our country. Yet now I knew that I needed a friend and I tried to speak to him, to ask him to give me a hand, for I felt that I could not get up without help.

He turned away from me as I spoke, his face ugly with a sneer. “He’s too drunk to speak,” he said to another man who stood at his side. “A fine sight on a public street, my god!”

A woman with a shawl about her head pushed forward towards me and bent over me for a moment. She had the damp eyes and red nose of the habitual toper, yet even she moved back from me.

“Why, ’e stinks of it!” she said. “It’s Tom Fisher, beant it?”

The Scotsman said, “Aye, it’s Tom Fisher all right! There’s no mistakin’ who it is, missus!”

I half-rose to my feet and then fell back against the top step. Someone took me by the arms and tried to raise me but I was too heavy for him. Then others helped, putting their hands roughly under my arm-pits as though I was a burden of little worth. And so they carried me down the steps to a cab. I heard the Scot give my address to the cab-driver, and then with subdued laughter in my ears I fell back against the cushions, to the clopping of the horse’s hooves.

I only remember arriving home in the vaguest way. I know that the driver assisted me into the house and took his fare from my waistcoat pocket as I directed him. I lay down on the sofa that night and slept as best I could in my clothes, not even bothering to remove my boots. The blows which I had received in that dark alley-way, together with the sickness that gnawed at my heart, had been too much for me. I was not drunk, but even had I been so I should not have felt less capable of fending for myself than I did that night.

XII

I WOKE again, cold and stiff, as the dawn was breaking and the trees in the garden stood out grey in the mist of the morning. My head and chest were aching and there was a raw patch down one of my legs where the iron of a clog had torn into my flesh. Yet these things caused me no distress. It was as though having experienced the full violence of those who had lain in wait for me, having suffered the depths of humiliation, I was a free man again but a free man with a difference now. Freedom now meant the end of my earlier life with all its responsibilities and ambitions, its good and its bad things, its sunshine and its rain. Now I was forcibly cut free of all that had controlled my thoughts and behaviour. And now a new purpose, a terrible purpose, was born within me . . .

My first act was to write a letter of resignation to John Griffith, for I knew that he like the rest of the town would soon be familiar with all the details, real and imagined, of my debauchery of the previous night. I knew that he would take that opportunity of arranging my withdrawal from the firm, and my new fierce pride caused me to take the first step and to dismiss myself. Strangely, that act of surgery caused me no distress. I signed my letter with a flourish and set about the task of cooking my own breakfast.

Old Widow Bassett came to the house at eight o'clock and did not seem surprised to see me sitting back and reading a book by an already blazing fire. Bad news travels fast, I thought, and waited for her to comment on my not going to the foundry that day. At last she could resist the occasion no further and said, "I'n heerd, Tum."

I said, "What have you heard, Mrs. Bassett?"

She said, "I met Elias Madeley on his way to work. He telled me 'is cousin seen thee last night at Club, on steps, 'e sen, blind drunk. His cousin come right up 'ere last night to tell 'im, seein' 'e lives near thee. His cousin thowt 'e ought to know."

I said, "That's what will have happened all over the town; one half of Darlaston will think the t'other half ought to know. But what will they know, Mrs. Bassett? Aye, what will they know?"

The old woman looked at me, her blue-veined hands trembling on the table top. "Why," she said, "that thee wust drunk, Thomas, that's what

they'll know."

I said, "Ah, maybe, maybe. But do you say a fledging is drunk when he tumbles out o' nest?"

Mrs. Bassett gazed at me as though I had gone a little mad. "Thee'st no fledging, Tum Fisher," she said. Then to my great surprise she smiled and said, "Why, I do declare, Tum, thee get'st more like 'Lijah ivery day! That thou dust! And 'Lijah's none a bad chap, 'spite o' what the busybodies sen on 'im."

I said, "Mrs. Bassett, I shall not go to the works any more." I expected this blow to strike hard but she did not even turn from her tidying.

"No," she said, "I shouldn't wonder if they gi' thee sack, me lad, after that carryin' on."

I said, "What do you think of that?"

The old crone straightened her back from dusting and said, "What should I think? It's none o' my affair. In anny case, thee'st got more money than thee canst spend if thee lives to be two hundred, and that thee won't do!"

She worked on for a while and then said, "When thee'st as old as I am, thee'st see that this sort o' thing dunna matter much. What's it matter if thee losest thee job, or if thee hast a babby out o' wedlock? If thee'st got the money, thee cust afford to laugh! All I'n got is me rheumatics! I'd lose a job or 'ave a bairn, anny day, if I could get rid o' me screws!"

There was something elemental in the old woman's talk, something that went deeper than the laws of civilised society. I sensed the peasant deep in her and knew that I was such a creature too, though it had taken me thirty odd years and great misfortunes to learn it.

That day I spent by the canal side away from Darlaston, where no one would know me, sitting on the bank and letting my mind run free like the water below me. I plucked the purple willow-herb flowers and made myself a button-hole of them, laughing to think of the prim rose which I usually wore. I spoke to little boys who fished with worms on the end of cotton and swore at them when they swore at me. I ate cottage pie at a little hovel outside a chainmaker's factory in Willenhall and then walked on to Wednesfield and drank a pint of bitter beer in a public house below a bridge.

When dusk fell, I travelled on the horse bus back to Wednesbury and made my way by side streets to the Vicarage, for there was one thing I

wanted to know before I set my new course irrevocably.

The little maid who answered my ring started when she saw who stood on the doorstep and would have shut the door in my face had I not pushed her aside and walked in unannounced.

The Reverend Chatterton was sitting at his heavy mahogany desk, writing on long sheets of sermon paper in his meticulous hand. His spectacles were on the tip of his nose and he had to push them up on to his narrow forehead before he could see who had come into the sepulchral gloom of his study. When he recognised me his face first twitched with embarrassment and then smoothed itself out into its public contours. He rose and held out his hand but I waved him down again and kept my own hands by my side.

I said, "Vicar, I felt that I had to come and see you."

He looked down at his desk and said, "As a matter of fact, Thomas, I was just writing to you; but since you are here it will save me the cost of a stamp, won't it?"

He waited as though he expected me to applaud this wit but I was in no mood for clerical or any other facetiousness that night.

"You have heard the rumours about me," I said, and noticed that he nodded even as I went on. "I want to know what our relations are now, whether your church disowns me as so many other folk seem to be doing in this town . . ."

He clucked like a busy hen and held up his long tobacco-stained hand. "Thomas, Thomas," he said, "but you mustn't use such words to me. The Church never disowns its members, even its erring ones. You should know that, my son."

I said, "I am one of the erring ones? Very well, Vicar, tell me this; do you consider me as one of your churchwardens still? Shall I be asked to read a Lesson at Harvest Festival this year?"

The clergyman got up from his chair and began to stab at the small fire with a brass poker. He did not seem anxious to answer me.

"Tell me, Vicar," I said. "I wish to know."

He got up and came towards me until he stood at arm's length from me. He smiled and held out his hand to place it on my shoulder, but I moved away slightly so that he could not do so, except by following me up, which would have been an awkward thing for him to do and would have ruined his

dignified stance. He put down his hand with a little annoyance, I saw, and said, “Thomas, you know the right of things, and I know the right of things. We know that a man may seem to sin and yet be innocent, don’t we?”

I did not answer him. “Go on, Vicar,” I said.

He sought for words and at last said, “Though we may know that what we did was the only possible thing to do, others may not know. They may attribute to us the worst of motives.”

“Your congregation?” I asked.

He nodded slowly, “Yes, my congregation might not understand. That is so.”

I said, “So I cease to be a churchwarden? I shall not read from the Scriptures in your church again? Is that it, Vicar?”

The clergyman made a gesture of irritation and said, “I do not like to hear it put so bluntly, so uncouthly, Thomas.”

“But that is what you mean, isn’t it?” I pressed.

The man looked away from me. “I would put it differently,” he said. “I would say that you must give everyone time to consider things in their true light, give them time to settle down again. Then we’ll see.”

“What shall we see, Vicar?” I asked unmercifully.

He made a stammering sound and turned on me almost angrily. “We shall see who is in the right,” he said. “That’s what we shall see. I will not be catechised in my own house, Thomas, and you do wrong to demand of me such things.”

I hung on to him like a rat-catcher’s dog. “Would you, Vicar, stand up in your pulpit next Sunday and tell your flock that you still have faith in me? Answer me that please.”

The clergyman stepped to his desk and rang a small bell that stood there. “I really cannot be spoken to like this, Thomas, and you should know it! Really, one would think it was I who had committed the sin, not you!”

The little maid stood at the door, wiping her nose on her black sleeve.

“That is what I wanted to hear you say, Vicar,” I said, “that you believed I had committed what you call a sin. Good night to you and from henceforth if any man speaks well of you in my presence, I will imitate my brother

Elijah and knock him down! Good night, sir, and I shall trouble you no further!"

I went down the passageway with the girl and I was conscious that the old man was gazing after us from his study door. I sensed that he would have called me back had his pride let him, if only because we Fishers had always been generous in our gifts to the church. At the door I halted and raised my hat to the little girl. I put a five-shilling piece in her hand, in a final gesture of defiance, for I knew that this was more than her week's wage at the Vicarage. "Buy yourself a few ribbons to cheer up your sad life, chicken," I said to her so that the Vicar should hear, "for it's little pleasure you must find in this mausoleum!"

Then already ashamed at my stupid jest I made my way home.

XIII

One morning, a few days later, the postboy delivered two letters at my door. The first one I opened contained a formal acknowledgement by John Griffith of my resignation. He made no direct reference to the actual situation in which we were involved, he and I, and merely stated his aloof sympathy that unpredictable circumstances had compelled me to take this action. He expressed a coolly-phrased hope that one day I might offer my services elsewhere and be found acceptable, in a place where my particular talents might be utilised with profit!

I pushed this letter through the bars of the firegrate and set light to it, almost forgetting my other letter in watching the flames lick round the stiff official notepaper.

The other envelope was a long buff legal one which I recognised instantly as having come from Lawyer Foster. In it was contained a smaller, greyish envelope of a cheap sort of stationery, with my name printed on it in large, almost childish capitals. There was no covering-letter from the solicitor, but instead a small printed card, offering me his compliments in a rigid black copper-plate.

I gazed puzzled at the ink-drawn capitals which spelled my name. There was something familiar in them, yet for a while I could not lay my tongue to what it was. Then I woke up and slit the envelope, to discover inside it a piece of paper of a similar quality. It was ruled and flimsy, the sort of notepaper which I imagined a farmworker might use if he had the trick of writing letters at all; or a miserable servant-girl, scribbling in pencil in some damp attic, or on one corner of a basement-kitchen table, borrowing Cook's

indelible lead when that functionary was elsewhere for a few minutes and a crumb of privacy flung down by the laughing gods . . . But this letter was from Susan, my next glance showed me that.

There was no address given, no date, even; she began without preamble in that direct manner which I had come to think of as being characteristic of her. As I read her words, my hands began to shake as though with shock:

"Brother Tom,

I have been away over half a year without writing to you, and I had intended that it should have been half a lifetime. But what conscience did not make me do, my weakness of spirit, my unhappiness has brought me to. So you see, I write not so much because I am grieved at having treated you badly as because I wish you to feel kindly towards me! You will say that I was always selfish; and indeed you can afford to say such things because you have always been strong and able to look after yourself. You do not understand weakness in others, their need for comfort and sympathy. I wish that I were made that way, brother, but I find that I am not. My spirit is always strong enough, but this poor loveless flesh of mine betrays it! Now I have had some chance of looking back on my past, I can see that I was always like that, so this is no new departure. We never change, brother, do we? I can picture you as I write, a respected and prosperous man of business, as you ever were cut out to be. I can even see your well-brushed hat, the clean velvet of your coat-collar, the formal rose in your button-hole, as you raise your hand like some Roman Emperor to call the cabby across to your side of the street! No, you cannot change, any more than our brother Elijah could! Even from our day of birth, we carry within ourselves the seeds of our own victory or destruction, and there is no avoiding the burgeoning of that seed. It will inevitably bear the bud, the flower, the fruit of God's intention, planted there before Babylon, even before the first motes of matter were sent swirling out into the void!

Do not sneer at me, brother, when you read these words. I was always a romantic one, you know, and I have scarcely had time to improve yet. I think both Elijah and I had that strain in our make-up, though I do not imagine you ever had it, that poetry—unless I have misjudged you greatly.

Yet here, in the place where I am, there is little enough to be romantic about in all faith! They keep me working at the most menial, and even nauseating tasks, from first light until dusk, when I am usually too fatigued to think of motes and Babylon and you and Elijah, even of God. That is as it should be, for I came here so as to punish myself, no less than to find for myself asylum from a world whose problems I did not feel hardy enough to tackle. I am a servant in a new Public Hospital in the north of England; I shall not tell you where for that would be to admit my complete defeat. I had plans originally of entering a convent, might that have been possible; in my simplicity I thought that such as I would find an easy access to such places of healing; but I was mistaken. They might have taken me if we had been a Catholic family, or even as I am, after preparation, had it not been for the child; but always he was the obstacle, the responsibility from which they said I was trying to escape.

But I beg you, tell no one where I am, no, not even Phyllis. If they imagine that I have entered God's service, I pray you to let them go on thinking so, for if they knew otherwise they would only laugh at my downfall, the retribution I have brought upon myself.

Brother, there are times when I wish that I could come back to you again; but I only do that in my hours of weakness. Then I am a child crying out for comfort, nothing else, and the mood soon passes. I do not feel love for you, brother, any more than I feel love for Dick Belcher, or even for my child, but only the need to be comforted by someone safe and stronger than myself. I do not even ask you to forgive me for having betrayed you so cruelly in the months that you gave me a home and offered me your protection. You see, Tom, I am still as self-seeking as I ever was, and am not even repentant. I should be ashamed to say that, but strangely I am not so.

Now, though I have hated writing these words, I am glad that I have made myself do it; it is part of my punishment that you should know how little happiness I find in tending the sick, cleaning away their refuse, washing their bodies. Each day is a purgatory for me; yet, I must make myself suffer and should I succumb to the final weakness of running back to what was once my home—even if you should have me—my life thereafter would

be nothing more than a constant reminder of my uselessness. For here, at the least, I am as useful as any other beast of burden!

My conscience is a little eased now that I have written this—and I have said it, nor shall I say it, to no other, not even Elijah, and I beg you to destroy this letter when it has given you the satisfaction which is your due.

Goodbye, Tom, and may you thrive as you deserve,

SUSAN FISHER."

I read this strange letter many times before I finally folded it away in my breast-pocket. I will not say that my heart bled for the girl; that would have been untrue, for in a way I felt that her punishment was just and inevitable. Yet another part of me felt a certain warmth, a sympathy towards her, a sympathy that grew out of our misfortunes, our mutual failure in life. Now for the first time, I saw that she and I were of one blood, just as, when I had struck down the workman in Griffith's yard, I had recognised my kinship with Elijah for the first time too. We were true Fishers, each one of us save Phyllis, perhaps, in our violence and our weakness and though God has sent us out along different paths at the start, there was no escaping that disease of the blood to which fate had condemned us . . .

I rose and on a sudden impulse put on my hat, intending to make my way to Lawyer Foster's, with the intention of discovering Susan's address, for I felt that he must know it. In my mind I had already got Susan back from her institution and she was sitting beside me in our kitchen, perhaps nursing her baby, even . . . But before I had reached the door another consideration halted me; suppose that I did achieve the miracle of persuading her to return to her rightful home, what would be my own position? I should be the butt of my sister, who would now find me a lesser man than she had left, an outcast like her other brother. Never again could I look at her in my pride; she would discover a humble despised failure, whereas she had left a man of some importance and pride.

In my selfishness I took off my hat and flung it on to a peg, my errand forgotten. I must set my new course alone. To have Susan in my house again would be to turn me from that course.

Part Two

I

I HAVE read somewhere that after his friend, Piers Gaveston, had been murdered King Edward dug ditches in Clarendon Park for ten days, sweating the grief from his body and exhausting his mind until such time as he should find new ways to overcome his enemies. And through the Summer and the early Autumn, from the time when I sprawled helpless on the steps of the Club with all the town laughing at my shame, I followed that sad king's example; though I did not dig, for the state of my heart would not have allowed me to follow such an arduous exercise. I pruned my trees and clipped my hedges, cross-raked the gravel of my paths and set new stones along their borders to give them precision, knowing as I did so that I was pruning away and clipping the mercy in my heart, raking the compassion from my spirit, giving a new precision to my mind. And in the exercise which I most relished, that of scything my grass, I knew as the sharp blade slid before my body time after time and my feet moved forward, inch by inch, rhythmic as the beats of my pulse, I knew with a terrible assurance that I was preparing myself to cut down my enemies.

Perhaps it could be said that I was unnerved, unbalanced, after the shocks of the last weeks; but if so I was unnerved as Macbeth was, unbalanced as Hamlet was, pathetically perhaps but with a growing energy inside me that would shortly drag down my more balanced adversaries. I knew that and I rejoiced in it. I slept well at nights now for I had no mere worldly ambition to keep me awake fretting. Nor did the footsteps come at night any more after my enemies had struck their final blow to my public reputation in the town.

I lived as I chose, wore rags if it pleased me, ate when the mood took me and always a meal of my own devising, for now old Widow Bassett came to look after me no longer. Her rheumatics gave her little peace, and indeed she had become more trouble than she was worth for she only served to bring to my mind the days when she was the friend of my mother and since her hands were so deformed with the screws she was little good in scrubbing or sweeping or even dusting. I became my own maid-of-all-work, though my labours outside were enough to absorb all my physical energies. I seldom bothered to dust or sweep out the rooms. Often I was too fatigued when the sun went down to light myself a fire and went unwashed and unwarmed to my bed.

I could not have got a day-girl to come in once it was realised that I, a bachelor, was at home all the day. Yet where should I be but in my own house? Was I to be turned out of it during the daytime to pander to the moral hypocrisy of some little slut of a serving-girl whose virginity, if not already lost in some schoolday encounter, would assuredly vanish as lightly as a cobweb in a wind on the first occasion she met a soldier anywhere in the vicinity of a hayrick!

I fended for myself with a savage glee; yet at times I went out at nights, especially when the year drew on and the darkness came earlier and hid me from the curious eyes of busybodies. I might have visited the theatres in Wolverhampton or in Birmingham, somewhere far afield, but I was never a man for the theatre. In the years when I might have cultivated this taste I was busy learning the trade of my fathers and now it was too late for me to take up such pastimes. Instead I walked alone across the pitbanks and commons which my brother had once regarded as his own territory. I put on a cloth cap and a muffler about my neck and sat in taverns, drinking tupenny ale. I jostled among the crowds at Fairs and Wakes or inside boxing booths. And always I listened for news of Elijah, watched for his rogue's face, listened for his rogue's voice. To go about the town asking for his whereabouts would have put him on the alert, would have caused the police to keep a watch on me perhaps. I had to work slowly, in my own way, unsuspected. What did it matter when I found him, so long as I did find him?

And always there was the image of the boy, Susan's boy, in my mind. I had wanted him to be my boy, my adopted son, once, but now that was out of the question. I could not imagine Elijah ever giving him up now. He knew that this child was his sharpest weapon in hurting me or why should he have used the boy as a bait with which to draw me out to the ambush he had prepared?

One day I felt sure a word would be dropped in my presence as I sat huddled in a tavern corner, unrecognised. A chance remark would put me on his scent. Then I would seek my brother and punish him savagely, as he had punished me.

As this plan flourished in the dark soil of my mind, the months fell away through Summer to Autumn, through Autumn to Winter. Yet still I had heard nothing. It was a strange situation, that in an area of but a few miles, though crowded and smoke-screened miles, two brothers should live, hating each other yet never meeting, thinking of each other each day, yet never coming within reach. It is possible; there are men who have lived all their lives in

one small village and have never been to see where the road leads to that runs at the end of the village street . . .

But now as the icy winds began to blow again and I could no longer pass my time outside, using up my fretful strength in the garden, I began to wonder how I could make an end of the situation, how I could put a finish to my brother and conclude my own revenge on him. Yet no way came to mind as yet.

I had made a Will in favour of Susan's child entirely, so that whatever happened he should never know want. Now I wrote a letter in my most regular copper-plate so that none who saw it should suspect that I was insane when I wrote it:

"TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN, I, Thomas Fisher, being in a fair state of health and of sound mind, do hereby declare that my intention is to put an end to my brother's life. That brother, Elijah Fisher, has wronged me at every turn and has finally brought about my disgrace in this town. To let him go unchecked would be an act of barbarism against the communities in which he may live, and to destroy him would be an act of humanity, such as the killing of a wolf, or a bear, or a mad dog. Let it be known, then, that this is my intention, without prompting from any other, but for my own satisfaction and for the vindication of my family's honour, which he has dragged through the mire for too long."

I signed this letter, placed it in a long, legal envelope and set it on the mantelpiece, before the black marble clock, not only that I should see it at all hours but also that whoever might search for reasons for his death should find it without undue trouble.

That was the beginning of my active search for my brother, a search which was to last but a short time now but which while it lasted seemed to me like a dream rather than actuality, a vision rather than reality; a strange sad howling opium dream, a vision of ecstatic desperation.

II

Now it was Christmas time again and the thought of the boy came to me more and more frequently. My heart was full of a strange yearning that I had never known before. Had I dared go out into the town by day I would have bought a great fir tree and dressed it up with candles and bright glass balls, to make more tangible before my eyes the image of childhood.

I think Phyllis must have felt like this too, for after her long silence she wrote to me, asking whether I would be able to find the boy and bring him to her. She had ignored my letter earlier, in which I had told her of my resignation from Griffith's Ironworks; but now as though in an excess of Christian good-feeling she alluded to my state in her last sentence, though without that warmth which might have made me take her at her word:

"Herbert asks me to tell you that he will always be willing to see you, provided that you write in advance to let him know you are coming, for as you will realise he is a much occupied man."

I tore her letter through and dropped it on to the floor. Now my sister Phyllis was almost as much a ghost as my sister Susan. Now my family consisted only of that boy, kept from me by my stranger-enemy, Elijah Fisher. And Herbert, her staid and prosperous husband, was even less than a cypher in my mind, a disembodied spirit of tight-lipped condescension . . . I wanted none of them!

But as the time of carol-singers drew on and their young voices echoed chilly along the dark streets beyond my high wall, my mind turned again and again to the past, when we all went to church and knelt in the heavy incense-laden dimness of the pillars, to give praise to the Boy of Bethlehem; and a great desire came on me to do this thing again, once more, for the last time perhaps. My own place of worship was closed to me but there were others. I called to mind the great church on the hill at Wednesbury and there seemed to be something symbolic in my going there, an act of renunciation of my own church almost; an exercise of final rebellion.

So, shaving and changing my linen for the first time for many days, I dressed in my best dark suit and put on my formal hat and set out through the snow by back streets and side lanes towards the place I had chosen. Apart from a few children, muffled to the eyes against the bitter weather, I

saw few folk out that night and I came at last to the foot of the hill almost without realising that I had already walked so far.

Above me, among the clustered houses, the church spire pointed upwards to heaven, like a gaunt burnt finger of accusation against the swirling snow. I began to make my way up towards it, entering a curling little cobbled street, hardly more than a pathway, that mounted for a while up the slope, the guttering of the snow-covered roofs hardly higher than the crown of my hat. And after a while this narrow passageway ended and I found myself facing a clearing, as it were, in the jungle of brickwork, the Bull Ring. Surrounded by mean dwellings on all sides, it lay like a deep granite-walled well, while the road spiralled half round it on its way up the hill, so that while on one side a man might look down thirty feet to the cobblestones of the grim place, from the other lower down the slope, his bedroom window might be placed on the same level as the ghastly rings that still dangled, circles of rusting iron, to which at one time doom-driven horned heads were chained, foam-flecked and staring, shuddering at the first onslaught of the dogs.

I stood for a moment, my coat collar turned up against the flurry of blinding snow that suddenly swept from the higher reaches of the hill over the roof-tops and across the empty place of death, into my face. And as I stood the door of one of the row of cottages that looked directly into the Bull Ring opened, throwing a broad band of orange light across the packed snow as the vicious flakes swirled heavily.

A woman came out of the cottage, a man's cap upon her head, an old black shawl about her shoulders. She stared at me blank-faced, for a matter of seconds, called back with a laugh into the room she had left and then, with a bucket in her hand, strode across the cobblestones of the ring to a pump which served all the hovels on that side of the slope.

At the first sight of her open door and its warm light, I had almost gone to the woman to ask if I might sit by her fire and warm my hands for they were numb now and aching with the cold. But there was something in the laugh which she flung back to her door like a discarded orange-peel, some contempt which put that idea from my mind.

I began to climb the hill again, the road gradually rising and turning until I could look down now on the woman by the pump. She stood black below me in the snow. Her right hand was working the pump-handle but she was looking up at me, where I stood above her. There was not more than twenty feet between our faces and I could hear every syllable she said. She spoke

them firmly, viciously, savouring the shape of them on her tongue, lingering over the pauses between them, attempting a supreme act of intimidation on me.

"Hey, yo'd better not goo up thear, Tum Fisher!" she said. "There's them up thear 'as sworn to gi' thee an unlucky blow!"

I had no words to speak to her in answer. I just looked down and laughed at her through the whirling snow. She stopped pumping and hissed up at me, "Thee cust laugh, Fisher, but that wunna save thee, me Lord Muck, when thee brother gets 'old o' thee! Nay, that it wunna!"

Then she threw back her head and laughed up at me like some tribal hag, some dark and savage Saxon beast.

This part of the town *was* Saxon, to the last stone. It was the original fortress of Woden in these parts, where now so ironically stood the gentle church of Christ. Even the steeply-mounting steps on which my feet were now set were called Ethelfleda's Terrace, and that slattern's language, the animal vigour of the words she used, even their intonation, seemed to me ancient, of an earlier day and of a wicked dispensation; the language of such folk as mutilated the sorry British hinds who fell into their dark power. I could not bear to listen to her laugher and turned away from her up the steep hill, until at last I stopped at the top, leaning against a house wall, panting in the strong gusts that now buffeted my head.

Below me the snow spread out like a dirty tablecloth over canal towpath and railway-siding; over culvert and cupola, gantry and pitgear; a thin cloth, through the soiled grey fabric of which protruded here the dark metals of the railway, there the long sloping ramp down which the spoil-buckets ran when they had tipped their load of useless slag. Here the dark iron-blue slates of row after row of mean houses; there the still black waters of the canals, the inland waterways on whose oily surface small bergs of ice and snow floated without purpose until their dissolution.

The night was a length of indigo serge, full of starry pinpricks and held before a fire so that the light shone through the holes where the points had pierced it. And constantly from place to place across this sky the smoky orange-red glow from furnaces rose and fell, rose and fell, like the slow pulse-beats of some monstrous volcanic heart, as here and there, in Cradley, or Tipton, or Ocker Hill, in Sedgley, or Willenhall, or Swan Village, a furnace door was opened and its bubbling metallic broth was exposed for a minute to the shivering snow-filled night.

I stood, staring across this harsh desert of ice and fire, no longer part of it now, able to see it for the first time for what it was, impartially, a running sulphurous sore on the green side of England. At last I was free of it, free to curse what had hitherto brought me a living; free to behave like a god sitting in judgement on Church Hill and not an outcast, a tumbled iron master, the brother of an unloving slut who had let some gipsy get her with child along a giggling canal-bank.

I began to laugh, half-cynically, half hysterically, at my own sad plight, however. I was like some mineral chip that had exploded from a planet and which must wheel out in space, solitary, unattached, for ever, without hope; disowned by the iron masters, despised and jeered at by the iron workers; a lump of rock, for all eternity swinging out in space, round and round, never to know rest again.

On Church Hill three days before Christmas, I saw myself like that for the first time. I was finished, nothing more, nothing less than that. I had known this in a theatrical way before, when I was writing the letter that stood before the black marble clock in my kitchen now. But I had never known it in my bones, in my blood, in my very heart. And the full realisation of it came on me as the snow beat into my face and took my scant breath away.

Then suddenly the comic enormity of my situation burst in on me like a monstrous swishing catherine-wheel nailed to the crown of my head. I began to laugh, to roar with laughter, slapping my thighs and taking off my billycock so as to wipe my streaming temples!

And it was at this point, as I leaned against someone's garden wall, my laughter now turning to tears, that I heard footsteps approaching from the other side of the road. Although they were partly muffled by the heavy blanket of snow, they were still recognisable as the steps of a man, and a definite man at that. I was in no mind to allow anyone, stranger or otherwise, to look into my face at that moment for something had happened to my spirit and I was anxious only to be left alone until such time as Tom Fisher had relearned his old courage and could face the world. I turned away from the road as though waiting for someone, but someone who would come from the opposite direction.

The footsteps came nearer. They slowed down and a voice called out, "A Merry Christmas, mate!" Then the steps went on, leaving my heart thumping at my side, for that cheery voice was the voice of Elijah Fisher, the man who had knocked away the last pit-prop of my happiness and let the

galleries sink down upon me as I worked alone in the darkness! Then the irony of the situation came upon me so strongly that I almost laughed aloud; he, the gaolbird outcast of the family, was wishing me a Merry Christmas!

Yet how right it was that he should be the wisher and I the receiver! He seemed to have happiness and to spare, from the gay tone of his voice and the light tread of his feet. I knew now, in all truth, that I had no happiness. All I had was a sudden flaring anger that swept through my heart and head like wildfire as I listened to that firm footstep retreating away from me, safely, down the narrow winding path which I had but recently ascended, down Ethelfleda's Terrace.

I ran to the top of the slope. A jaunty little tune floated back to me, the whistling of a man who was at peace with the world, but more than that, at peace with his own heart—and the one is vastly superior to the other.

I gasped with fury and began to follow him as fast as I could on that freezing roadway. I dared not shout, for fear of betraying my intentions, for now I knew what I must do. It was fruitless to appeal to the law, which had punished my brother already at my request and without effect, and which now had lost faith in me and might be counted on no longer to punish him. Now I must punish him myself, whatever the consequence to my future, and I was beyond considering that. No longer did my own safety mean anything to me beside my revenge. I must show him that I was head of the family still, that I was still capable of ruling somebody!

I found myself running bareheaded now, though I had not noticed the wind whip off my billycock hat, nor should I have stopped if I had noticed it for now my anger was too flood-swollen for anything to halt my mad career.

Below me on the hill, my brother moved on with a merry step, his long shadow thrown black across the snow from a street-lamp set in a bracket on one of the overhanging walls. Once I almost called out to him to stop, almost used his name; but something kept me from doing this. Perhaps it was pride, perhaps even shame, that we should share one name.

I felt my muffler come loose and work its way out of the breast of my greatcoat, and tried to push it back, but my hands were clumsy and wet and dragged it out even further when I withdrew them. I had to slow down then for the ice which was caked thickly on the cobblestones was treacherous and more than once I almost sprawled my length upon the ground.

Now as I neared the sunken Bull Ring I saw the figure below me more clearly in the light which shone into his face from an uncurtained window.

There was no doubt about his identity; there was not another nose like that in the whole of the Black Country! I clung gasping to the tall iron railings that fringed the upper lip of the Bull Ring, for my brother had stopped and was staring in through the window which illumined him, smiling and nodding and tapping on the pane with his knuckles. He was talking to someone in that little room but now the blood thudded so hard in my ears that I could not recognise his words. But suddenly I saw him feel inside his jacket and drag out a pair of cockerels by their feet. They were gamecocks. Their heads dangled together on limp broken necks. Their gay feathers fluttered pathetically in the night wind of that Saxon hill.

Then my ears cleared and I heard his voice. “Two o’ Jacob Tranter’s!” he said. “They’ll be a bit tough eatin’, but no doubt they’ll make a drop o’ good broth for the bairn! Yo’ c’n come, and welcome, if yo’d like a bit o’ chicken! But yo’ll ’a to file yer teeth, no doubt!”

Then he had waved and gone on further down the hill, away from the light, into the thick and driving snow, towards the row of squalid cottages situated on the lower edge of the Ring.

I was suddenly afraid of losing him now in the blinding flurry and began to run as fast as I dared, almost praying that I might catch up with him before the darkness wrapped him away from me.

But without warning there came a most vicious fluster of snow, a small but intense blizzard, which struck my bare head with so sudden a blow that one of my legs caught against the other and came near to upsetting me. I spun round, my mouth wide open for breath, my eyes shut tight against the sharp and painful crystals that had blown against them. I groped out and found the railings once more and hung on to them until the vice had gone out of the storm.

Immediately below me the snowflakes swirled round and round in the Bull Ring like some horrid Polar broth being stirred; then across the broad space, I saw a door open and then close again, its ochreous light being cut off almost as soon as it had appeared. I felt certain that my brother had entered that cottage, out of the storm. That house must be the haven of his villainy. So, without intending to, I had tracked down Elijah Fisher. Now we should see who had the right to the child, Susan’s boy, my boy!

I loosed the railings and ran the rest of the way down the curving slope, skirting the Bull Ring and coming up before the row of squat hovels. They lay like hunched and snarling beasts, well below the level of the pavement, so that one looked down through their lower windows, and might almost

reach up to clasp the sill of their upper ones. I ran the length of the row, staring down through their windows, yet did not catch a glimpse of my brother. These windows were shielded, or half-shielded, by old rags, torn garments, newspapers or strips of cardboard, one even by an ancient umbrella, the ribs of which protruded like the bones of a creature rotting in a desert. Yet in each of these kennels burned candle or lamp or tallow-dip, as though their inhabitants were celebrating their meagre Christmas as brightly as they could by their poverty-stricken lights.

I knew that Elijah Fisher was there, in one room or another and that where he was the child, my child, would be found too. I had come too far now to abandon my search.

Never in my life had I so abased myself as to knock on such doors as these to ask a favour. Now I felt that I should be acting like a beggar, a thing of damnation, if I were to rap on that blistered, splintering wood and then stand meekly until someone should choose to answer the door and deign to tell me whether Elijah Fisher and his two dead gamecocks were within. A violent wave of nausea swept over me, filling my head, swamping my faculty of reason, I think. I was damned if I would go cringing like a puppy dog to find my brother. No, I would visit these stinking cottages like the wrath of God, and they should know my force at last. They should know what it was to scorn Tom Fisher!

I heard myself laugh then, a brittle high-pitched laugh that came to my ears more like the hysterical cackling of a drunken street-woman than the raging fury of a ruined man. I felt that I had to run from that laugh now, to escape from its weakness, somehow or other, for to me as I stood there the echoing sound of that pathetic noise was an admission of my failure, my hopeless failure in a life that had once seemed so secure. And I had to run from that failure, come what may. “Damn him! Let me find him, and then . . .” I said, as I ran down the narrow brick steps to the cottage.

“Come out, Fisher,” I shouted then and grasped at the latch of the door. It did not give way to me immediately and I flung the weight of my body against it. The flimsy door gave and I stumbled into the single-roomed hovel, only to pull myself up with a bewildered jolt when I had done so. The room was dim and full of shadows, being lighted only by a small tallow-wick that floated in a saucer on the dusty ledge of the window. The uneven earthen floor on which my feet slithered was thick with neglected refuse and the foetid air damp with the steam that issued forth constantly and vehemently from a great iron kettle, set among the glowing coals of a narrow rusting fireplace. So heavy was the place with moisture that I could

scarcely breathe, yet as my eyes became accustomed to the gloom, I saw that the kettle served a humane purpose.

Fighting for her breath, on a couch made of sacks and packing-wood, and half-covered with filthy rags, lay a haggard-faced young girl of fourteen or so. Her long black hair lay tangled about her head, on which the beads of sweat stood like ghastly pearls. Her blue and heavy-lidded eyes opened with alarm as I staggered towards her through the steam and she tried to rise, holding up a thin arm as though to shield her face.

"Nay, dunna hit me again, Dadda," she said in fear. "I couldn't help it. I couldn't help it, I was cold! Dunna tak yer belt off, Dadda!"

Then she began to sob, plucking at the tattered coverlet, senselessly, rhythmically, as though there was no heart left to break but only an eternal rehearsing of the breaking-scene.

My own anger fell away from me like a discarded garment. Now I was torn by another emotion, stronger for a moment even than the one which had brought me to this place. I would have gone to her, to comfort her in some dumb unknown way. My hands were already outstretched towards her when I was taken from behind by the collar of my coat and swung round. The doorway seemed crowded with the faces of people, vicious sneering faces. The man who bundled me from the door and up the narrow steps outside was shouting in my ear, "I wunna 'a thee touch 'er! Thy hand shall never touch my lass, Tum Fisher!"

I could still hear the sick girl's crying from the open door, as plaintive in that night as the cry of a lamb. Then they spun me round and I stood swaying in the whistling snow, dizzy with surprise, my enemies in a half-circle about me, men and women and even children, jeering and cursing and snarling like beasts from some mean and sulphurous jungle.

Then someone yelled out, "I towd thee not to come up 'ere, Tum Fisher! I warned thee they'd gi' thee a bad blow, thee saft owd fool!" It was the woman in the man's cap. She held a poker in her hand and came forward to me threateningly. The others followed her, jeering, the children snatching up handfuls of snow and garbage and flinging them in my face. I backed before them, holding up my arms to protect myself as the creature lunged towards me.

Then with the savage hooting of their laughter in my ears, I felt cobblestones beneath my feet, sensed high granite walls about me and I

realised that I was penned in the old Bull Ring, to be baited as these hooligans chose.

My first impulse was to break through them, to show them that they had cornered a bull this time and not a rat. But even as I moved forward with a shout, a great man wearing a dirty open shirt and the moleskins of a furnaceman, swung his leather belt in my face. The heavy brass buckle took me across the temples and I slipped on the cobbles, losing my balance for the moment. While I staggered, a young girl who wore the bright ear-rings and gaudy neck-cloth of a gipsy, pushed out at me with both her hands, laughing as she did so. I fell back against the wall. I could retreat no farther now!

Then they were on me, kicking at my legs, clutching at my collar, dragging down at my coat. The woman in the cap struck out with her poker, a blow meant for my head but which glanced across the bone of my shoulder, paralysing my arm for the moment.

Now, after my first roar and their first gibes, we fought silently in the snow as animals might, gasping and grunting for breath, striking out and kicking wherever there was room to move hand or foot. Once I was down and for a while a great terror plunged over me as I thought they would stifle me in the slush. Then just as suddenly I was on my feet again, hanging on to something, something cold and metallic. It was an iron ring set in the wall, a ring to which they had once chained the other bellowing creatures whom they would torment.

Yet as I clung there like a spent swimmer, the man with the leather belt struck again with all his strength, coldly, taking careful aim. Half-blinded I fell, still grasping the ring which my weight must have dragged from its crumbled socket, tasting the warm blood which ran into the corner of my mouth, lying in the trampled muddy snow, now scarce able to breathe for the insane galloping of my heart.

For a while there was a dreadful silence through which I heard a woman's voice call, "Thou'st done it now, Jabez Cutler! That thou hast and no mistake!" And someone else, perhaps the gipsy-girl, laughed out loud, shrilly and without humour.

Then as in the confused uproar of waters I heard many things; I heard the trailing echo of that hysterical laugh; my own painful gasp that turned surprisingly into a roar of fury, as I found myself rising without willing to do so, the new iron weapon in my hand; but above all other sounds, the voice of

my brother, Elijah, riding abreast the snow-filled winds like an eagle sweeping into battle.

"Stand off, you coward bastards! Is this the way to carry on when a man's back's turned! Let him be, you scum, or I'll break your filthy necks!"

I was on my feet now, arms dangling at my side, my right hand painful from gripping the iron ring with such force. My tormentors fell back before me like hounds before a stag. And beyond them the tall spare figure of my brother towered above them all. Now I had forgotten them and I remembered only the man who had brought me to this sorry state. And I went towards him, my temples banging with blood, nursing my last ounce of strength to strike him down.

The crowd saw my eyes and fell back around me so that Elijah and I stood alone in the open ring.

"I am coming for thee, Elijah Fisher!" I said, raising my hand to strike. "Now the score will be even!"

I saw him above me, standing stock-still as my hand came down. He seemed to be without the power to move. The ring caught him on the cheek, and I struck again and again. And each time he seemed to grow taller and taller until he towered over me, smiling down at me kindly as though I was caressing him and not killing him.

Then I felt his arms round me, raising me up, and he was saying, "Poor Tom; poor lad! They've knocked thee about, owd chap! If I'd been 'ere they'd not done this!"

And his eyes were soft and gentle as they looked down into mine, and his hands were soft and gentle, like those of a young mother to her first child. And he lifted me up as though I was as light as a young girl and began to carry me away across the Bull Ring through the snow. And I knew that they were all following us meekly, like curs that have done wrong and now are afraid. The fury had drained from me with my strength. Now at last I knew that my brother was a stronger man than I was, a better man, and I began to weep in my defeated weakness, without shame, without any wish to hide my face, a child again, in my father's arms, fearing him and yet loving him at the same time.

So before my senses left me utterly, I lay by a kitchen fire in one of the cottages, side by side with a little child in its cradle. Elijah bent over me and said, "What is it, our Tum? What do you want, lad?"

And I said, "Is that the child, her child?"

He nodded and smiled strangely. “It was her child, but now it’s mine. Mine and thine, brother, if we can learn the way to live together in peace again.”

I took his hand in mine and said, so weakly that he had to bend his head over me to hear my words, “We have been enemies too long, ’Lijah. Now I’m too far gone to fight thee any longer, lad. All I have in the world is the lad’s, tell him one day. That’s all I have to say.”

Elijah looked down at me and touched me on the face. “Let us go away, our Tum,” he said. “Away from ’ere where they all know us. Let us tak the bairn and go to our Phyllis’s! There’s some job I can do, never fear. We’ll get a trap as soon as thee canst travel, and we’ll go together. What dost say, our kid?”

Now it seemed to me that I suffered more terribly than I had done in the Bull Ring. Then they only hurt my pride and my body; now it was my very spirit that was being wrenched from its sockets.

I grasped my brother’s hands. “It is the thing I want most in the world,” I said. “It will be the lion-coloured days come again, our kid!”

Then the hot tears spurted from his eyes and ran down my face, and I smiled at him and went to sleep even before my mouth had finished smiling.

III

So it was that I came down to my level; the level of the gutter, the squalid house, the chipped and littered hearth-stone. Tom Fisher had fallen at last! Fallen like a poleaxed bull on the cobbles; like an old chimney-stack pulled down by laughing foundrymen, crumbling as it falls, its soot-soiled bricks scattering haphazard among the rusting iron and nettles; all its strength, its high nobility, its individuality lost for ever among the willow-herb.

So it was that broken and powerless I lay in the power of my brother; the man I had never loved before, and like a frightened child came at last to love him, to be grateful for his care and his protection, forgetting the long past that lay behind us both, fearful of the future that still might be waiting to destroy me. I knew only the immediate present, the meagre shelter, the warmth, the rough kindness of those about me who tended me because Elijah was my brother; not so much because they pitied me, as because they were afraid of him . . .

Yet perhaps I had impressed them as I stood surrounded like a bull by beasts, fighting back at them and never asking for quarter. There might have been something in that which appealed to their savage code of honour. Or perhaps they were relieved that they had not put an end to me after all and were glad that the rub of the rope had left their necks. Yet again, seeing me tumbled from my pride as a master, and broken, perhaps some spark of compassion stirred in their dark hearts, causing them to see that now all scores were settled, that I must be punished no further. I do not know . . .

I only know that I shared their Christmas fare and that they sat in turns by my bedside, even those men and women who had screamed and cursed at me and struck me at the time of my fall. And one night, it was Christmas Eve, I think, Noah Harper came into the smoky little room where I lay and put a bottle into my hands.

Then he stood back, twisting his cap and swaying on his feet. “I’n browt thee a drap o’ whisky, Tum,” he said. “A Christmas box for thee. Thowt it’d dew thee good.”

I tried to thank him though the bottle felt uncomfortably heavy as it lay against my chest and in truth I had no wish for it. He stood by my bedside

for a while, looking down at me, unable to find any words to say. At last he seemed to give up the attempt and turned away from me, pretending to poke up the fire in the rusty grate. Then, with his eyes averted from me and like a man making his last confession, he said, “Tum, it was me who did it. I fatched thee out o’ Conservative Club that night, not yo’r ’Lijah. He nivver knowed abaht it till it ’ad ’appened. ’E give me a rare beltin’, Tum. I couldn’t goo to work for a week after it, I c’n tell thee! Cost fergive me, mate?”

I said, “I’n glad he belted thee, Noah. I’d ha’ done the same if I could ha’ got at thee that night!”

He turned now and smiled at me for we were speaking the same language. “I’ll nivver ferget that belt o’ the jaw yo’ give me in the works, Tum,” he said. “Yo’ hit me hard then, mate! But I asked for it. Believe me, Tum, me tongue run away wi’ me that day. I meant no disrespect to yo’r Sue, that I nivver. I’n allus liked that wench. I was on’y tryin’ tew hurt thee through ’er, thee know’st.”

I shut my eyes at his words for they brought back the painful memory of Susan and I had been trying to forget her. He came to the bedside and said, “I’m sorry, Tum lad. Yo’ see, I cor ’elp that tongue o’ mine even yet.”

I looked up at him and said, “Was it you and your mates who came to my house at night, Noah?”

He nodded. “It was a saft thing ter dew, Tum, I knaws now. We tried to frighten thee, and when we fahnd we couldn’t, we took thee another way. ’Lijah nivver knowed abaht that, and I hopes as ’e nivver will.”

I said, “I’ll not tell him, Noah. That’s all dead and gone now.”

At the door he stopped and looked back. “Tum,” he said, “we’n brought thee tew this between us, but if ever thee gets ter be a master in the works agen, there’s not a mon wouldn’t work the flesh off ’is ’ands for thee. Thee’st a mon, Tum, and that’s moar than c’n be said fer most on um.”

I said, “I’ll never walk into an iron-works again, Noah. I’d as soon die here where I lie.”

He shook his head. “I’n got to goo,” he said. “Yo’r ’Lijah an’ me’re looking out for a pony an’ trap, summat nice an’ ’andy, like. We’n heard o’ one rahnd Moxley way.”

“I’ll look forward to goin’ for a ride wi’ thee, Noah,” I said, “one o’ these days.”

He grinned and waved his hand. “A Merry Christmas tew thee, Tum Fisher,” he said, and went into the snow again.

EPILOGUE

PHYLLIS GREGORY

born 1859

I

PREMONITIONS are curious things and often we cannot shake them off however practical we are, or think we are! And in my way I consider myself a practical person, though I know that in my younger days others would not have described me so. Then they called me ‘flighty’ and even ‘irresponsible’; but they did not truly know me. They only knew my smile, my laughter and my pretty dresses . . .

Now I look back on a premonition of ten years ago, when our local gentry still thought of me as ‘Herbert Gregory’s Black Country indiscretion!’ It was the morning after our Twelfth Night dinner party; Herbert had gone out as usual to ride round the estate with his bailiff, while I was in the morning room which overlooks the front avenue to the house. One of our maids, Hannah, was beeswaxing a table, which had suffered during the previous evening’s revels from the gentlemen’s cigarettes and drinking glasses. More damage could not have been done if we had filled the room with iron masters from my own country. Men are the same it seems whatever their background—whether they wear a muffler or a hunting-stock! I was busying myself arranging our new light muslin window drapes, smiling to myself at Hannah’s grumbling, for indeed one might have thought that walnut table was hers and not mine, she was so aggravated.

It was a bright morning, crisp and clean, and although I had enjoyed but a few hours’ sleep, since the last of our visitors had kept us up until the last bottle of port had come from the cellar, I felt as merry as a cricket and was singing as I went about my task.

Then suddenly, when Hannah was immersed in her crossness and I in my song, there was a sharp little crash behind us and we turned to see that a plate had fallen from the ledge that ran along the top of the wall-panelling and had broken on the floor. Had it been one of the plates which Herbert had bought me, I confess I would not have felt so put out; but this was one of my mother’s blue-rimmed Coalport plates, one of the few things which I had brought away with me from Wednesbury when I had left home. Susan had always liked those plates and I think, as much as anything, that was why I had chosen them when mother had asked me what I wanted. I was very awkward in those days, I think! But perhaps no more awkward than most girls of my age.

Now we both stared down at the shattered pieces on the carpet. “They were put up safe, Mistress Gregory, when Jane and me dusted them last,” said Hannah anxiously. “We aren’t to blame.”

I stood on a chair and looked at the other plates. They were in truth set firmly in their niches and could not have fallen but by some quite violent shock. I could scarcely blame the maids for the little disaster.

Hannah said, “Mark my words, Mistress, plates and pictures only falls when something is a-going to happen. I’ve noticed that many times before. There was that time when old Grandad Gregory’s picture fell in the dining-room. Now only three days after that . . .”

I shut her up and told her to get on with her table as I could not stand listening to such old wives’ tales; yet all the same a strange feeling came over me, as though that plate were a warning of something else, something more important.

I went back to my drapes, not a little disturbed and even wondering whether Herbert would come back with bad news from his inspection of the farms. Perhaps a horse had staked himself, or a gate had been backed into and smashed by some clumsy waggoner . . . I didn’t know what to expect but I did know that I might expect something.

And as I stretched up at the window, setting to rights the last of the curtain-folds, I looked down the long avenue and saw what the plate had been trying to tell me. A man was leading a horse and trap up towards the house. He was a tall thin man whose head and throat were bare despite the morning’s cold and in the trap sat huddled another man but wrapped up heavily in greatcoat and horseblanket and swaying with every step the horse took, as though he sat in his seat with great difficulty.

At first I wondered why these folk should take the front path to the house instead of going by the back way as tradesmen should, for I did not recognise them then. But as they came slowly nearer, I gave a gasp of surprise, for I saw that the man leading the horse was my shiftless brother, Elijah. He was walking with his head held up, as though he had a perfect right to visit me, almost as though he owned the pathway on which he walked. My surprise became confused with some degree of anger as I saw this, and at first I had almost sent Hannah out to order him off my premises. Then I recollected myself. If Elijah chose to be awkward, as well he might be for one of his temperament, he might say such things as would embarrass me in the eyes of my serving-woman. He might refuse to go away at her command, in fact; and then I should be faced with the problem either of

setting the stableman on him, or of sending him away myself. I decided to choose the latter course directly, without involving my servants. So I got down from the chair on which I had been standing and taking up a fur wrap as I passed through the hall I went down the front steps towards them.

Elijah stopped when he saw that I was coming out to meet him and although I did my best to look severely at him he put on a smile to greet me.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded, without answering his greeting.

He hung his head for a moment and I glanced at the grey old man in the trap, wondering which of my brother's disreputable companions this might be. Then my heart made a leap for I saw that the man in the trap was my brother, Thomas. But a Thomas so changed as to be more like a dead than a living man. Almost without wishing to, I went to the side of the trap and as I did so a little child in a basket on the floor of the trap cried out hungrily, and Thomas bent down to comfort him, clumsily but with an infinite tenderness in his movement.

I turned to Elijah, confused now, and trapped in my confusion. "What does this mean?" I heard myself saying but knowing in my heart what it meant.

"We'n brought the bairn, oor Phyllis," said my brother. "We'n come to thee at last to beg thy pardon."

Had my brother been a great actor he could not have chosen words which had in them greater power to affect my mind. I knew him for what he was, a fierce unbreakable man, who would have cut his own throat rather than admit defeat. I of all folk knew what such words must have cost him, for never in my life had I heard Elijah Fisher beg anyone's pardon before. And, beyond all these things, I sensed something else; I sensed that Elijah Fisher was abasing himself for the sake of others, for Thomas and the child that cried hungrily in the basket by the old man's side. For the first time in my life, I think, I knew tenderness towards my bully of a brother.

I said, "I do not know what Herbert will say when he knows that you have come." They were the only words that came into my mouth, for at that time I could not bring myself to express the true forgiveness that was seeping into my heart. I myself had always been too proud to admit defeat and I was not ready to do so yet awhile.

Elijah said humbly, "We dunna come for oorsel's, lass. It's for the babby mostly. He's a nice little lad, oor Phyllis, and we mun do the best for 'im.

Thee needn’st fear, I’ll bring thee no shame. I’ll work for yo’r Herbert if ’e’ll ha’ me, an’ I’ll not ask a penny from ’im, just to be by the lad.”

I knew that the tears would come into my eyes and give me away if I did not do something. I took the horse’s reins and led him to the stables at the back of the house. Thomas did not speak but smiled down at me whenever I turned to look at him, and then I knew that I could not send them away or I should suffer for it for all my days.

And that was my premonition answered; and that was how my brothers came at last to my house at Penkridge, bringing me a child that I never thought to have, the morning after Twelfth Night in the year 1886.

II

I am glad of that broken plate. I still have it, wrapped up in silk in my dressing-table drawer, in all its broken pieces! For it is a symbol to me now; it marks the day in my life when the past was broken and a new sunlit summer began to dawn.

Sometimes I walk down the avenue to the gamekeeper's cottage, set where the broad path bends towards the road, at the edge of the sheltering spinney. Elijah keeps the house whitewashed and its doors and windows brightly painted. When Tom is well he tends the little garden in the front and the small, sheltered lawn at the back. The one is a gentle paradise of hollyhock and mignonette, of honeysuckle and, in their season, crocuses. The other is a secluded place where a spirit may find ease, shut away from account-books and mortgages, below the tall hedges, watching the long shadows creeping across the grass.

Sitting with Tom under the sheltered cottage wall, while Elijah has been out with his gun, I have often sighed for the days when we first turned away from each other; but Tom always smiles and pats my hand, "Phyllis," he says, "we had to know despair before we could understand happiness. This was our pattern, the way God had decreed we should take. It could have been no different whatever we had done. We must be thankful that the lion-coloured days have come back to us at last and that God has given us the hearts of lambs to enjoy them!"

Herbert and Elijah have taken to each other in a way that I had not imagined possible, and it is nothing new now to hear my husband consulting my brother on some topic or other to do with forestry or game. I have long since ceased to smile at the situation. There is perhaps only one point of disagreement between the two men and that is to do with our boy, William, our adopted son, Susan's child. Herbert wishes the lad to follow him as a farmer and has expressed his desire for the boy to be brought up with that sole idea in his mind. But Elijah will have none of it.

"Send the lad away to school, to a good school, Herbert," he says, in his old masterful way. "Let him have education. Let him learn Latin and what not. Give him a chance to make up his own mind, and then we'll see what he will turn to."

And Herbert at last will forget his irritation and say, “Why you old badger, what do you know of schools and Latin! You can scarce read the daily paper!”

But Elijah will shake his head solemnly and will say, “I’m right, ain’t I, our Tum? The lad wants a good education, don’t he? Then he can choose right for himself.”

Tom agrees with them both in turn, for he is not a man to become involved in conflict nowadays. It is as though the iron has been burnt out of him, to leave only the gentle fragile shell of what he once was.

I see Tom now as an old man, though he is still in his early middle-age, sitting in his chair with the sunlight falling about him and his hands in his lap, smiling and watching little William as he plays on the lawn, chattering to himself or to the imaginary companions of his child’s world. And sometimes Tom will seem to gaze through the child as though to some distant point of past or future, or to some other person with whom the happy boy is a link.

Once when I saw this look in his eyes I said to him, “You are thinking of her, Tom, aren’t you?” And he turned to me and said, “Yes, Phyllis. She is always in my mind. She is the only one lacking here.”

I said, “It is not in her pattern to be here with us, Tom. She has chosen a different prison from us in which to serve her sentence! Or perhaps it is a different heaven, I do not know.”

But Tom only looked away from me again and said, “Remind me to ask Herbert to get a new scythe-blade sent down. I shall try to clear the spinney glade next week if the weather holds. It will make a pleasant place for the lad to play in. He’s old enough to learn how to play at cricket now!”

I said that I would speak to my husband, but I could not help smiling at Tom’s words, for he had never played at cricket in his life, nor was the little lad yet old enough to be initiated into such obscure mysteries! Even if there had been anyone to instruct him, and among our horse-loving, gun-loving menfolk, there were none!

Yet into our enclosed summer world, another man did intrude one day, when we were still slumbering thankfully in our new peace. I was out at the back, sitting beside Tom on the lawn, telling William some nursery story. Elijah was in front of the cottage in his norfolk jacket and half-laced gamekeeper’s breeches, plucking roses for the bowl on their table. I

remember I had teased him, saying that he and Tom were worse than a couple of old spinsters for their flowers these days!

"We know what's good, oor lass," Elijah had said, not a bit abashed. "It's taken us a bit o' time to find out, but we know now, don't we, Tum?" And he had stumped out to the garden.

As we sat there, drowsy in the warmth of the afternoon, the crunch of boots upon the gravel of the avenue came to our ears. We heard the latch of the wicket gate click and a curious exclamation of surprise from Elijah, in a tone of voice which somehow seemed to belong to the past, the past of us all, not only of our brother. Little William sensed something strange, too, and before we could stop him had got up to run and peep round the house-side at the visitor.

He came back in a moment or two and said, "A big man's come, with a bag. A big man with a funny hat and all brown on his face."

I knew who it was, with a strange indefinable certainty, when the child said that, though I could not resist the impulse to look on that man once more. I rose and went to the hedge, looking through it so that I should not be seen. There was no mistaking Dick Belcher, despite his erect military carriage and his deeply tanned face. He stood, his slouch hat and gladstone bag in his hands, smiling at Elijah, who even now had not fully recovered from his surprise at being confronted by this ghost from the past. I saw the long frank gaze of Belcher's eyes, the stare of a man who has made a pilgrimage to set his world in order and who is beyond fear or shame now that he has reached his goal.

William was leaning against me, looking through the hedge at his father. I put my arm round him and held him tight, realising only after I had done it what that gesture meant. Then I went back as quietly as I could to where Tom sat.

"It is Belcher, isn't it?" he said and I knew from his voice that he had long expected this moment.

Unable to restrain myself, I said to the child, "Would you like to leave us and go with that man, William?"

But the boy did not answer me. He ran back and gazed through the hedge again at the two men and I saw that Tom's hands were trembling where they lay on the travelling-rug that was wrapped about his legs. I put my arm round him and we both sat there, in fear that soon we should be faced by this man, should be forced to come out of our new and sheltered

world and begin to fight once again. And now, I knew, the old fight had gone out of us for we were different people from what we had been in the past.

Then Tom said, “It seemed too good to last, Phyllis. We should have known that it was only a dream. It was bound to come to an end one day.”

I turned away and looked at William, trying to catch his eye and beckon him to come back to me without calling out, when suddenly the boy swung round and ran to the front of the cottage, out of sight, into the garden where his father stood. My first impulse was to follow him and to snatch him up in my arms but Tom saw that and took my sleeve.

“It will be as God wills,” he said. “We have interfered with His will too often already.”

And we sat there, holding each other’s hands, hardly daring to think, yet unable to control the consternation in our hearts.

Then suddenly, unable to bear this suspense a moment longer, I pulled away from my brother and went again to the thickest part of the hedge where I could see without being seen, where I could hear the words spoken by the two men, the words which might mean so much to our future happiness. Belcher was leaning on the white gate-post, his hat pushed back, his gladstone bag at his feet, like a man who was half-expecting to be asked inside the house. He was talking easily and with confidence, gesturing now and again with his hand like one who has become accustomed to the habits of foreign parts. This was a new Belcher, one made mature and masterful by his travels, it seemed.

Elijah was gazing at him, biting his lip as though in some embarrassment, as though his old friend and enemy had grown beyond him and couldn’t be reached with the weapons of the past, the weapons both of love and of hate. Little William was hanging on to my brother’s hand but peeping out from time to time at the big brown-faced visitor who was so different from the men he knew. I could sense that the little lad was, with each moment, gaining more confidence in Belcher, in that big body with its strong hands, in the deep musical voice. The child seemed instinctively to be moving towards his father and as I recognised this inescapable primitive fact, I shuddered and put my hands over my eyes so that I could see no more, for I could not bear to think that I must lose him.

With my eyes covered, the words that Belcher spoke leapt with an increased insistence to my ears. It was almost as though he was speaking to

me, close to my face, in that easy coaxing manner; the manner, surely, in which he had spoken to my sister that night when she allowed him to bring our shame upon us . . .

"God, 'Lijah," he was saying, "but I've seen things since you and me knocked hell out of each other at Walsall! I've seen Africa, a bitch of a country that burns the eyes out of a man and sends him to bed with a throat like sandpaper and a tongue too thick to swallow with! I know a veldt when I see one now, lad! I've watched the thunder-clouds build up over the kopjes and seen the cattle start to move for shelter—and damn-all shelter for them to find, poor devils! I've marched under that shocking blue sky till the sweat ran out of the lace-holes of my boots and my feet were red-raw inside them! God, 'Lijah, but what I've been through would have killed the Tipton Slasher, honest boy, it would!"

After Belcher had said these words, he paused for a little space and I wondered whether my brother would reply; but little William was the first to speak. He said, "What have you got in your bag? Is it anything for me?"

Belcher laughed and said, "Aye lad, I've got summat you can have," negligently, as though he did not yet realise that this was his own son, the flesh of his own body. As I listened, I could have sobbed at the callousness of the man. The good-hearted selfish callousness, for how should he know that William was his own unless he was told!

" 'Lijah," he was saying, "I marched into Bechuanaland with Sir Charles Warren himself! I saw men with the assegais sticking out of their ribs, laughing and crying and singing, they had lain so long on the ground under the sun they didn't know they were dying! I deserted and got over to Witwatersrand and made a fine pile helping old Schreiber dig for gold! And I thought he was crazy with every shovelful I turned! That's the sort of life I've led! Gosh, I was there when the first shanty was thrown up in Johannesburg! I was there when the very first Kaffir whore paraded her wares along the hard-mud main street, and slung a bottle at her like all the others, out of the saloon window!"

My brother Elijah said, "You have seen life and no mistake." But as he said it, I knew that he was not thinking of Africa. There was a sullen menace about his tones which made me want to look up, even to go out and tackle this interloper myself.

But Belcher did not seem to notice the tone of my brother's words. He went on talking as carefree as before.

“Yes, ’Lijah lad, you have said it! I have seen life and now I’m back again. Back to do the right thing by you all, to start again where I left off and shoulder my responsibilities!”

Elijah said, with an awful slow simplicity, “How did you find us?”

The other’s answer came out bluff and cheerily, as though he were expecting praise, “That was easy, lad! I just took a drink in a tavern near the Bull Stake and left my purse on the counter for ale all round, and half Wednesbury flocked in to tell me where you’d gone, and how old Tom fought himself to a finish in the Bull Ring!”

When he said that my heart stopped beating, I am certain. If they had told him so much, surely they must have told him that Elijah and Tom had brought the boy with them in the pony-trap that morning, two years ago . . . As in some relentless and ghastly dream, I heard this man’s voice continue, “To tell you the truth, ’Lijah, I’ve come to see if Susan’s with you. Her and the little one.”

Now I felt the sweat-beads starting out on my brow. These were the words of nightmare; these were the words of my doom. Not the doom of the body nor yet of the spirit, but the doom of my new motherhood. I who would never have a child of my own, out of my own body, of my own love, who had come to look on my absent sister’s boy as my own, who had rejoiced in hearing him call me mother, was to lose him; to lose the precious title that so many women take for granted, to be thrown back on an empty childless life because of this glib and sunburnt ghost who had strolled into our garden that afternoon.

I could not resist it now but took my hands away from my eyes, if only to see Elijah, for I knew that we were fighting the same silent battle, sharing the same pain. His face was sallow and twitching as he spoke and I saw that his strong fingers were clenching and unclenching as he forced himself to use words as the vehicle of his reply and not the force of his arm.

There was a long and horrible silence, and when Elijah spoke at last it was not to answer Belcher’s question. His voice was as harsh and strained as his face and his lips were thin and bloodless for he had bitten them unmercifully.

“Why did you run away?” he said cruelly. “Why did you not stay and marry the lass?”

Once more that ghastly silence fell upon the garden and at last I began to pity even Dick Belcher as he stared speechlessly at my brother. Now I knew

that we were all in safe hands. I knew that Elijah would fight to the end, by fair means or foul, to keep inviolate the little world of peace we shared. And I began to back away from the hedge, the tears running down my cheeks.

Even as I went, Belcher's words came to me on the afternoon breeze that eluded the hedges of our sheltered garden. There was a sincerity about them, an immense pathos that made itself real to me, despite my hatred of this man.

" 'Lijah," he said, almost a child again, "how can you ask that! I ran away because you would have killed me or I should have killed you, in the clay-pit that Sunday morning. I saw death in your eyes when you came down the slope. I knew it was either you or me. I didn't want to fight you again. God, 'Lijah, don't you see that my life wouldn't have been worth a button if I had struck you an unlucky blow? My own father was in gaol for killing a man."

As he said that I gave a sob and stumbled back towards Tom in his easy chair; but still the words came to me, louder now and more moving because they spoke of the man who lay powerless by my side.

"I could see what you couldn't, 'Lijah. I saw your Tom coming with the constables. I was frightened of Tom as I've never been frightened of any other man, not even you, lad. What you didn't do to me, he would have done! Tom is a strong man, 'Lijah. I would still be frightened of him now, in spite of what I've seen and been through."

I did not dare look at my oldest brother but I could sense his hands trembling on the blanket as I touched it.

Now Belcher's voice was quiet again, and I found great difficulty in hearing his words. "You ask why I did not marry Susan. Did she never tell you? I did my best with her. I asked her again and again; but she had no love in her. Yes, I'll dare say that to you even now, 'Lijah. She doesn't know the meaning of love; she is cold, both to herself and to others. She is a born martyr. Yet I would have married her and gladly, if only for the child, 'Lijah. Yes, I would marry her now and think myself a lucky man, if she would have me. That is what I have come to say. That is why I am here this afternoon."

Now, as I sat beside Tom, my heart turned over in my side, for I knew that the words Dick Belcher spoke were true ones. Somehow, I knew that he had asked her but that some devil of hate had grown into Susan's breast,

even towards the man with whom she had shared an inexpressible joy and that she had brought torment on us all out of a whim of martyrdom.

I sat still, frozen as though in mid-Winter, and our Tom was just as I was at that moment. We did not dare listen any longer but turned to each other at last and held each other's hands, like two very old people or two simple children. And the seconds beat on our brains like centuries, and the minutes like aeons, in which an ice-cap would become a flowering paradise . . . And the voices from the other side of the hedge became distant and impersonal and nothing to do with us, for we knew that we were indeed nothing when such a battle was to be fought. We were the childless ones!

Then, at last, when we had lost all count of time, we heard those firm footsteps upon the gravel once more. Dick Belcher was going away.

I got up and ran to the hedge openly now, no longer concerned whether I should be seen or not. But Belcher did not see me. He was walking, almost marching, away along the avenue towards the road, his hat on his head again and his bag in his right hand.

Elijah stood at the white wicket-gate with William on his shoulders, and they were staring after the retreating figure. The little lad held a soldier's water-bottle in his hand proudly as he gazed after the man who had given it to him.

At the roadway Dick Belcher turned and looked back for a brief instant. He waved his hand and I think that he smiled, though the distance was too great for me to be sure of that. I looked at Elijah's face. It was grim and set, his old fighter's face. He did not smile or wave in reply, though I saw his hand start on its journey to do so and then recollect itself. William's face showed no emotion one way or another. It bore the fixed and open-eyed expression with which young children greet both joy and sorrow.

At length Elijah came round to us and sank into the chair which I had left. He put his head in his hands and said, "May God forgive me, I told him that William was the housekeeper's child and that Susan had never left the Infirmary alive with hers."

Although this was what we had wanted, both Tom and I looked at our brother in something like horror and then turned our faces away from each other. The picture of that upright carriage was still in my mind and the sound of that firm footstep in my ears, and I knew that somehow we had all committed a great sin against Dick Belcher. William could not stand this

new silence. He said, “Mamma, what is the matter? Why did the big man go away and leave us? Look, he gave me this water-bottle. He was a soldier.”

I felt my eyes fill with shame as the child spoke to me, calling me ‘Mamma’. I turned to the two silent men and said, “I cannot live like this. This is only half a life. I have been living in a dream where I was the mother, but Susan should be here with us, with her own child. We must send for her, Tom. We must get her back somehow or other. I cannot rest until we do. I can never be a true mother. God help me!”

But Tom did not answer me. He sat with his hands folded again on his rug and his eyes gazed out over the hedge towards the green spinney. The air was suddenly full of the sound of bees as the late sun struck across the grass full into our faces. It was a moment of honeyed bitterness, and we all knew the taste of it. The lion-coloured days!

Elijah was the first to break the silence as he held out his hands again to the child, who stood puzzled by our sadness. “Wait a while, oor Phyllis,” he said. “It will all come right if we have patience. We’ll get her back, by and by, when the lass is ready to come. It will work itself out in the end, Phyllis, thee mark my words. We’ll have oor Susan back one day, never fear.”

Tom still gazed out of the world we were in and said at last, “We must not fight any more, Phyllis. The pattern must complete itself without our help. God holds the threads in His hands. We must not snatch them from Him, sister.”

And at length, when the sun had gone behind the hedge and the spinney began to grow dark, we left the cool lawn and went into the gamekeeper’s cottage, where the bird cheeped in its cage and the clock ticked on in its corner as though nothing would ever change.

THE END

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[The end of *The Rebels* by Henry Treece]